

Shalom Aleichem: Saying Hello

A Sermon for the High Holy Days by Assistant Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe

Temple Rodef Shalom

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As many of you know, I was married in July of this year, just a month after I began here at Temple Rodef Shalom. Even though *you* and I have just met, with my wife Jaimee's permission, I'd like to share with you one of my favorite things about her. She is the queen of saying "Hello." She'll be walking by strangers, and she'll tell them hello – not just a little hello, but a big, enthusiastic, "Hello!" She'll start conversations with people she's never met, too, with no reservations. And she'll often say hello to me, not only when we've just met up, but after we've been spending time together for hours. It's a different hello. She'll say, "Hey." It's her way of checking in, of making contact on a deeper level.

This is a time of year when we find ourselves saying hello a lot, sometimes to people we know, sometimes to people we're just meeting for the first time. It's a great time of connection and reconnection. Of course, saying hello isn't easy for everyone. Sometimes we don't know a person's name, and we're afraid of embarrassing ourselves or offending them. Or maybe we're shy, and saying hello feels like a big risk. And yet, this is the time of year to break out of our shyness, to open ourselves up.

Like Jaimee, we all have different kinds of hellos that we use for different purposes. Today I'd like to reflect with you on three different ones, and what they mean for us: saying hello to each other, saying hello to God, and saying hello to our deepest selves.

First, saying hello to each other. The High Holy Days are a time to take stock of our relationships. Perhaps we have let some of them begin to slip away, and now is the time to reach out and reconnect. Maybe we've become complacent, and it's been a while since we started a new friendship. The hello we say to someone new might be full of hope and possibility, fun and maybe a little nervousness. When I first knew my wife Jaimee and saw her regularly strike up conversations with the strangers around her, I was surprised and curious. I wondered how people would react. After all, we were in New York City and, while I actually have learned that New Yorkers *are* nice people, I still wondered how they would do with *this* kind of conversation on the street, the bike path or sitting at nearby tables in a restaurant. But I found that not only were people receptive to a little conversation; we often made friends that way and some of them turned out to be close friends.

Oprah Winfrey recently said that if you want to meet a mate, you should say hi to 10 strangers every day. Maybe this notion can be applied to every aspect of our lives. It's especially important in a synagogue setting, where there are so many opportunities to meet new and wonderful people, and on the other hand, if we are not outgoing and welcoming, there is a

chance that people could come here and feel ignored and alone. Here is what Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes about the potential that is present when we make a connection with someone new: "Everyone carries with them at least one and probably many pieces to someone else's puzzle. Sometimes they know it. Sometimes they don't. And when you present your piece, which is worthless to you, to another, whether you know it or not, whether they know it or not, you are a messenger from God Most High." To be open to what others can bring you is to be open to change and growth.

To our close friends and loved ones, we say that deeper, "Hey," that seeks to make sure we are really connected. Is everything in our relationship as it should be? Are we communicating well about what goes on between us, including our thoughts and feelings? There is a story about a man at his wife's funeral. The ceremony has been over for 30 minutes, and the man is still standing at the grave. The rabbi gently puts his hand on the man's shoulder and tells him it's time to go. The man says, "I loved my wife." The rabbi replies, "Yes, she was a wonderful woman." But the man says again, crying, "No, rabbi, I loved my wife!" The rabbi responds, "Yes, I understand." "No," the man says, "You don't understand. I loved my wife, and I never told her." Have we said the things we need to say to the people we love? Do we say them often enough? I love you. You are important to me. Thank you. I'm sorry.

The second type of greeting is the one we offer to God. When we reach out to connect with God, we're hoping our hello might help us to deepen the relationship we feel, or even to help us to begin to feel that relationship at all. This one might be a beckoning, searching hello. Maybe we can hear its echo. Or it could be more unsure and hesitating, hardly above a whisper, with a question mark after it. Maybe it's just whatever we can think of to say, no matter how crazy it is. Elizabeth Gilbert, in her best-selling book, *Eat, Pray, Love*, tells the following story about a time of crisis when she prayed for the first time. She says: "What I said to God through my gasping sobs was something like this: 'Hello, God. How are you? I'm Liz. It's nice to meet you.' That's right. I was speaking to the creator of the universe as though we'd just been introduced at a cocktail party. But we work with what we know in this life, and these are the words I always use at the beginning of a relationship. In fact, it was all I could do to stop myself from saying, 'I've always been a big fan of your work.'"

