

Kol Nidre 5777
Aleinu - It is Upon Us
Rabbi Karen Citrin

How good it is to look out and see our holy community come together in worship. I have a confession. When I was a child, I remember that sometimes services seemed to go on for a long time. There was one line that was music to my ears: “Please rise for *Aleinu*.” The *Aleinu* signified that it was nearly the end of the service. You can be honest, it is Yom Kippur after all. How many of you have had a similar thought?

While some of us have these associations, *Aleinu* actually offers a deeper message. *Aleinu*. “It is upon us.” On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about *Hineini*, the single word meaning “Here I Am,” a radical Jewish response to being present. *Hineini* is an individual answer. *Aleinu* is a communal response. “It is upon us.” “*Aleinu l’shabeiach*.” “It is upon us to praise the Sovereign of the universe.” The prayer goes on to say, “it is upon us... *l’taken olam* – to fix the world.” Then, we conclude, “On that day, *Adonai* will be one, and God’s Name will be one.”

In a world that has become increasingly fractured and broken, *Aleinu* conveys a different message. In a world that has become increasingly individualized and lonely, *Aleinu* reminds us that we are in this together. *Aleinu* signals that we are intimately connected and bound to humanity. This year, we need to hear the message of community more than ever.

Tonight, Kol Nidre calls us into community. As the bow drew across the cello strings, as we sang the mysterious notes of Kol Nidre, we stood shoulder to shoulder with family and friends, generations past, and Jews all over the world. We stood with ark and hearts open. While we entered the sanctuary alone, ready to pour out our personal confession, Kol Nidre initiates a 24-hour period of shouldering each other’s burdens. “For transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement atones; but for transgressions of one human being against another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another.” (*machzor*) *Aleinu* – it is upon us. We share in one another’s mistakes and serve as each other’s guide to lead a life of goodness. We are in this world together.

Kol Nidre, the ancient, haunting melody that calls us home year after year. Tonight, I want to paint two pictures of belonging to community. As these images take shape in your minds, I invite you to reflect on how our lives are better when we come together. As Jews and as Americans, our communities exist outside of and inside the synagogue walls. *Aleinu* – it is upon us to look both outside and in.

Looking back on the year that has been, I’m sure you would agree that it has been a difficult one. At times it felt as if the world was spinning out of control. It has been frightening to turn on the news. Each time we hear about another city and community: Orlando, Dallas, New York, Tulsa, Charlotte. Which community will be next?

When will the senseless violence stop? How are these communities moving forward? What can we do? Why do we feel so powerless? *Aleinu*. It is upon each of us to shape community.

I want to share the story of one person who powerfully shaped a small piece of community this year. Tulsa schoolteacher, Rebecca Lee, shared a heartbreaking message that went viral on social media about what her students were feeling after the tragic shooting of Terence Crutcher. As you know, Micah and I recently moved here from Tulsa, Oklahoma. It is a strange sensation to hear about familiar places on the news. We were in touch with a colleague, Reverend Ray Owens, who was quoted by CNN as he organized a peaceful protest vigil at his predominantly black church. “Thanks for keeping Tulsa in your prayers,” he wrote to us. “The Crutcher family and our city remain in great pain over this loss of life and the system that caused such a tragedy.”

Crutcher’s sixth grade daughter attends the charter school where Rebecca Lee teaches. The staff decided that, in their words, they needed to “press pause and create a space for kids to share their thoughts and feelings.” Ms. Lee wrote, “I want to share what I experienced with the kids today, because I am convinced that if you can put yourself in the shoes of a child of color in Tulsa right now, you will have a clearer understanding of the crises we’re facing and why we say black lives matter.”

She writes, “As the questions roll, so do the tears. I watch 10 year olds pass tissues to each other, to me, to our principal as he joins the circle. One girl closes our group by sharing: ‘I wish white people could give us a chance. We can all come together and get along. We can all be united.’ We agree to love one another, to take care of one another.”

