

Last week, I spoke about teshuvah.

Return.

About the things we sometimes leave behind as we make the journey through life—
and the possibility of returning for them.

Joy.

Forgiveness.

Faith.

Some part of ourselves that the journey required us to leave behind for a while, but which we may now be ready to encounter again.

This morning, I want to talk about another experience I suspect many of us know.

The strange experience of having a life that is full—
and still feeling an empty space within it.

A void.

I don't mean unhappiness.

I don't mean that something is broken.

You can love your life.

You can be grateful for it.

You can be surrounded by people you love.

You can do work that matters to you.

And still have this quiet sense:

Something is missing.

We often try to fill it. More work. More commitments. More travel.

Maybe a journey of self-discovery.

Maybe a new relationship — preferably accompanied by a red sports car.

You know, for most of my adult life, whenever I felt that void, my instinct was to fill it with accomplishment.

I became a cantor young.

I built a career I loved.

I studied more.

I took on leadership roles.

I collected degrees and experiences.

And somewhere around fifty, I realized that despite all of it, the void was still there.

So I thought:

I know.

I'll become a rabbi.

What a wonderful idea.

And so I went back to school.

I studied.

I worked.

I became a rabbi.

And it was meaningful.

It expanded me.

It changed the way I thought about Judaism and the way I served the Jewish people.

But something surprised me.

The void was still there.

So I requested kol ami to add additional rabbinical responsibilities to my cantorial role.

Surely this was it.

I was using more of myself.

More of my training.

More of what I had spent a lifetime learning.

And yet, the space was still there.

I kept assuming that if there was a void inside me, something must be missing from me.

Something else I needed to become..

Something else I needed to accomplish.

Something else I needed to add.

And then Beth Orr came into my life.

I want to be careful about what I say next.

I don't mean that I arrived here and suddenly every question was answered.

That's not how life works.

And it's certainly not how synagogues work.

But something happened here that I had not anticipated.

I found myself needed in a different way.

Not simply for what I could do.

Not simply because I could preach or sing or teach or officiate.

It felt more personal than that.

I began to feel responsible for something.

For people.

For a community.

For what this synagogue could become.

And slowly I began to wonder whether I had misunderstood the void.

I had assumed that because there was an empty space inside me, something must be missing from me.

But what if I had been asking the wrong question?

What if the question wasn't:

What am **I** missing?

What if the question was:

Who is missing me?

That is a very different question.

That question asks:

Who needs something I can give?

Where is there a place that will be different because I showed up?

Where is there something unfinished that needs my hands?

Maybe there comes a point in life when the question changes.

Not:

What else do **I** need to become?

But:

Who needs the person I have already become?

And strangely enough, that is a question our tradition places directly in front of us this morning.

Because a few moments ago we heard one of the most confrontational passages in the entire Yom Kippur liturgy.

The prophet Isaiah looks at a community doing exactly what we are doing.

They are fasting.

They are praying.

They are seeking God.

They are doing the religious things they have been told to do.

And God asks:

“Is this the fast I desire?”

Is this what you think I wanted?

A day of bowing your head?

A day of fasting?

A day of prayer?

And Isaiah continues:

Let the oppressed go free.

Share your bread with the hungry.

Bring the poor into your home.

Clothe the naked.

Do not hide yourself from your fellow human being.

And then Isaiah says:

“Then shall your light burst through like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly.”

Then.

That word matters.

Isaiah is not saying that the inner life does not matter.

Of course it matters.

Yom Kippur is built around introspection.

Repentance.

Prayer.

Fasting.

We are supposed to look inward today.

But Isaiah says:

Don't stop there.

Turn outward.

Because transformation that remains entirely inside us is incomplete.

We spend so much of our lives asking:

What will make me happier?

What will make me feel fulfilled?

What will fill the space?

And Isaiah asks us to consider another possibility.

Perhaps some of our healing begins when we stop looking only at what we need—
and begin asking where **we** are needed.

Perhaps some of the light we are searching for appears when we become light for somebody else.

And maybe that is the call to each of us.

And to the very synagogue in which we are sitting right now.

Beth Orr.

A house of light.

This congregation has had some incredible years.

And more recently, some challenging ones.

There are those of you who have been part of this congregation since its earliest days.

