

**HIGH HOLY DAY SERMONS 5776  
OHAVI ZEDEK SYNAOGUE  
BURLINGTON, VERMONT  
RABBI JOSHUA CHASAN**

**First Day of Rosh Hashanah 5776**

*Gut yuntuf, Shanah tovah u'm'tukah,*  
a good and sweet year for us all.

By now  
I trust  
you have figured it out that  
I am not the new rabbi.  
It's about time.  
Twenty-four years is a long time  
to be considered the "new rabbi."

With God's help, Ohavi Zedek Synagogue soon  
really will have a new rabbi.

For now, I am grateful for this last opportunity  
to greet and speak with you on *Rosh Hashanah*,  
this special day of the Jewish calendar.

Over the years on this day, I have spoken with great hope of the maturing and flowering of our congregation. In many essential ways, we have done very well. Consider our Hebrew School. We've been blessed with three wonderful principals, Gigi Weisman, Sarah Klionsky, and Naomi Barell, each with her own special spirit and understanding of Judaism:

We are fortunate because our children are a bit different from children growing up in large cities where there is a greater emphasis on materialism. Our Hebrew School kids have a good time at OZ. Oh, you'll hear the complaints – it's Hebrew School after all. But when they begin to grow up and become *bar* and *bat mitzvah*, the *Shabbat Morning Service* at which they are called to the *Torah* takes on a unique air of the of the spirit of the girl or boy coming of age. This is a real blessing for everyone present. Just about every time, relatives from out of town tell me they wished they lived in Burlington so that they could come to our kind of service.

When first I was interviewed to come to OZ, I was told there was a division here between, on the one hand, the old timers (not all of them elders), and, on the other hand, [quote] the “Jews from the hills,” as they were called. One of the reasons I took to wearing a pony tail for a few years was my discomfort in hearing some congregants talking derisively about the [quote] “granolas,” another name for “Jews from the hills.” I figured it would be a good lesson for the rabbi to be seen as a “granola” himself.

We worked our way through that division. To some extent, we were diverted from it by the issue of marriage equity, first civil unions and then real marriage equity, which received a lot of support from members. We hired a gay man as Associate Rabbi.

We responded actively to the issues of our day in a number of ways. We helped to establish Kids for Peace Vermont, with our kids participating as campers and parents taking leadership roles. We allowed ourselves to have a conversation about intermarriage. True enough, the conversation was heated at times. But, as Vice President Biden would say, just having the conversation was a “big deal.”

When Rabbi Jonah was here being interviewed, I’m told he was asked if he would officiate at an intermarriage. I’m told that he replied that, if the Conservative Movement’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards issued a *t’shuvah* on the issue that allowed members of the RA to officiate at an intermarriage, he would officiate. And you invited him to be OZ’s rabbi. Clearly, the conversation that began has to continue with all of the civility expected by our sages who taught *elu v’elu divrei elohim chai’im*, two different views can both be words of the living God.

Through the past quarter of a century, we’ve done some hard work here. *So many* of us rose above our great heterogeneity – our differences in Jewish background, in understandings of Jewish tradition, differences about the politics of the State of Israel, differences about a host of significant issues that continue to divide Jews all about the world.

Here at Ohavi Zedek we have learned to transcend these differences by reaching out to each other with self respect and mutual respect as Jews, as human beings. In addition, we have reached out actively to those in need, whether members of our own congregation or our neighbors struggling within a few blocks of where we sit.

As well, from a distance of 6,000 miles, we have suffered together each time our sisters and brothers in Israel were violently attacked. We are all over the map about Israeli politics, and now in how we relate to Iran, though I think it safe to say that all of us (or perhaps just about all of us) know that Iran is a mortal threat to our people.

We have ridden the political rollercoaster, watching the Oslo process take shape and fall apart. Tragically, we witnessed the first assassination of the leader of the Jewish people since the days of the ancient Romans. Following the United Nations conference on racism in South Africa, fifteen years ago, we have seen a rise in anti-Semitism around the world, including in our neck of the woods.