The sixth graders have a harder time speaking. Ms. Lee reflects, “It hurts to talk about. It hurts to think about. It hurts. I tell them, ‘We have different skin colors. I love you. You matter. You are worthy. You are human. You are valuable.’ Shoulders shake harder around the circle.

“I share this story,” Ms. Lee says, “because Mr. Crutcher’s death does not just affect the students at my school. I share this story, because we are creating an identity crisis in all of our black and brown students. (Do I matter? Am I to be feared? Should I live in fear? Am I human?) I share this story, because while I could never capture the articulate things kids said or the raw emotions students shared today, my privilege requires that I speak. I ask that you use whatever privilege or platform you have to speak.... I ask that you love and love hard.”

In one day’s lesson, in the aftermath of tragedy, this one teacher imparted a message of belonging and hope to her students. She created a circle of community, a loving community, and told them that they matter. Their sharing and their silence speak to the importance of community. Members of the Jewish community and other faith communities heeding Reverend Owen’s call to the vigil at his church, demonstrates the

importance of belonging to community. This teacher challenged all of us to take a closer look at our communities, our cities, to reach out to those who are different from us, and to love the stranger. When I read her words I couldn't help but think this is what it means to be a Jew. *Aleinu* – it is upon us.

Aleinu. It is upon us to also look within. The stronger our Jewish communities are, the more we will be able to partner and stand with others. It is incumbent upon us to look at the central Jewish institution of synagogue, and to ask the question of why belong in 5777? Especially here at Temple Beth David, with new co-rabbis, we have a unique opportunity before us.

What compels us to belong to synagogue today? Or, perhaps we should be asking, what about synagogue is compelling? We all know about the struggle to engage the next generation of Jews. And the decline in affiliation is not unique to the Jewish community. Robert Putnam's groundbreaking sociological work, *Bowling Alone*, chronicled more than just the decline of bowling leagues. He exposed growing concerns about the broader erosion of civic life and spiritual connection.

However, I am also heartened by the ways many Jewish communities are rethinking and reframing the experience. There are exciting initiatives and renewal projects taking shape in synagogues all over the country. And we don't have to look too far to see that some neighboring Boston congregations have been nationally recognized for their innovations. Rabbi Sidney Schwartz, author of the recent book called, *Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future*, writes, "Despite some of the current indicators of communal deterioration, I see something very different. On the margins of the community there are stirrings of Jewish revival. It looks different than the Jewish community of the last generation, but if properly nurtured, it has the potential to grow into a great renaissance of American Jewish life."

What do these stirrings look like? You can see communities coming together through spiritually uplifting moments taking place on Shabbat in synagogues that offer multiple pathways to participation such as learner's *minyanim*, a musical service in the round, "Torah Yoga," "teen schmooze," Shabbat movies and discussion, "PJ Havdalah." People go not because they have to, but because they really want to go to temple, and are happy when they are there.

You can see congregations coming together and combatting isolation by caring for one another in times of need – calling each other, cooking, coming over, comforting each other.

And you can see revitalization in Jewish education in congregations that have questioned the success of the Sunday School drop-off and are offering more flexible and engaging opportunities for Jewish learning that bring together different segments of the community. For example, parallel adult and child Torah study, "Sharing Shabbat," Jewish book clubs in age cohorts, ongoing *tikkun olam* opportunities for families, adult

member mentors for children, and retreat experiences that bring the best of Jewish summer camp into the synagogue.

It is also exciting to look at national Jewish renewal initiatives such as the joint project of the Union for Reform Judaism and the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion called the “B’nai Mitzvah Revolution.” The project aims to empower synagogues to reduce the rate of post-b’nai mitzvah dropout. They are working with congregations to create meaningful preparation, joyful ceremonies that signal beginning rather than end, and a process that ultimately strengthens the involvement and connection for families. This revolution is catching on, as more and more synagogues are looking to reverse the “revolving door” trend in congregational life.