Gilbert is right. It's not easy to find the right language to talk to God, and we only have what we know. The great Medieval Rabbi Moses Maimonides said that we have no way to sense or describe what God is, and we are left only with the words and images with which we are familiar. On Yom Kippur, as we sit in synagogue, we re-familiarize ourselves with our own connection to God. The prayer book deliberately gives us a myriad of different names for God, each offering an option for how we might develop that relationship as we pray. Some of them might work for us. Here are just a few: *Avinu*: God as Parent, who is always there as an ally and a guide; *Malkeinu*: God as Sovereign, offering us a higher force or purpose than the petty distractions around us; *Din*: God as Judge or Conscience, who holds us accountable for our actions in a way that no person can; *Tzuri vego'ali*: our rock and redeemer, whom we can

lean on in hard times; *Yotzer or*: creator, responsible for the miraculous world around us; *Oseh Shalom*: the one who can bring peace into our lives; or, *Kol d'mamah dakah*: the still, small voice we hear when we listen deeply.

No matter whether we have felt open or closed to God this past year, now is the time to seek that connection, and to be open to the conversation. A conversation with God is different from any other, because we know not to expect the kind of response we usually get when we speak to someone. We know that there are questions no one can answer, and there are things we have to say for which there is no verbal response. The words are ours, and God's response is within us as well. But the conversation, as hard as it is, as uncertain as we may be, is essential to our lives as Jews and as people.

The service gives us different ways to begin the conversation with God. When we hear *Kol nidrei*, we are still too shy to use our own voices, and the *Shaliach Tzibur*, our communal delegate, begins for us. When we recite together the words, "*Avinu Malkeinu*, be gracious and answer us, for we have little merit," we begin to find the courage to speak. Then, we chant the same words, first quietly, tentatively, "*Avinu Malkeinu*." And then we become bolder, pleading for an answer, "*Asei imanu, tzedakah vachessed, asei imanu tzedakah vachessed vehoshieinu*. Please, God, treat us generously and with kindness, and be our help."

As Jews, we speak with God through communal prayer. But each of us also has something personal to say, and something to ask. I hope that today, even those of us who are not accustomed to connecting with God might be able to sense the beginning or the continuation of a conversation.

Finally, we say hello to our deepest selves. Late one night, I was leaving a crowded restaurant. I finally managed to reach the door, and another man was coming from the opposite direction. I motioned for him to go first, and he did the same. So I stepped towards the door – but so did he. It was like a scene from *The Three Stooges*. We did this once more before I realized that the wall beyond the door was made of glass, and the light in the restaurant had caused it to show me a reflection of myself. I had seen my own image and mistaken it for a stranger!

If we met us, would we recognize ourselves? How often do we look? On Yom Kippur, as much as we are opening up the Book of Life, we're opening the books of our own lives. We encounter ourselves, and say, "*Is this* who we're going to be? That's really what this day is for, and it's the hardest and scariest of all the greetings we can make today. If you don't say hello to someone, maybe they're not really there. Saying hello to ourselves means we have to face dimensions of ourselves that we would rather not acknowledge. We'd rather pretend those parts of us don't exist. That's what we're used to doing.

The prophet Isaiah, in the verses of *haftarah* we will read today, tells of a community that observes all of the rituals and wonders why their prayers are not answered. God's response is

that while they observed the rituals outwardly, they did not look inside themselves for the ways the rituals were supposed to inform their actions in the world. We too could pass our Yom Kippur visiting with people, listening to the music, singing along, and reading the prayers out loud, but never daring to reflect on our lives and allow ourselves to gain new insight. It's easier that way, and less risky. What will we do today during the moments we could have to ourselves? How will we pass the time before *Ne'ilah* or breaking the fast? Even a minute or two of self-exploration today could be significant. But it may not be easy. We're shy when it comes to speaking to ourselves, too. We like to joke that it's OK to talk to yourself; you're not crazy unless you answer. Today, let's make the effort to say the hello to ourselves that we sometimes say to a close friend. "Hey, tell me how it's really going." And let's wait for our response. What do we need to say to ourselves? What questions do we need to ask?

All of these greetings can lead to sacred conversations, and I invite us to make room for them, on Yom Kippur and throughout our lives. I hope we can all bring the same bravery and enthusiasm to these conversations that I have learned from my wife, Jaimee. How do Jews greet each other? Some say "Hello," or "*Shalom*," and some even say, "*Shalom Aleichem*," may you find peace and wholeness. Even in our greetings, we express our highest aspirations, for ourselves and for each other, and every Yom Kippur, we reach higher. As I begin my first year with this community, I know it will bring a lot of hellos for me, and I hope they will lead to many sacred conversations with all of you. I can't wait to say "*Shalom Aleichem*" to you at your family's *Bnei Mitzvah*, weddings, *brises* and baby namings, and as we all greet each other here on Shabbat and in other celebrations throughout the year. I am looking forward to being a part of everything that happens in the life of this congregation, to facilitating all of our efforts to connect with each other, to connect with God, and to connect with our deeper selves. To say, "Hello, and *Shalom Aleichem*."