We now witness the growth of racial hatred of Arabs amongst Israeli citizens that has led to the burning of Palestinian homes and children, desecration of churches, mosques and monasteries. Like liberty and justice, hatred is indivisible. The same Jews in Israel violently attacking Palestinians recently stabbed to death peaceful marchers in a gay pride parade.

Of course we Jews as well are under constant threat of attack. Israel's entire neighborhood is aflame, with war or the threat of war to the north in Lebanon, to the south in Gaza and Egypt, and to the east in Syria. Thank God for the Mediterranean Sea.

But let us step back for a moment from the terrible immediacy of the violence. Let us thank God for all the wonders of the healthy culture which has taken root in Israel in just under seven decades, despite the continuing siege. Notwithstanding the recent spike in racism, the resilience of Israelis is remarkable and does not get much press at all.

Thank God for *Yerushalayim*, thank God for Jerusalem. It is a city with a potential for social peace as great as its present state of social distrust and antagonisms. We look to the people of Jerusalem to model for the world the way different peoples of humanity can work out their differences. The Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, may his memory be for a blessing, gave expression both to the promise and to the struggles of Jerusalem:

*Jerusalem is low, crouching between her mountains,  
Not like New York, for example.  
Two thousand years ago, she crouched  
In a wonderful lunge.  
All other cities ran great  
Circles in the arena of time, won or lost,*

*And died. Jerusalem remained in a lunge:  
All victories are taut and concealed in her. All defeats.  
Her strength grows and her breath is calm  
For a race even outside the arena.  
Jerusalem stone is the only stone  
That feels pain. It has a nervous system.  
From time to time Jerusalem congregates  
Into a mass of protest like the Tower of Babel.  
But God-Police hits with big clubs:  
Houses are ruined, walls breached,  
And then the city will scatter again, murmuring  
Prayers of complaint and screams-here-and-there from  
churches  
And synagogues and moaning minarets  
Everyone to his own place.*

*On a roof in the Old City  
Laundry hanging in the late afternoon sunlight  
the white sheet of a woman who is my enemy,  
the towel of a man who is my enemy,  
to wipe off the sweat of his brow.  
In the sky of the Old City  
a kite  
At the other end of the string,  
a child  
I can't see  
Because of the wall.  
We have put up many flags,  
they have put up any flag.  
To make us think that they're happy  
To make them think that we're happy.*

There is great restraint in the tone of the poem, a gentleness as it describes neighbors who are enemies living side by side. Amichai concludes one of his many Jerusalem poems with the powerfully evocative line,

*And the eye looks to Zion and cries"*

And the eyes look to Zion and cry. Zion is the land of ancient dreams with its great promises of milk and honey. Zion is the place where it is destined that the lion will lie down with the lamb. But the history of the last three thousand years tells a different story, which the history of the past twenty-five years has only continued.

Thank God it is more peaceful for us here in *Yerushalayim K'tanah, Little Jerusalem*. That's what the founders of this Jewish community called their Jewish home here in Vermont. A few of you may recall the first time I stood before you on *Rosh Hashanah*. In September, 1991, I told a story about Mindy Wall. I believe Rabbi Meir and Mimi Wall, may their memories be for a blessing – I believe they were out of town at the time.

Mindy was here. The story I told was of how people in New Jersey responded to our interest in moving to Vermont. "Burlington?" one fellow asked derisively, "it's hardly the center of *Yiddishkeit*." At the time I was too happy about moving to Vermont to be defensive. Our conversation turned pleasantly and superficially to other matters.

Around that time, Rabbi Joe Brodie, who was dean of student life at the Seminary where I was studying, heard that I was interviewing for the job in Burlington. Rabbi Brodie remembered an encounter that had taken place almost thirty years before. It was a story that left him with a lasting impression about Burlington.