(<http://bnaimitzvahrevolution.org>)

Think about it, when bar or bat mitzvah does what it’s supposed to, Judaism gets it right with its message of community. We welcome a young adult member into our *minyan*, our sacred community, during a potentially challenging and awkward stage of life; we ask them to learn and teach, we convey that they matter, we tell them how proud we are, and we instill an image of belonging that they will hopefully want to pass onto their children someday.

What do all these glimpses of renewal have in common? One) These renewal efforts seek to raise the bar of Jewish communal life, not lower it. Two) These congregations have reflective leaders who create shared vision of sacred community and encourage a culture of participation. And, Three) These synagogues embrace an innovation disposition; a desire to experiment and a tolerance for possible failure as a temporary setback. (*Sacred Strategies: Transforming Synagogues from Functional to Visionary*, Isa Aron, Steven M. Cohen, Lawrence A. Hoffman, Ari Y. Kelman)

My colleague, friend, and professor of Jewish Education, Rabbi Tali Zelkowitz, encourages us to view our Jewish communities, especially when it comes to engaging the next generation, less like china shops and more like jungle gyms. In other words, Jewish tradition has survived a long time. We don’t have to be so worried about every little piece breaking. Rather, we can see our community’s learning process evolving on a jungle gym, with spongy floors and shock-absorbent walls, a colorful, safe apparatus where we can twist and bend in new ways, question and climb to new heights, play and laugh, with minimal risk of breaking something or hurting anyone. (*“Jungle Gyms and China Shops: Secular, American Identity-Formation as Durable; Jewish Identity-Formation as Fragile,”* 2008)

Tonight, I have shared bold visions of communities. *Aleinu* – it is upon us. It is upon us at Temple Beth David to continue to build our community. I see a deeply rich history and foundation built over fifty plus years. I see incredibly dedicated members, founding members, multi-generational families, people who give their time and energy, and new faces taking their first steps in. I see a serious commitment to learning. I see a love of Shabbat, of prayer and song. I see eager and thoughtful children. I see profound

kindness and caring. The way you have so graciously and openly welcomed my family, gives me hope as we look to welcome the next generation of Beth David members.

Your belonging matters. You belong to celebrate and mourn together, to rejoice with and support one another. You belong to connect with each other and with our beautiful tradition. You belong to effect change together. You belong because when the world feels like it is spinning out of control, you have a safe sanctuary to come to, a holy space filled with caring people who touch our souls. You belong to imagine and dream together of the bright future ahead. *Aleinu* – it is upon us.

What connects Rebecca Lee’s classroom and our synagogue is the overwhelming message that it makes a difference when we share and participate. Our presence matters. We are not alone. It is good to belong.

I will leave you with the powerful introduction to the *Aleinu* prayer that appears in the Reform Movement’s new *machzor*, *Mishkan HaNefesh*.

Aleinu –
ours the duty to listen and ours the duty to praise;
ours is the duty to respond to what we hear;
to raise questions
and build houses of study in which to ask them;
to praise the Creator for creating;
to praise the Creator for rest;
to praise the God of Torah for the challenge of Torah;
to praise the God of eternity for every hour, every day;
to plant and build, to seek peace and pursue it;
ours the duty to do justice; ours the duty to be Israel:
to fix the broken, to open doors of hope;
to bow before a commanding Power that speaks to us
from Sinai, from history, from deep within the heart.
Hear, O Israel:
it is not your duty to complete the work,
but you may not turn away.

Aleinu – It is upon us to affirm the dignity and value of our fellow human being regardless of race, gender, class, or sexuality. *Aleinu* – it is upon us to vote, and to make our voices heard as we seek to shape our communities. *Aleinu* – It is upon us to create vibrant Jewish communities that are ever-evolving and welcoming to all who seek to belong. *Aleinu* – It is upon us at Temple Beth David to come together this year, and for many years to come. “On that day, *Adonai* will be one, and God’s Name will be one.”
Amen.

And now... Please rise for *Aleinu*.