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Second Day Rosh Hashanah Sermon
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As you know by now, Rabbi Aaron and I have chosen to frame our teachings this year around the provocative words of the 4th Century Babylonian sage Rava who imagines that at the end of our lives we will be called to judgment and asked to answer a series of questions:

Rava said: At the hour when they bring a person in for judgment, they ask him/her:

- (1) Did you conduct your business affairs faithfully?
- (2) Did you set aside time to study Torah?
- (3) Did you involve yourself in procreation?
- (4) Did you look forward to salvation?
- (5) Did you debate wisely? Were you able to infer one thing from another?

It's an interesting list, and it challenges us to think about what questions we would use to measure the value of our lives. Some of his questions would undoubtedly be on our lists, though we might frame them slightly differently: Did we conduct our business affairs and our personal lives honestly; were we concerned with future generations; did we work toward the repair of the world; did we listen to other people's ideas and learn from them... All of those questions might make it on our lists... but torah study? Is that a value that you want to be judged by when you do an accounting of your life?

Of course it makes sense that it is on Rava's list. For him, Torah study was not just an intellectual activity; it was a mitzvah, a religious obligation. Maimonides, the famous medieval philosopher codified it in his Mishneh Torah as follows:

“Every Israelite is obligated to study Torah, whether he is rich or poor, healthy or sickly, young or old. Even a poor man who lives on charity or begging, even a man with a wife and children to support is obliged to set aside a time to study during the day and at night.” (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Torah Study, Chapter 1)

But for us... what is it? How many of us actually set aside time to study Torah in our lives?

So do we just dismiss Rava’s question? Or do we try to engage with the question and let it challenge us to imagine what happens in a person’s life if he or she sets aside time to study Torah.

What happens when you study Torah? First of all, Torah study begins with a blessing. We said it this morning:

“Blessed are you, Holy One, ruling over time and space, who makes us holy through Your commandments and commands us to involve ourselves in words of Torah.”

The blessing formula is so familiar to most of us that perhaps we don’t really hear it. What does it mean when we say: *“Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheyenu Melech Ha-olam Asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu...”*?

Today I just want to look at those last three words. We’ll leave the opening formula for a different time: *“Asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu”* – “who makes us holy through a mitzvah, a commandment, and commands us...”

First, what is a commandment? It is not an idea with which we Americans who are so used to personal autonomy are very comfortable. To be commanded is to be obligated... to

acknowledge that someone, some thing, can make a claim on us, can ask something of us, even if that something requires sacrifice..

So stop here, for a moment... who or what in your life can really make a claim on you?

Before you answer, a quick story. When we were beginning the process of one-on one conversations through Hineni, our congregationally based community organizing effort that begins when congregants talk to each other about what really matters in their lives, we trained several congregants to initiate these conversations. The way it worked is that a congregant would call another congregant whom he or she often didn't know and say:

“Hi, I’m from Temple Emanuel, and I would love to meet with you for about a half an hour to get to know you and to hear from you concerns you have about the quality of life in our city that the congregation might become involved with. Don’t worry. This isn’t about money or anything like that... just about developing connections among congregants that will strengthen our community and maybe even give us some clarity about what we might do as a congregation around social justice. I’m happy to meet you in your office, in your home, at the temple or at a Starbucks... let me know a time that would work for you.”

Most people responded affirmatively, but several did not. Their response: “I’m sorry. I’m too busy to meet with you.” Even the sacrifice of a little bit of time was too much to ask.

I must admit I was surprised. It raised the question of what institutions have a claim on you. If your alma mater calls, do you respond? Your child’s school? Your neighborhood association? Your synagogue... does it have a claim on you?

Who/what does have a claim on you?

(The question was opened up to the congregation with a variety of answers: family members, friends, people in crisis, synagogue...)

So there are people and institutions that can ask something of us. Perhaps holiness actually has something to do with being in a relationship that can make a claim on us, that can ask that we make a sacrifice. In ancient times we offered animals as sacrifice; we don't do that anymore. But the blessing "*Asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu*" challenges us to understand that now we are being asked to offer ourselves, that we become vessels of God's holiness through responding to the claims on us.

Mitzvot...commandments...might be connected to the Aramaic word for "connections." So now let's imagine a different translation for *asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu*: "You make us holy through connections, and connect us through...(fill in the blank: lighting the candle of Shabbat, affixing the mezuzah, wrapping ourselves in tzitzit...).

"You make us holy by connecting us to a tradition that makes a claim on us, to each other and to You."

It is ironic that the word *kadosh*-holy actually means to set apart, yet it is really about making connections, deep connections. You make us holy, *kadosh*: it's the same root as *Kiddush*, the blessing we say to set apart Shabbat, *kaddish*, the prayer that separates different parts of the service and becomes the mourners prayer, and *kiddushin*, the word for marriage, where we separate one partner out from all the other potential partners we might have. Yet in each case we are connected because of that which is holy: Shabbat connects us to God, *kaddish* to the person we remember and *kiddushin* to our beloved.

The opposite of *kadosh* is *chol*. It doesn't mean profane; it means ordinary. And it is the same word as "sand." Sand, a dry substance that is without cohesion, that slips through your fingers. Holy then means: "separate from the ordinary distractions that keep us from being connected to what matters most."