In the summer of 1962, Rabbi Brodie was at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, helping to lead a special studies program for graduating high schoolers. As the program began, the students were interviewed to determine the level of their Hebrew skills. Into the room walked a young woman from Burlington, Vermont, by the name of Mindy Wall. After the initial introductions, Rabbi Brodie asked her a question in Hebrew:

*May'ay'zeh makom aht?* "Where do you come from?" And Mindy Wall said:

*Mihb'Burlington* "From Burlington." And the rabbi said:

*Burlington? Hee mid'bar!* "Burlington? That's the wilderness." With fire in her eyes, Mindy responded:

*Burlington – hee Yerushalayim K'tanah!* "Burlington – Burlington is Little Jerusalem." Actually, not long ago, the movie came out, *Yerushalayim K'tanah, Little Jerusalem*. If you don't have a copy, contact Vermont Public Television.

Hundreds of miles from any metropolis, thousands of miles from *Eretz Yisrael*, here in Burlington, Vermont, a Jewish community has grown with vitality and integrity. Just how precious is the *yiddishkeit* of our *Yerushalayim K'tanah* – just how precious is Little Jerusalem can be seen in Ben Tziyon Black's

mural, now hanging a few feet from us at the entrance to the synagogue. God willing, it soon will be restored to its full beauty and power. As Governor Madeleine Kunin said, as an immigrant and Holocaust refugee, it is a visual statement of “freedom over oppression, and hope over despair.” The presence of this mural now forms a gateway through which generations will pass.

*Yerushalayim*: The Hebrew name of the city has beauty and power of its own. I remember being in Israel on a *Shabbat*, walking around the city, east and west, sitting in a flowery park in the west, children playing all round; then walking east to the Old City, *davening Minchah* at the *Kotel*, wandering just about everywhere in every quarter of the Old City with no fear. Many of you know, from your own time there, the uniqueness of Jerusalem. Even in these times of intense hatred, one can experience in *Yerushalayim* the resonance of *shalom* inherent in the city’s name.

As you know, the Hebrew *shalom* means far more than the absence of war. There is a sense of wholeness, safety, completeness tending toward perfection. The Arabic word *salaam* connotes safety, security, freedom from fault.

Thirty-five years after that first walk, I wouldn’t go now where once I walked without fear. I think I always will remember a specific spot near the City of David where a young Jewish man was assaulted, stabbed, simply for being a Jew in Jerusalem. I also remember vividly a place in East Jerusalem where I sat with a family after its home was destroyed for no reason other than that it was built without a permit (permits not being given to Arabs to build in Jerusalem).

Yet there remains, indelibly, a sense of the holy about the place. It is, in Hebrew, an *ir kodesh*, a holy city, literally a city set apart. The sound of its name is a call, a call deepened by the physicality of the place – the light of the sun, the hew of the stone, the strange mingling of warmth and chill in the air on an early winter evening, a large *chanukiah* set high on a wall of the Old City.

Three thousand years of history have hallowed this place, hallowed it through both prayer and martyrdom. There is some debate about the exact date of King David’s establishment of *Yerushalayim* as the center of Israel. Yet there is no doubt that the fate of humanity is bound up with the fate of a city that appears to be a master key to the well being of the world.

In a story we will hear chanted tomorrow, *Torah* tells us that Abraham was directed to walk up Mount Moriah to the large, flat rock which tradition holds was the very place where creation began and where *Adam* was born of the dust. Through the more than three thousand years since Abraham’s encounters

there, we who descend spiritually from Abraham and Sarah have looked upon this place as the heart of our spiritual home.

In the course of these years, two other major religious traditions were shaped there. "Sanctity is always contagious," *Amos Elon* has written. Just as we inherited *Shalaym* from *Malki-Tzedek*, we have found ourselves sharing the place with others who are pulled in by the force of the spiritual gravity which calls so many of us human beings to *Yerushalyim*.

