Sermon for Yom Kippur 5782 September 16, 2021
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Legacy

This is a day for reconsidering our lives, for seeing ourselves in a long-term perspective, in the scope of eternity. And it is also a day for reconsidering the lives of those we have loved and lost, those whose memories we invoke and whose past we revisit on this day. We look back and ask ourselves, what is the legacy that they leave to us? How does the way they lived their lives continue to teach and inform and shape how we live ours? In what ways have they left the world different because they lived? We look forward and ask ourselves, what is the legacy that we will leave to those who come after us? How will the way we live our lives reverberate in the lives of those we leave behind? In what ways will the world be different because we have lived?

The Hebrew word for legacy used most often in Torah is *nahalah*.[1] This word is particularly resonant because it comes from the root *nahal*, meaning a river or stream. When we think about the legacy of those who came before us, we are standing in the middle of the river looking upstream, seeing what has flowed down to us, what nourishes and challenges us. And when we think about our own legacy to those who come after us, we are still standing in the river, but this time we are looking downstream, trying to imagine what will flow from us to future generations, what they will take from our lives and what they will discard, what will nourish and what will challenge them. The fact that the river keeps flowing, and that our lives stand in that flow between the past and the future, is both a great source of comfort and a great challenge to us.

Today I want to talk about legacy. Legacy in the Torah often refers to something physical – land, property, or material possessions – that comes down to succeeding generations as an inheritance, and too often when we talk about legacy in our day, that is what we highlight as well. But I want to talk about something different, the impact that a human life makes on the world. In the prayer we say at the graveside, we read, "You would never permit the impact we make on the world to fade." Today I want us to consider that impact in two different contexts, to think about both our legacy as individuals and our legacy as a Jewish community.

Our Legacy as Individuals

After one of the many funerals that my teacher and our Rabbi Emeritus Rabbi Gordon and I conducted together, he said something to me that I have always remembered: "We try to live our lives in such a way that when we die, our children will think of us with love." As a rabbi, I spend a lot of time with grieving families, talking to them about their loved ones who have died. Although the deceased are sometimes public people who have long lists of accomplishments in their professional and volunteer lives, the families rarely spend much if any time talking about those. Instead, they talk about the gifts that this person offered to them in small, personal ways. They talk about their smile or their laugh, their kindness or generosity to

[1] See for example Numbers 27:7 with regard to the daughters of Tzelophehad.

others, their devotion to family. The ways that we relate to the people around us, whether family, friends, or strangers, have more impact than perhaps anything else we do. Many of us learn this as parents or teachers, when we see that what we explicitly teach children might have some effect, but what we do and how we relate to others is the most powerful teacher of all.

On this day when we look downstream at the legacy we are creating for those who come after us, we have to ask: What models from those who have come before us are we following? What impressions are we making on the minds, hearts, and memories of the people we encounter each day? And what will we leave behind us when we leave this earth? In Pirkei Avot, the collection of rabbinic wisdom from 1,800 years ago, Akavya ben Mahalalel says: "Mark well three things and you will not come into the power of sin. Know from where you come, and where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning."[2] I am not so interested in his answers, but I am fascinated by these questions. First, where do we come from? What personal examples have shaped how we act, our interpersonal relationships with other people? For myself, this question has prompted me to see traces of my parents' and even my grandparents' behavior in myself, ways of acting I learned from teachers, mentors, and friends, patterns that I picked up from them and have perpetuated, many for good, some for ill. These patterns of behavior are very powerful. In the cases where we need to shift or alter them, it can take tremendous effort to create a new track for us to follow, and of course trying to alter those habits that may be leading us to dysfunction is a key part of the work of the High Holidays.

Second, where are we going? In my understanding, this is asking how we are influencing the patterns of the people around us, whether they are our family, colleagues, friends, acquaintances, or even strangers. What example are we setting? How are we shaping the ways in which those after us will behave and speak, even long after we have departed from this earth? As a person who regularly speaks publicly, I have often had the experience of having someone come up to me and say, "Rabbi, I'll always remember when you spoke about such and such. It really meant a lot to me and helped me." Even when I don't remember all of the things I've said over the years, the fact that others do shows the influence that words can have. Of course, I've also had the opposite experience, when someone shares with me how much something I've said long before has hurt them, often in ways I did not intend and had no idea about. We all have the capacity to influence other lives deeply, for good and for ill, and being conscious of that power can shape what we do for the better.

Akavya ben Mahalalel's third question is, "Before whom are you destined to give an account and reckoning?" His answer is simple: "Before the King of the Kings of Kings, the Blessed Holy One." While that may be the accounting that takes place in heaven, we know that there is another accounting that is going to happen on earth. Not only will we be remembered for good or for ill, but also the pattern of our deeds, our ways of speaking, and the qualities of

[2] Pirkei Avot 3:1.

our interactions with others will be imprinted on those we have influenced in the world, again for good or for ill. That is the earthly reckoning that is inevitable for us all. If we could keep that in mind, every day, how would that shape our actions? If we knew consciously that each step we took would have effects not only in our own lives but for generations on the earth, how would we step more lightly, more gently? How would we moderate our words? How would we reshape our actions? This is the Day of Atonement, but every day is a day we should be wrestling with what our personal legacy is on this earth, one we can still shape in the minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years that we all, G-d willing, have left together in this life.

