

## The Seven Shepherds

I hope you don't mind me saying this...it might be a bit forward. I have seen in my 48 years many, many beautiful things. I've seen the royal gardens at the Palace of Louis the XIXth in Versaille- amazing. I've wandered the halls of the Louvre and beheld the artistic wonders of Europe. I've seen the gorgeous bays of San Francisco and the sunrise over the Greek Islands, where the waves of the blue Aegean Sea sound like harp strings. I've seen the Atlantic Ocean rising in glorious wrath against the lighthouse-topped cliffs of northern Maine.

I've stood on Mt. Zion and contemplated the ancient hills of Judea. I've looked upon Jerusalem, where our Rabbis taught that nine of the ten portions of beauty that were allotted the earth reside. I have seen all of these things and was moved by such great beauty.

But the sight of you, Am Yisrael, the People of Israel, my brothers and sisters, standing here now, hearing the Shofar, is more beautiful by far. Your Neshamas, your innermost souls, shine out, infused with the power of being together on this holy day. Among you, you ancient, holy nation, is the secret of sanctity, the secret of eternity and the secret of salvation.

How did you come to be here? How did this congregation, HaTikvah, the House of Hope, come to rest here in this place, surrounded by cornfields and golf courses, forests and the Kitatinny Hills?

Those who build and those who uphold are rarely truly recognized. There is a beautiful legend in Jewish lore that says that the whole world exists only because of the merit of 36 Tzadikim, 36 truly righteous, perfect souls hidden among the masses of humanity. They are never known, never recognized or honored- to look at them, you would think that you had seen nothing special...and yet over there- in the world of truth- they are celebrities, heroes, shining stars of strength,

virtue and hidden power. But only one with eyes to see can understand who they are and what they give.

In this beautiful congregation, among the beautiful souls here, there are souls whom I have been allowed to begin to understand. Souls through whose merits our community is infused with light. Only some, a few, I have merited to know- but there are others whom I have not yet discovered, who yet remain hidden.

I would like to share with you some of what I've learned about HaTikvah and that which upholds this community. Let me as your Rabbi hold up a mirror and show you part of what I see when I look at you and why this view is so beautiful.

Our tradition speaks about the seven Shepherds of Israel: Avraham, Yitzchak, Ya'acov, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah. Perhaps our community is also blessed with seven. I like to call them Roei HaTikvah- the Shepherds of Hope.

First among our Shepherds of Hope, I have seen a generation of founders who have maintained a passionate attachment to an intimate and close-knit community without ever allowing it or them to become insular or exclusionist. Some of the founders have moved to other places, but continue to travel great distances to celebrate and share. One of that generation, called by early members a man who can sell anything to anyone, whose personal vision in a very real sense provided the impetus for this shul's existence, continues to live close by and to share his insight, warmth and humor with all of us every Shabbat. Another has used his strong Jewish background, compassion and incredible dedication to teach and to guide the spiritual life of HaTikvah for decades joined by his helpmeet in making HaTikvah the joyful family that it has become.

But these are some of the more visible of our hidden Tzadikim. The second shepherds are those whose involvement spans generations- nurturing and guiding the community while keeping faith with parents with whose care they have been

charged. We have been blessed with the presence of a gifted educator who, with boundless energy and an inspiring commitment spent years caring lovingly and attentively for an ailing parent while serving our synagogue and especially its children.

Another active and involved member cared for years for her frail mother in her home. I was privileged to visit last Sukkot, holding my Lulav and Etrog out to the small, quiet figure on the bed. To my surprise, when I offered to show her how to perform the Mitzvah of shaking the Lulav, she took it from me and shook it to the six directions with the authority and joy of a true Eshet Chayil, a woman of valor as memories reawakened and thin hands grew strong and sure with purpose and celebration. I saw the face of her daughter and caretaker shining- and the memory of that beautiful moment has carried me through many dark nights since then.

I have been privileged to share the way with others who have cared for stricken parents and spouses with selfless compassion, who have risen to the challenge of providing a loving home and care for children diagnosed with developmental disorders; there are so many hidden sources of love and healing among us.

A third group of our shepherds are those who have joined themselves to our community and people not through birth, but through choice. With the courage and conviction of Avraham and Sarah, the first converts to Judaism, we are blessed by the presence of three synagogue leaders who came to the tent of Israel as strangers and sojourners, but who have become *Ba'alei Batim*, heads of our household, the household of Israel, in their own right. A part of their gift to us is how they have helped us understand the needs and circumstances of Jewish by choice and interfaith couples and enabled us to fulfill our mission as a welcoming community of faith, continuing the tradition of hospitality of Avraham and Sarah.

A fourth group of the shepherds of hope are those whose families were touched more directly than most of us by the shadow that was cast over the world sixty years ago. The Shoah is not just a piece of history, but a catastrophe from which the Jewish demographic has not yet recovered. For these families though, the Shoah is personal, a wind of loss blowing through generations. But those shepherd families who have been touched so directly have risen against the darkness and the wind to a place of affirmation. We have seen this Bimah, thanks to one of these families, filled with survivors and partisans who fought the Nazis in the woods of Eastern Europe. The walls of the shul still echo with their voices “Mir Zanen Doh- We are still here.”

Another shepherd of hope has dedicated years of his life and expertise to teaching Holocaust studies in our religious school, sharing history, insights and the legacy of loss and pride, of resistance, courage and survival to our future generations. The presence of these families at services, the support they provide to the life of our shul, the help one family has provided to the governance of our religious school are precious inheritances and an inspiring example of the power of hope.

Fifth are those families who now, after generations of distance from their heritage, are returning to rediscover Judaism. We are blessed with families who join us from other parts of the world, lands once under the oppressive pall of the iron curtain, prevented from studying Torah and from taking part in Jewish life. Now they have undertaken the journey to freedom. Their children are enrolled or are graduates of our religious school. One has become a youth leader in our shul and recently took part in the national Makabee games, a proud and gifted young Jewish athlete.

From a smoldering spark, Judaism has kindled again in hearts and elevated souls, joining us together even stronger than before, for neither the shadow of the ghettos and the camps nor the regime of Stalin could stifle the living faith that waits to sing from every Jewish heart. Among these

shepherds are those who have reversed generations of the pressures of assimilation which is part of the challenge of American Jewish life. When someone who is the first in their family in generations to put on Tefillin, celebrate a child's Bat Mitzvah, affix a Mezuzah or exploring other ways to make their Judaism a part of their lives, something holy and unique comes into the world.

Sixth are our children. Two years ago, a group of Bar/Bat Mitzvah graduates joined together autonomously and independently to create a junior board. Within months, they had immersed themselves in the life of the shul, engaging in fundraising, serving the community in ways as varied as a talent show, Purim shpiel, helping in our religious school and more. Now in their second year, they are planning even more ambitious projects.

This is your community, your house of hope and these are just a few of those who have created and upheld it. Some are members of our leadership. Some run from formal positions, but all make a difference, all are lights in whose light we see light.

And the seventh shepherd? This spot is reserved for those still hidden, or those whose moments are still awaiting. This community, between the highlands and the Delaware, is blessed in so many ways. Jewish families arrive in our area each month. Our need for those who will stand up and stand with us remains. The seventh spot is the spot for those to whom the Shofar is calling. It is reserved for you.

In a few weeks, we make the choice as Americans, a choice of directions, a choice of leadership. On this day, the Yom HaDin, we make a choice for the guidance of our own soul. As you hear the Shofar sounding again now and at Musaf, it is calling to you in a voice that only you can hear, for its message is for you alone. Tekia.

L'Shana Tova.