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**Congregation B'nai Yisrael of Armonk**  
**Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770**  
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Thirty years ago tonight, just up Route 22, at the Canyon Club, a 31-year-old Rabbi approached the podium to address the Association of Armonk Jewish Families on the occasion of the New Year. Thirty years ago I felt inadequate to represent the nobility, the dignity, the significance of an ancient and valuable Jewish tradition. Our Jewish tradition calls us, fundamentally, to be our better selves, to be sensitive, empathetic, forgiving human beings. Our tradition beckons us to pursue peace in our own hearts, in our own homes, in our community, and indeed around our world. The admonition צדק צדק תרדוּהָ —“Justice, justice you shall pursue” [*Deuteronomy* 16:20] is fundamental because there is no peace without justice; peace is not the absence of war, but the presence of social justice. To be our better, more humane, more spiritual selves means to sustain one other, which is what makes us a spiritually rewarding sacred community.

The nature of our community was on the mind of the young Rabbi I was thirty years ago tonight. What, I wondered, would we do together in the years to come? Tonight the question remains the same: What will the future hold for those of us gathered at the New Year—complex, sentient human beings who are caring, supportive, nurturing—indeed, loving of one another? At the New Year 5770, our communal challenge remains not about schooling our children in Judaism, not about teaching facts about the Jewish tradition to young people, but to nurturing in Jewish human beings of all ages a curiosity about the vitality of Jewish living, in order to fulfill the best of ourselves. To build our better selves, we continually create a spiritual community that is the work of our collective hands, minds and hearts.

The work of our hands came to my mind because the podium I approached thirty years ago—the one that we will use tomorrow afternoon in our Family Service in the other room, along with the ark that holds our Torah in that service—were made by the founder of our temple in his workshop at home. In our early days on the property here at the corner of Banksville Road and Route 22, the tent would arrive a few days before Rosh Hashanah. Our first tent here for the High Holy Days sat 350 of us. After the tent went up, we gathered to set up the chairs and the ark and the podium. We did the labor ourselves. That first year on our property, the treasurer brought over his own lawn mower from home in order to mow the lawn for Rosh Hashanah. The gardener mowed the lawn a few days ago in anticipation of our getting together to greet the New Year 5770, according to our Jewish calendar.

In the year 5740, a younger Rabbi thought: “The path to this day began a long time ago, in antiquity, when our forebears grew rich and comfortably fat as they enjoyed the wealth of the kingdom. Then it was our prophets, Amos, Micah, Isaiah and Jeremiah,

who came to remind their world that being Jewish was never an end in and of itself; on the contrary, Judaism was a means to a better world for all people. Our prophets taught then—and ought to remind us now [—he said back then—] that Judaism has nothing to do with riches that could be measured numerically, pieces of gold and silver that could be counted. Judaism was then and remains now a way to a better world, a world of understanding, a world of human dignity, a world of justice and peace. Concerning those Jews of old, our prophets demanded nothing less of them than that they be ‘a light to the nations.’”

That night, the young Rabbi, who resides somewhere as a part of who I am, said these words: “As we make our way along, let us remember that we will not measure the success or failure of our school in terms of students that can be counted, but rather in terms of how we impart the vitality of a living Judaism. Surely that is true for adults as well.... The tone was set. We make our services, and we will judge our [worship] services not by counting the people who come. Rather, we will judge our services by what we who come derive from them.”

Two years after those words were uttered by a younger Rabbi, the president of our temple, in the dedication message to our Congregation, wrote that our building and our property are a gift “gladly given to those generations of Jews who will follow us.” Our Congregation B’nai Yisrael was not for us, not for our use, not a place with a utility for the present, but rather a gift to the community, from one generation, to the human presence of the next generation, a part of our people’s processional through time. Our temple was, then, a gift to all of us here and now.

The gift remains the religious possibility of discovering our better selves in a religious world in which we celebrate human dignity and understanding. Our Rabbis of old surely understood the Greek concept of *paideia* (παιδεία), the Greek word that we know from our English word “encyclopedia.” *Paideia* was the concept that the community is the teacher. Our community taught us; we found our way together; we lost our way together from time to time—but we have been blessed by the journey of our years together. So too our Rabbis of antiquity understood the concept of the מנין . When the temple was destroyed in Jerusalem, the Rabbinic Reformation was that there was no longer a single sacred spot. Sacred ground would be created when men and women came together. The presence of the community, the voices of friends and family, together, create the sacred space that allows the service we celebrate here tonight at our New Year. Together, we give voice to the old words. The voices of mothers and fathers have taught the children of Congregation B’nai Yisrael the words *Shema Yisrael* for more than a generation and a half. When children hear their parent’s voice singing and saying the words of our service that go back across the millennia to the very beginning of the journey of our people through time, we are in touch with the sacred. So tonight we journey together as a sacred community.

I remember reading these thoughts about community: “To build better cities, you build better communities; to build better communities, you start at home. You begin with your own life and circle outward. You build connections between your life and your community, your life and nature. Making things better always comes down to personal experience and personal responsibility.” [Tanya Kucak, *Rain*, September-October 1984.] Tonight we are together as families because the family is fundamental. The family is the foundation of our identity, and therefore of our community.