Against this spiritual backdrop, there is about the political slogan of [quote] "Jerusalem, one city eternally united" a failure to appreciate that the unity of *Yerushalyim* comes, spiritually, from within. Any attempt to impose it politically, militarily, will come back to bite the hand of such imposition. It is the very nature of Jerusalem to foster togetherness. As the Psalmist has it,

*Yerushalayim hab'b'nu'yah k'ir sheh'chub'b'rah lahh yach'dahv,*  
"O *Yerushalyim*, built as a city knit together, a city uniting all."  
(Psalm 122:3)

The contrast between the hope and the reality of the place is too great to be called ironic, or to be dismissed bitterly, or not to be embraced at all. It is as if this city represents the very condition of humanity. All the paths of the city lead up to its holy center where King David set down the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle; where his son King Solomon built the *bayt ha'mikdash*, the Holy Temple. All the paths of the city lead up to its holy center, yet it is so easy to get lost and then even to despair.

Recently, one American rabbi started what he calls a "non-Zionist synagogue," as if it were possible for us to reverse *Avraham's journey*, to walk away from *Eretz Yisrael*. The fact is that the State of Israel was the lifeboat into which our people crawled after the *Shoah*. I can speak only for myself but I believe deeply that, absent the Jewish State of Israel, humanity cannot be trusted to abide Jewish existence. Racism is a disease for which there is no cure, whether it be projected against us, peoples of color, gay men, lesbians, those who are transgendered. Racism is a disease.

Since 1967 and the reunification of *Yerushalyim*, some of us Jews have made the terrible mistake of abusing the concept of holiness for national-political purposes. [quote] "When the holiness of the Temple Mount" – these are words said in 1975 by the highly respected Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz--- "when the holiness of the Temple Mount is imputed to its being 'God's estate,' is not any plot of land equally the 'estate of God'? After all [the Psalmist says] 'the

earth is God's and the fullness thereof! a verse religious Jews repeat four times a week."

According to Leibowitz, the reuniting of Yerushalyim in 1967 has created a major challenge for us as Jews. With the victory in sixty-seven, [quote] "[s]ome went so far as to identify the nation and the homeland with the Godhead, the military victory with the realization of the Torah, the conquest with the enhancement of Judaism."

The Jews from Kovno who founded our Jewish community would be aghast at such an understanding of the character and purposes of our peoplehood. Little Jerusalem was created out of the ancient dreams of our prophets, dreams of peace and justice. Ben Tziyon Black included, at the base of his mural, words from Psalm 62 which call us to justice and rescue the weak and the needy.

Consider the names the founders gave to their congregations: *Ohavai Zedek*, lovers of justice; *Chai Adam*, Human Lives, *Ahavath Gerim*, Love of Strangers. This immigrant world had a rough and tumble character to it, to be sure, but just as surely did these Jews know who they were as Jews.

They called their world *Yerushalyim K'tanah*, Little Jerusalem, not to lay claim to any "estate of God" but rather to create a community uniting all in the pursuit of the peace and justice that were absent from their lives in Lithuania. They were born and bred of the poetry and song of the culture of traditional Judaism. They had the foresight to send for a talented painter to transplant the treasure of the spirituality manifested in the colors and images of the mural that graced *Chai Adam Synagogue*.

And now, in our own time, through the vision and great persistence of Aaron Goldberg and Jeff Potash, and the generosity of many members and friends of this Jewish community, Ben Tziyon Black's mural has put Little Jerusalem on the map. No longer will Burlington, Vermont be considered a Jewish wilderness. Our community has come of age. May the presence of the mural ever remind us of our immigrant origins here in Burlington, and this congregation's commitment to be *Kehilat Ohav'ay Tzedek*, to be a congregation of lovers of justice.

Come see the mural at night when its image is reflected in the windows before it. Standing there, between the actual mural and its reflection in the glass, we are surrounded by the traditional love of Judaism, the old world come fully alive. May such a sight inspire us to deepen our commitment to Ohavi Zedek Synagogue in particular and to the Jewish people as a whole.

