

“Agudas: Defining Community”

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5777, October 2, 2016

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A little while ago, a few members of our congregation came up to me and asked me to tell them what the name “Agudas Israel” translates to in English. At first blush, translation questions are simple and deceptively straightforward. ‘Agudas’ means community and ‘Israel’ means, well Israel, or Israelites, or Jews. So Agudas Israel is “Community of Jews”. But like all translations, this falls short of what it truly means.

During one of the subsequent Tuesday evening adult education sessions, I was relaying this question and request. A participant said they had been told that “Agudas” meant gang. After we all chuckled for a minute or two, we found that perhaps there was validity in that statement. That we are a group of people brought together for a common purpose, putting the needs of the collective above those of the individual.

Of course we do not have the violence which is so often associated with the term gang. But then again perhaps we have our own set of initiations: for example, receiving a letter from the membership committee; going to lunch with our president; sitting on the bimah, and many other ways we bring people into the folds of Agudas.

Because we recognize that in this day and age, we do not *need* to be Jewish, we choose it. In that way, we are all “Jews-by-choice”.

The thing is, though, while we all have already chosen Judaism by our presence in this place, we must also choose community. None of us can be a Jew-by-self. We have all wandered in here at various points in our own Jewish journeys, seeking one another.

I’d like to share a folktale story with you of a fellow, we’ll call him Ploni, who lost his way in a dense forest. After a while, a second fellow, who we’ll call Shlomit also lost her way. Then the two chanced to meet. Ploni asked, “Can you help me find my way out of the forest?” Shlomit answered, “I cannot, but I can show you the ways that I have tried without success.

After that, you and I together can seek to find the true way.” “Oh my beloved Jews, we are all lost together; and the most any of us know are the ways that have *not* worked, the paths that we took in error. But if we listen to one another, we can avoid taking false paths others have tried, after that, we can seek together to find a true way.”¹

So maybe that is how we can understand ‘Agudas’—a spiritual unit, working together to find our true way. And in doing so we share ourselves and our paths. Doing so by being vulnerable with one another. Here we are on Erev Rosh Hashanah, gathered together for the first time this year, opening our heart and souls to prayer—and hopefully to each other as well.

In order to be really open with one another, we have to first come with an open mind and an open heart. One way we can understand being open is being ready to grant and receive forgiveness. As Rabbi Lew tells us, “Only love can produce love.

Only compassion can free us from the prison of our own anger, the compassion we feel for the other, the compassion we feel from them, and the compassion we feel for ourselves”².

Forgiveness, asking for and granting, first requires a bit of introspection. Let us take a moment to think back on this last year and really try to take in what we might have done. I want us to think about the big moments and the small moments with a clear vision.

A young man appeared before his rabbi. “The time of repentance comes once a year,” he said, “and usually this is no problem for me. I can think of something that I have done wrong in the past year and so I prepare myself to repent for my wrongdoing. But honestly, rabbi, this year I can remember nothing that I have done wrong. So I ask you this: while others are repenting, what should I do?”

¹ *The Essential stories*, pg 136 [from Buber, *Last Masters* p 213]

² *This is real and you are completely unprepared*, pg 235

The rabbi said, "You must do exactly as I say. Go down to the riverbed and choose a large stone and bring it to me."

The young man walked down to the riverbed and stared at the stones around him. He chose a stone that was not too large for him to carry and put it in a sack and threw the sack across his shoulder. A short while later, he appeared before the rabbi. He drew the stone out of his sack and placed it on the table. The rabbi admired the stone for a moment. "You have done well," she said to the young man.

"Now, please take this stone and return it to the exact place where you found it. And, this time, bring me ten intriguing pebbles." The young man wondered what the rabbi had in mind, but he did as he was instructed. He returned the large stone to its place on the riverbed and looked around for ten intriguing pebbles to bring back to the rabbi. He made his selections carefully, trying to find ten stones, placing each one in his sack one by one.

It was early evening before he again appeared at the rabbi's table, placing the ten pebbles in a neat row before the rabbi. The rabbi admired the pebbles for a moment.

"You have done well," she said to the young man. "Now follow my instruction carefully. Take these ten pebbles back to the riverbed and place them each exactly where you found them."

"But, rabbi," the young man objected, "that is impossible! I searched up and down the river for these specific ten pebbles. I shall never remember the exact location for each of them!"

The rabbi nodded. "Now, you have learned something about sin and repentance," she said. "When it comes to a large sin, none of us have any trouble remembering exactly what we have done, where we have done it, and how to set it right. But all year long we do small things that miss the mark, every one of us sins in small ways. These small sins are like your pebbles. It is difficult to know when you have committed them, where you have committed them, who has been harmed by them, and how you can set them straight.

As the time of repentance comes each year, we ask forgiveness not only for the large sins that we can recall so well, but for all the little sins too. Not just for the large stone, but for the little pebbles.³

We can search for days and days and still not remember the location of each pebble. The same can be said for all the small mis-steps. At least during the yamim noraim, these ten days of awe, I encourage each of us to take note of our small pebbles. Those moments which can be fleeting and which we barely give pause unless we reflect upon them. We ought to strive for this awareness in our various circles, and certainly here, at our Jewish home away from home. If we could strive to embody this idea of awareness, perhaps we can gain an understanding of one another as expressed in Proverbs: Just as Face Answers Face in a Reflection in water, so should one person's heart answer another⁴.

Martin Buber says, "Man wishes to be confirmed in his being by man, and wishes to have a presence in the being of the other...Secretly and bashfully he watches for a YES which allows him to be and which can come to him only from one human person to another⁵." He proposes that we yearn to be seen.

Each of us needs community to be seen and also to recognize our own selves. When we see one another, when we are aware of one another, then we can experience holiness. And we can do so in the presence of community. And so, it is our choice *how* we build community with one another. We have a blueprint of society given to us by Torah. The Israelites have shown us some of the errant and correct paths, and yet we also must each determine our role in the kind of community we will create.

³ *The Essential stories*, pg 371

⁴ Proverbs 27:19

⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

We must be conscientious that there is a difference between doing what is right at the moment because it feels good and making a deliberate choice to follow God's and our laws.

When each of us intentionally and thoughtfully performs ethical acts, we become partners with God. Our individual actions have the power to influence others, to build the kind of community here in Hendersonville that exemplifies God's Presence⁶.

What a gift we have to work together to build community! How fortunate are we to be part of something so magnificent. And each of us like our own symphonic instrument⁷: alone able to carry a tune; together able to create powerful and moving music. You see, it is how we function together which makes us who we are. I have come to an understanding about the essence Judaism: It is all about relationships⁸. Especially if we are open with one another, leaning on each other. Especially if we focus on building and choosing this community. If we are able to allow ourselves such awareness of each other, then maybe, as Buber suggests, we might experience a glimpse of the Divine⁹.

May this year we find our own unique sound and blend it together with the unique sounds of one another in our Agudas Israel gang. May we see the Divine in ourselves and the Divine in each other. May we have a good and sweet year. Shanah tova umetukah.

⁶ Dvar Torah from Jay Gellman during AIC Board workshop, Sept 18, 2016

⁷ Fred Guttman facebook post; September 2016

⁸ *Relational Judaism*; Ron Wolfson pg3

⁹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*