Our Legacy as a Jewish Community

What is the legacy that has come down to us as a Jewish community, this community right here of Germantown Jewish Centre? And what legacy will we leave behind us after we are gone? This synagogue was founded in 1936 at a moment of transition, and its name marks three important nodes of change. First, the fact that the name is completely in English – complete with the hyper-corrected British spelling of "Centre" – marks a change from American Jews identifying mostly as immigrants with roots elsewhere to American Jews identifying principally as Americans, leaving the world of the shtetl behind and finding new ways to be Jewish in a changing American society. Second, the fact that this synagogue was identified with Germantown marks an important move for Jews from areas of first settlement like South Philadelphia to places like Northwest Philadelphia, in neighborhoods where Jews previously were not allowed to live, and where restrictive deeds and covenants had kept them out. Claiming Germantown as their own was a sign from the founders of the synagogue that they were here to stay. Third, by calling this synagogue a Jewish Centre, the founders allied themselves with a shift from considering synagogues mainly as places for, let's be honest, a minority of Jews to say prayers to seeing synagogues as hubs of Jewish life of all kinds, from lectures to art, music, drama, sports, education, social action, language learning – oh, and yes, prayer too.

This idea of a synagogue center paved the way for diverse kinds of people to find their home at Germantown Jewish Centre, and that led to the incredible diversity of prayer options and other forms of Jewish expression that have become our core identity. Our commitment to being open to multiple ways of being Jewish – expressed in the tag line of "a community of communities" – became our "brand" in the Jewish world, and luckily a lot of us were happy to join the community on that basis. For me, that diversity, and the mutual respect for alternate Jewish paths that has come along with it, is what drew me and my family to join GJC 22 years ago, and it is what has driven my vision when, in a turn that no one could see coming, I became your rabbi. The legacy of our founders, of Rabbi Charry, Rabbi Hahn, and Rabbi Gordon, and of all of the leaders and members who have put their energy and time and money into this place over the last 85 years has come down to us and continues to shape the ways we set our priorities. Even the fact that we are meeting today in a tent is an outgrowth of the idea that everyone's needs must be respected in setting a direction for the congregation. The mutual respect we have for each other even when we disagree and when our needs conflict and our

ability to reach out and connect across the differences that could divide us both have their roots in the legacy that the past has offered up for us.

What of the legacy we will leave for the future in this community? We once again find ourselves at an inflection point in Jewish life in America. Everything we knew about how to live Jewishly and all the institutions we built in which to do it are being called into question. The pandemic has thrown that into high relief, but as I said last year, I don't hold with those who think that this means that localized Jewish community is outmoded. Instead, I think it simply means that we have choices to make. Will we continue to structure our institutions in the image of those of the 20th century, or will we stretch ourselves to imagine new ways to organize and grow? Will we continue to see the Jewish community as it was 50 years ago, or will we open our eyes and our hearts to the community we actually have and the community we could be?

These choices face all Jewish institutions, but here at GJC, with our particular history and legacy, we have a special and, I believe, crucial role to play. We all know that we live at a time of increasing division and disjuncture, when Americans in general not only refuse to respect those with whom they disagree but also go further and can barely see them as human beings. Anger and indignation have replaced curiosity and attempting to understand each other. Political opponents don't just disagree; they deny each other's legitimacy. Difference is placed into the worst kind of moral hierarchy; to be different is not only to be wrong but to be evil. American society is being torn and shredded as ideological arguments shrink the space for common ground and common purpose. And many sink into despair at what our country has become.

Unfortunately, the American Jewish community is not immune from these same forces; the destructive impulses are the same, even if the issues are different. And here is where we at GJC have a special role to play and a unique legacy to offer if we will embrace it. Instead of insisting that there is one right and true way to be Jewish, we can insist that there are many paths and that all of them are legitimate. Instead of demonizing those who disagree with us, we can engage with them with respect, seeking to learn more and to understand our differences. Instead of seeing diversity as weakness, we can comprehend its strength. This is the gift that we have to offer American Judaism and American society. But we have to live it every day, to walk on the hard path of mutual respect, living with our discomfort, learning from our divergences, and working toward compromise when our needs conflict or when our resources are limited. Let me say it again: It is hard work. But we can be motivated to take it up and to push it forward when we imagine the legacy we would like to leave to the Jewish world and the example we would like to set for what is left of civil society in America. Wouldn't that be something?

The legacies we consider this day flowing to us from the individuals who came before us and from the GJC community of the past can fill us and buoy us up and give us comfort. And the legacies we can imagine flowing down the river of time from us, our legacies as individuals

impacting others every day and this community's legacy as a light and example for the Jewish world and beyond, these can and should inspire us to reflection, to consideration, and to action, so that our lives will have had meaning and significance when we, too, like the generations before us, no longer walk this earth.