*Shanah tovah u'm'tukah*, a good and sweet year for us all.

## Second Day of Rosh Hashanah 5776

*Gut yuntuf. Shanah tovah u'm'tukah*, a good and sweet year for us all. Here we are again, for another chance to reflect on what's gone right for us and what's gone wrong during the past year; time to consider how, this new year, we can live, God willing, with a clearer conscience and a lighter, more open heart.

Other than these *yamim nora'im*, these Days of Awe, we are not used to sitting at a synagogue service for this length of time. When it comes to prayer, too many of us today are like the *chaside* who complained to his *rebbe*:

*Rebbe*, every day when I pray, I get a terrible headache. You wouldn't believe the headache I get on the High Holy Days. And then no coffee on *Yom Kippur*. The *rebbe* stroked his beard and said:

"*Yankel*, what has praying got to do with your head?"

The *rebbe* is right. Prayer is not an intellectual exercise. Prayer really is not even a thing that we do. Prayer is a way of living, a way of helping ourselves to hear the command planted within each one of us to respect ourselves and each other. We learn from the *mishneh* at the beginning of our *mahzor* – that we human beings are all equal and each one of us is unique.

Being human, each one of us is commanded to remember that we did not create ourselves. We are not the source of our own existence. We know how our bodies are created. Less well known is that our souls are continuously, always being formed, shaped by our Creator. Rabbi Heschel called prayer "attachment to the Utmost." We need spiritual practice to nurture our capacity to experience being fed by the Utmost During the continuing process of our being created.

Through prayer, meditation, reflection (however you understand it), today we can settle down enough within ourselves to ask an important question: "What stands in the way of my being who I really am called to be?" I love the way the *Baal Shem Tov*, founder of *hasidut*, understood our task at this time. He told his *chasideim* that we are cleaning out the refuse from the courtyard of the

Eternal. Our soul, the substance of our inner being, is the courtyard of the Eternal.

Judaism is essentially and deeply personal. *In the beginning* it was personal. We began as a people with God's call to Abraham and Sarah. It's no coincidence that yesterday we read a very revealing, personal story about Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael; that today we heard chanted the story of our father Abraham being asked to sacrifice Isaac, his precious son.

Thank God, Isaac survived . Then, Isaac's son, Jacob, *Ya'akov*, had his own intensely personal encounter, wrestling with a man who changed Ya'akov's name (which means heal of the foot) to *Yisrael*, one who wrestles with God.

In each of these stories, our patriarchs and matriarchs are open to intensely personal experiences. When the prophets of Israel heard God's call, they were not always happy to be asked, for they sensed the depth of personal vulnerability that would be demanded of them, the fierceness of divine justice and the heart-stopping affection of unconditional, eternal love. That's what divine love is: unconditional, eternal love. *Torah* gives us an "up close and personal" look at our beloved ancestors. Biblical Israel was up close and personal long before up close and personal meant an in-tight shot on television.

A good part of the weakness of Judaism in our own time, and consequently a great challenge for us in Jewish life today, is that we have lost the intensity of our personal encounter with the tradition. There is no point in placing blame. History takes twists and turns. We Jews were attracted, like moths to a flame, to the rationalism of the Enlightenment . As a consequence, the sense of the mystery of life that traditional Judaism had conveyed dropped by the wayside in major Jewish circles.

With a loss of the mystery, in combination with our being welcomed into the larger world, there came a diminution of our active participation in the life of Israel. Consider the measure of the participation of the patriarchs and matriarchs and our prophets in the stories we tell about them, the great measure of their participation in the life of Israel. Rabbi Heschel wrote [quote] "What stands out as essential, unique, and decisive is the *prophet's participation*, his [or her] being visited by the words of the Eternal.