Those who have celebrated simchas in these walls.

Those who have buried people you loved from this community.

Those who have watched children grow up here.

And

There are those of you who are new—

and we say welcome.

And there are people sitting in this room this morning whom we have not seen in a while.

And I want you to know:

We see you.

And I am very glad you are here.

Whatever brought you through these doors this morning—

welcome back.

But I want to ask something of all of us.

Not only:

Can this place give me what I need?

Ask:

What does this place need from me?

Because a synagogue cannot be something we simply consume.

It cannot only be the place we come when we need a service.

A school.

A lifecycle event.

A sermon.

A melody.

A seat on the High Holy Days.

A Jewish community becomes a community when enough people decide:

Some part of this belongs to me.

The lonely person walking into an oneg for the first time,

maybe **they** belong to me.

The child who needs an adult other than their parents to show them that being Jewish matters,

maybe **they** belong to me.

The grieving person who discovers that after the funeral everyone else has returned to ordinary life,

maybe **they** belong to me.

The person who walks through these doors and knows nobody,

maybe **they** belong to me.

The future of Jewish life in this community,

maybe some part of that belongs to me too.

Not mine to control.

Not mine to fix alone.

But mine to care about.

Mine to help carry.

Mine to build.

What could Beth Orr become if enough of us thought that way?

Not:

What programs should they offer?

What should they change?

What should the clergy do?

What should the board do?

But:

What could this place become through us?

And maybe **that** is what I had misunderstood for so long.

I thought the void inside me was evidence of something missing.

Something I needed to find.

Something I needed to accomplish.

Something else I needed to become.

But maybe not every empty space inside us is asking to be filled.

Maybe some of those spaces are asking to be used.

Maybe that space becomes room.

Room for another person.

Room for responsibility.

Room for community.

Room for something larger than ourselves.

Maybe Beth Orr did not simply fill something that was missing in me.

Maybe Beth Orr gave me somewhere to give myself.

And **That** is the Beth Orr I want to help build.

And I want you to know something about my own commitment to it.

I am putting down a stake here.

I have made a seven-year commitment to this congregation.

Not because I know exactly what those seven years will bring.

I don't.

Not because building the community I am describing will be easy.

It won't.

And not because I believe one rabbi, one cantor, one board, one staff can build it.

We can't.

I am making that commitment because I want to find out what happens when a group of people decides that this place is worth giving themselves to.

I want to build with you.

I want to see children who are little now become teenagers here.

I want to see families we haven't met yet walk through those doors.

I want to sit with you through losses we cannot yet imagine.

I want to celebrate things none of us know are coming.

And I want us to look back seven years from now and barely recognize what we were able to become together.

But for that to happen, my commitment cannot be the only one.

The question isn't whether you will also promise seven years.

The question is much simpler.

What part of this are you willing to make yours?

Last week, I spoke about teshuvah.

About returning.

About looking back over the road we have traveled and asking whether there is something worth going back for.

That question still matters.

But eventually, we also have to look at the road in front of us.

And perhaps Yom Kippur asks:

Now that you have looked honestly at the life you have lived—

now that you have remembered what matters—

now that you have considered who you have become—

what are you going to do with that person?

Who needs your wisdom?

Who needs your patience?

Who needs your courage?

Who needs your generosity?

Who needs you to notice that they are standing alone?

Where is there hunger you can help feed?

Loneliness you can interrupt?

A burden you can help carry?

Something unfinished that needs your hands?

Isaiah says:

“Then shall your light burst through like the dawn.”

Maybe the light does not come when we have finally filled every empty space inside ourselves.

Maybe it comes when we make room for somebody else.

When we share the bread.

When we notice the lonely person.

When we help carry the burden.

When everything we have spent a lifetime becoming is finally placed in the service of something beyond ourselves.

Then shall your light burst through like the dawn.

Maybe that is how the light gets in.

And maybe that is how the light gets out.

Not by finally becoming complete.

But by taking everything we have become,

everything we have learned,

everything we have survived,

everything we have been given

and giving some of it away.

So this year, when you feel that space inside you,

before you ask what might fill it,

ask:

Who might need it?

Who might need your hands?

Who might need your heart?

Who might need your light?

And then,

let it burst through like the dawn.