In the midst of our community, I am aware of failure. I fret that we have lost our way. An out-of-work person in our sacred community said to me that the family could no longer pay their way, and that their son or daughter was “taking up space” in our community. Taking up space in our community. Taking up space is the requirement for creating a sacred community, holy ground according to our tradition. I apologized for my failure as a rabbi, and asked to be forgiven, because I have failed to teach that lesson successfully. Mindful of failure, I fret that we have lost our way, we who gather in the year 2009 to greet another New Year. While richly blessed by the extraordinary journey we have traversed, I am troubled by the nature of our journey today. Another wonderful friend in our congregation showed me the error of my ways when she spoke to me at a meeting about a year and half ago. Looking me straight in the eye, she said: All you ever ask of us is that we line up our cars in straight lines in the parking lot, and that we be on time to pick up our children. Her words were like a dagger that stabbed at my heart because I knew she was exactly right. We have not in recent years asked enough of our community.

We have to ask more of our community. Yes, I understand some of the complexity of the lives we live today. The demands on our time are huge. Incessant e-mails zoom in and fill up our in-boxes with a rapidity that seems to me sometimes as an assault. We spend more and more time alone, and isolated, in front of the screens of our computers, communicating words. But no human voice traverses the e-mails I read and send to so many of you, who touch me so deeply, grace and bless my life so profoundly. We are experiencing a privatization and a commodification of our lives today.

Alone in front of the computer screen, without a *paideia*, without a מנין, we do our work. Alone with our computers, we have grown accustomed to paying for services. Purchasing services is purchasing commodities. For too many, our precious Congregation B’nai Yisrael has become a service provider. Families join our sacred congregation with wonderful hearts and profoundly sensitive spiritual natures. Good people, wonderful people, friends and neighbors, want their children to become bar or bat mitzvah. Heedful of my failures, I fret that some families here understand the roles of Rabbis and Cantors as those who prepare a child for a life cycle event, the same way they might pay for a tutor to help their child achieve a better score on the SATs. We have a special fee for bar and bat mitzvah now. We have muddied our own life-sustaining drinking water. My friends, good people, say to me: I don’t “use” the temple, as if

somehow Congregation B'nai Yisrael, the place where the scrolls of our Torah are kept, is no different from a gymnasium and a few treadmills.

I share a portion of that failure. We have not asked enough of your precious time. Time ticks by; still, attentive to failure, I fret that our congregation has been caught up in the culture from which we must escape, the culture that has come to commodify our way of life. Education has become commodified. Services are purchased from school districts where the privileged enjoy quality public education, like here in Armonk. Expensive courses prepare our children to beat the tests. Just over a year ago, I recertified as an Emergency Medical Technician, taking courses at Westchester Community College. The students with whom I studied did not read the textbook. I studied the textbook. All of my fellow—and clearly younger—classmates took practice tests in order to pass the tests. I was preparing myself to be an Emergency Medical Technician. So, I read the textbooks; I successfully renewed my certification.

Today, a student's individuality is neither encouraged nor celebrated. When I worried thirty years ago about counting pieces of silver, and about numbering, I took my worry and my grief from our Biblical prophets, like Amos, who worried that good human beings might "sell the needy for a pair of shoes," as a commodity. A human being could be sold as a commodity. And Jeremiah cried with grief because we so easily lose our way, and stray from the path of justice and right.

Now we come to greet a very challenging and difficult New Year. We are painfully aware of the extraordinarily difficult and burdensome economic reset that has so profoundly changed our lives. Last year during these Days of Awe, I suggested we might be liberated by learning to live lighter. Let me suggest now that in all of the travail of these days and nights, there is a flicker of hope that was hidden from me in the years before. Now looking back, I understand that I was counting pieces of silver, commodifying my own life. Now I struggle against the deceit in my own heart [Jeremiah 17:9]. Redolent of failure, I fret because I now know I was caught up in measuring the nature of our sacred community in my own mind. As the number of our families grew, I commodified my understanding of myself as a rabbi with a growing congregation. I was bitten by words James Baldwin wrote about Michael Jackson in 1985, because he was worried that Jackson might not be able to "snatch his life out of the jaws of carnivorous success." [NYRB, August 13, 2009] I was bitten by a commodified carnivorous success.

But there is more. I too was caught up in the culture of excess. I became spoiled. I remain spoiled. I thought we should expand our current congregational building space more than was realistic. I participated in my own failure. For the sin which I sinned, forgive me, pardon me. In the pain of our failure we have discovered again during the year that has passed not only that we need to ask more of one another, but more

fundamentally that we are in deep and profound need of one another, in need of our sacred community.

Tonight we are—in part because of the painful economic hardships—more profoundly sensitive to injustice, more deeply a religious community than we have been in recent years. We understand better the value of depending on our families more, and the significance of those we love most in our world. Our awareness of our privilege is deeper and our sense of gratitude more securely rooted in each and every one of us. While we have lost much that can be counted, we have discovered the domain that our Rabbis of antiquity described as *אלו דדברים אשר אין להם שיוור* these are the matters which are without quantifiable dimension. [Talmud, *Pe'ah* 1:1] We are each other's keepers. We are now, more than we have ever been, what I wanted our name to be thirty years ago—not alone Congregation B'nai Yisrael, but in Hebrew *ק"ק בני ישראל*, the sacred congregation of the Children of Israel. We have come here to affirm that we are a religious community, that we can depend on one another in order to become our better selves: more sensitive to others, more empathetic, more forgiving of ourselves and our neighbors.

So our journey has reached that wonderful moment: another New Year. In our New Year, we who are so blessed will continue to strengthen ourselves as we fortify our families. We will nurture one another by reaching out a helping hand to each other. By building our better selves, our better families, and our sacred community, we ourselves will be “a gift gladly given to the next generation of Jews,” who at the New Year will be what our Prophets challenged us to be all those years ago: a light to those whom we love deeply; a light to one another in our community; nothing less than a significant light to all the nations. *Shanah Tovah*. Amen.