Participation is essential to Judaism. Participation is the root of what is so personal about Judaism. In the biblical era, our people felt immersed in the unfolding of a divine plan. Building on this experience, the ancient rabbis continued to understand history as the unfolding of God's plan. They called it *tikkun olam*, the rectification of the world, and it did not always play out in

straight lines. For example, incest played a large part in King David's ancestry, and the Messiah is said to come from the line of David.

*Tikkun olam* allowed for both order and for freedom, a delicate balance to be sure, as we human beings have discovered. Rabbi Akiva understood this balance of order and freedom as a paradox. On the one hand, everything is foreseen, everything is foreseen by God, and, on the other hand, we humans have free will; indeed, we are commanded to choose how to live. Over and over again we must be making moral choices.

Accepting both perspectives, that God foresees everything and that we are commanded to exercise our free will – can be liberating. Instead of struggling to understand the paradox, better to be actively participating in shaping the world as it unfolds.

The sound of the *shofar* calls us together to shape, to redeem this world of flesh and bone, of here and now. We Jews do not wait for redemption until we die, though, to be sure, our tradition teaches of a redemptive world to come. Our task as Jews is the redemption of this world, creating justice in this world, pursuing peace in this world; not only by ending the organized violence of war, but also by seeking the experience of *sh'laymut*, the wholeness experienced by people who live with integrity.

OZ's President, the historian Jeff Potash, likes to remind us (I alluded to it yesterday) that it was not an accident that the founders of our synagogue, refugees from the injustice of Europe, called this congregation *Kehilat O'ha'vay Tzedek*, congregation of lovers of justice. The quest for social and economic justice is not just the task of a synagogue committee. The quest for justice is what we are about as Jews.

Please excuse a personal reference. When The Jewish Theological Seminary recently awarded me an honorary degree, I was delighted that they made reference to my being raised in a culturally Jewish but secular home and then discovering traditional Judaism. In their description of my rabbinic career, they took note that [quote] "[t]he religious faith you found as an adult sustains you in fulfilling your childhood identity: called, as a Jew, to repair the larger world." [end quote] I'm grateful for their words.

History is far more than the record of nation-states going to war and making peace. From a Jewish perspective, history is the record of humanity's capacity to still its arrogance; to open its heart; to recognize the uniqueness and equality of all forms of life; and to celebrate the glory of life's diversity.

These are honorable personal goals. To meet them we must not be bystanders as history unfolds. We must think about ways of participating in the shaping of our community – ways that allow for us to fulfill our task to repair the world. We must be actively insisting on justice, actively seeking peace. When we see thousands of refugees seeking, including many children, fleeing the warfare at home and seeking shelter from the storm, we must ask ourselves what we, personally or communally, can do to help them.

Each of the goals –

to still our arrogance;

to open our hearts;

to recognize the uniqueness and equality of all forms of life;

and to celebrate the glory of life's diversity – each of these goals is a way of healing. Judaism is all about healing.

Right after *yuntuf*, we begin reading *Torah* from the beginning again. We will hear all those stories familiar to us, both of familial deception and then familial reconciliation. My favorite is actually not in *Torah* but in the *midrash*, the ancient rabbis' stories about the *Torah* stories. It is the *midrash* I shared yesterday morning in introducing the *Torah* reading. The *midrash* adds to the *Torah* narrative a story about years later, when Abraham's two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, find their way to each other and reconciling. This *midrash* is like a seal on the first book of *Torah*. The seal certifies that this story indeed is a story of reconciliation.

May each of us, together and in our own ways, choose to participate personally in the struggles for justice and peace in our time. We live at a time when racial hatred and ethnic wars are defining the state of humanity. We live at a time when our technological genius has led us to a dangerous deterioration of Earth's climate. We live at a time when the physical security of all human beings is at risk.

Even as this risk is heightened, as ever, it is for us, the people of Israel, Jews wherever we live – it is for us Jews not to be afraid to take the lead in responding to the racism and hatred and violence of our time, wherever we encounter it. That is our calling as a people.

*Shanah tovah u'm'tukah*, a good and sweet year for us all.