What is it that makes us holy really? I think it is an active sense of indebtedness, knowing that we are in debt for the miracle of our lives, for being alive, and therefore something is asked of us in our lives: We are responsible to create lives of connection, lives that include sacrifice. To say a blessing with the words: *asher kidshanu*... who makes us holy... is to say that our lives have purpose.

And then the blessing continues with the specific mitzvah... in this case: *l'asok b'divre Torah*. When I study this blessing with Bar Mitzvah students, I ask them to speculate on the meaning of *l'asok*. They guess: "to learn, to study to obey, to follow." And then I tell them: "No, it means to be involved with." Then, I ask them to tell me a little about themselves, what their hobbies are, what they love to do, what they are involved in.

One boy told me that he was involved with skateboarding. He told me that skateboarding was exhilarating, scary, that it involved his whole body and it required total concentration... After a few minutes of a powerful description of what it feels like to have his heart pounding, the wind in his hair and sweat dripping from his forehead, he stopped and asked: "You mean someone could feel about Torah study the way I feel about skateboarding? Wow!"

Wow indeed... and even more. The promise of the blessing is that there is something in being involved with words of Torah that not only leads to holiness and connection, but also to exhilaration, fear, total concentration and maybe even fun.

And then the blessing for Torah study goes on, although we don't usually say the rest of the blessing:

“May the words of Torah be sweet in our mouths and in the mouth of all of Your people so that we, our children and all the children of the House of Israel may come to love You and to study Torah for its own merit. Praised are You Adonai, who teaches Torah to Your people Israel. Praised are You who has chosen us from among all people by giving us Torah. Praised are You who gives Torah.”

May the words of Torah be sweet so that we come to love God. It is Torah that makes us special; it is our path to experience divinity. Genuine involvement with words of Torah, the moment when your heart is pounding, is what makes us Israel: God wrestlers.

You remember the story which gives us our name. Jacob, returning after 20 years to the brother he deceived, is terrified that Esau will kill him. He leaves his wives and children in a safe place and crosses over the river Jabok to be alone – Jabok, the river named out of the letters of Jacob's own name. And there, in that dark night of existential struggle, he wrestles with an angel, or with God, or with his brother, or with himself. He is both blessed and wounded, and his name is changed to Israel: one who wrestles with God.

We are B'nai Yisrael, the children of this man, this God wrestler... we are Beit Yisrael, the House of God Wrestlers...each one of us is Israel, a God wrestler... and we wrestle with God by wrestling with Torah.

We wrestle with Torah every Shabbat and every holiday, every Monday and every Thursday. Sometimes the Torah we study together in synagogue is painful; our Torah reading this morning is a perfect example. How could Abraham be willing to sacrifice his

son? Impossible, isn't it? But then, how many times have we sacrificed our own children... making decisions for them based on our own needs instead of theirs? And where was Sarah... how could she not know what her husband was planning to do? Impossible, isn't it? But how many of us have not wanted to know some of things going on in our community, in the home of our friends or even in our own homes? And Isaac, how could he have been so passive? But then, think of all the times each of us have been passive, unwilling to stand up and fight....

It is not easy to wrestle with Torah. You get wounded... You have to look at yourself in the mirror of the text... and maybe see parts of yourself you prefer not to notice. And you do it year after year after year, and each year you see something different, something new. The texts haven't changed... but you have.

There's another dimension to Torah study, one that we experience every Shabbat in our New Emanuel Minyan. We look at a sacred text, and then we look at the commentary on the text. And then we look at a commentary on the commentary. In fact, we join in an ongoing conversation, across time and geography. No wonder a page of Talmud has the text in the middle and the commentaries all around the sides... in this corner Rashi from the 11th Century, in that corner the Tosefot, a century later... here a 16th century question... there an 18th century answer. And when we study Torah, we too are on the page, our questions sharpened by theirs, our answers enriching the discussion. And most often when we study Torah, we study with a chaver, an intimate friend, a study partner or group of partners. Like skateboarding, it is exhilarating, challenging and even sometimes heart stopping. We get close enough to be wounded... and close enough to be blessed.

Torah study is different from other kinds of learning. It is study in response to a claim. It is study that leads to connection: to a tradition, to a study partner, and ultimately to God. And so it is

study that can lead to clarity about what is really important. It can lead to holiness.

No wonder Rava has that question on his list. It would be on my list as well.

So how do you do it, how do you set aside time for Torah study? You could take a class at Temple Emanuel or at any of the wonderful centers of adult Jewish learning in Los Angeles. You could make a commitment to come to our New Emanuel Minyan on Shabbat where every week we engage in Torah study, interactive text study that challenges us to make a connection between the Torah of tradition and the Torah of our lives. You could go to the URJ website and sign up for “Ten Minutes of Torah.” Or better yet, you could find a friend to study with... a chaver... and make a commitment to meet once a week or once a month over a book or a text. We’ll help you find the text... and be a resource for you and your study partner.

Better not to wait for that heavenly tribunal. It’s a new year... a good time to decide to set aside time to study Torah.

“May the words of Torah be sweet in our mouths and in the mouth of all of Your people so that we, our children and all the children of the House of Israel may come to love You and to study Torah for its own merit. Praised are You Adonai, who teaches Torah to your people Israel.”