

We All Know Each Other -- Even if We Don't

Yom Kippur Evening, 5772

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By the water's edge of one lone harbor, along the shore of one of Maine's myriad inlets, not too far down the way from where bay and ocean meet, Mieke and I had just finished a picnic lunch. We were sitting on the rocks by whose feet the water lapped, next to the general store of Cundys Harbor. Just behind us, tall grasses swayed in the breeze at the end of what turned out to be somebody's backyard. From a neat and trim white clapboard house, a clothesline stretched to an ancient tree, laundry fluttering on the line like the sails out on the water before us. As we got up, dusting off the seats of our pants, we looked out toward the merging of sky and water. There, against the perfect blue of each, thick black smoke was billowing skyward from off the water.

In a matter of moments, it seemed, people were rushing from all directions toward the dock on the other side of the general store. From the house behind us, two women had emerged, one younger and one elderly, and were standing on the side porch. Someone shouted, putting words to the obvious, "there's a boat on fire!" We could hear the crackle of a radio from a shed on the dock. In the water, just beyond the dock, there was a large float to which a lobster boat was tied up. A lone fisherman was almost finished unloading traps and gear onto the float, neatly stacking the traps. With a loud expletive, we saw him suddenly start tossing helter-skelter everything that remained on his boat as quickly as he could. Then casting off, he gunned the engines and pointed for the stricken vessel.

Mieke and I found ourselves pulled along toward the dock by the palpable air of concern. As people asked each other which boats were out, we began to feel as though we too knew all of the local fisherman. With the dust swirling off the hill that led down from the main road through the village, we were standing a little bit back from the rear of the crowd. Appearing alongside of us, arriving at her own pace, catching her breath, pausing for a moment on her cane, something almost prophetic in the urgency of her presence, was the elderly woman we had seen on the porch of the house at the end of whose yard we had picnicked. Strangers, she knew that we were from away. Joined somehow, the three of us as stragglers, standing back in our own place behind the group, there was a felt bond among us. With great earnestness, and yet with a twinkle in her eye, the elder woman leaned in toward Mieke and me, as though to explain the

great gathering of concern: "we all know each other," she said, "even if we don't.... You know what I mean?"

She struck me as a prophet, one who reminds of purpose and meaning, of why we are here and of what is required of us in this world and in this life. So moved, I could only say, "yes, I do know what you mean, thank you." It is one thing, though, to know the meaning of her words, and another to live in accord with her wisdom.

By now, the lobster boat that had raced from the float was a small speck blurring into the smoke and sea in the distance. A report floated back from the shed with the crackling radio, everyone on the boat had gotten into the water and was accounted for. A sense of relief settled with the dust onto the crowd. Realizing that there was nothing for us to do nor any way to be of help, Mieke and I again thanked the elder woman, though I don't think she had any idea of why we thanked her, and then we started up the hill to the car. As we drove away from the harbor, there was a hand-painted sign along the road announcing a church picnic on Sunday, probably taking place right about then. At the sound of a siren, we pulled over just across from the volunteer fire department. I wondered out loud if the firefighters had just left the picnic, as they headed now toward the harbor to be there in case the rescued were brought ashore to Cundys Harbor. Responding to my musing, Mieke laughed, "I can see a d'rash coming."

She was right. I was genuinely touched by the woman's words and wisdom, spun from the threads of village life that weave one to another. That moment has stayed with me, standing there by the water's edge, three of us among the crowd, strangers drawn to one another through common concern, two of us not knowing those we were concerned about at all. I realized too late that we didn't even know the woman's name, nor she ours, and here she is among us. Named through her words, perhaps the not knowing is part of her message. Though making for a deeper connection, we don't need to know names to be connected, to be concerned, to know each other, even if we don't.

What does it mean to know each other even if we don't? Ever since that moment of a gift so simply given, it has seemed to me that this is one of the most important questions that we need to ask. It is a question that needs to be asked in relation to so many different facets of our lives, as Americans, as global citizens, as Jews, as people sitting here tonight. The wise woman of Cundys Harbor was describing what she saw as a reality in the place where she lived, a small village on the Maine coast. It is a rare reality, absent from so much of contemporary life. The knowing of others even if we don't is about concern for people. It is about human connection, knowing that we are all related by virtue of our common humanity, by our sharing of space on the same planet. It is about intuitive concern for the commonweal, caring for the well-being of others. It

is a knowing that speaks of a common bond that transcends familiarity, something deep and essential. It is about human empathy, feeling what another feels, seeing what another needs and responding to it.

I have wondered how such knowing is acquired and transmitted, whether it can be. How shall we take a seed given to us by a small Maine village and see it germinate in the global village and in our own hearts? The surest antidote to fear and hatred of the other, is to come to know the other as a real person. Whether it be opposition to equal marriage without knowing gay people, anti-Semitism without knowing Jews, Islamophobia without knowing Muslims, change begins in the first glimmer of awareness that the other is like me, when I first begin to see a shimmering of myself in the other. There is an urgency to come to know those we can know directly who are different from us. In that knowing, hearts and minds are opened to knowing a wider range of those whom we perceive as other and cannot know directly.

To feel the hurt of those nearby inclines the heart to feel the pain of those far away, and yet so close. We know in real time of natural disasters as they occur around the world, earthquakes, famine, drought, and of human disasters, war, ecocide, brutality in so many forms. We quickly see the suffering in the faces of so many others whom we are called to know. In what ways shall we cast off like that fisherman from Cundys Harbor, and point ourselves toward the stricken? Those we are to know, at least in the way of knowing even if we don't, are very close by, and so far away. The sound of gunfire, heard by people so often, in neighborhoods so close to here. Who are these people who live in fear for their children's lives, people whom we should know? Nehar Shalom has recently become a member of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. Joining with others, I hope that ways will open up to us to address concerns of the larger village in which we live, coming to know people we didn't even know we didn't know.

Knowing each other, even if we don't expresses a way of life and an outlook rooted in a depth of concern for others. It expresses a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others that is felt as second nature. The woman in Cundys Harbor spoke collectively, "We all know each other, even if We don't." In her words was the certainty that others would be there for her, just as she for them. If we can speak of an American spirit, such an outlook, I think, speaks to what is best in that spirit. In spite of the legendary crustiness of New Englanders, that outlook of collective concern reflects the soul of any number of villages that dot hillside and valley, that lie along the rock-bound coast and well off the beaten path of country road and mountain trail. More than the village green and the soaring spires of faith, playing out like sap lines and trap lines, it is the caring spirit of one for another that joins the fisherfolk and farmers, the loggers and laborers, the poets and painters, the newcomers and the old-timers, and even the summer people who picnic along the shore, drawn to know their secret.

With all the fury of a nor'easter, there is a tragic twist that happens. Of that famed and fierce independence bottled in New England and distributed throughout the land, the very interdependence undergirding it becomes suspect. When government answers the call of its moral being, to care for all citizens equally, to protect and provide for, however imperfectly and insufficiently, it is learning from and honoring the caring spirit of the New England village. Whether in regard to health care or education, housing or jobs, opposition to collective responsibility through government for meeting basic human needs has released a meanness of spirit throughout the land. The other is quickly identified, shielding our eyes from the image of God that shines in her face. A politics of self-interest is the antithesis of independence and of that which is best in the American spirit, of that which allows us to say, "we all know each other, even if we don't."

In the Jewish community we have generally been good at responding to the needs of others. While difference of opinion among Jews is legendary, a truism in the quest for truth, there is a splintering among us today for which humor offers little salve. While social, economic, and religious differences among American Jews are ever more sharply delineated, debate around Israel is tearing us apart, even as Israelis are pitted one against another across a growing social divide. It is not only the nature of debate, but the underlying conflict itself that tears at our souls, the narrowing of vision, the calcifying of rigid positions, the inability to know the other even if we don't, whether the other is Palestinians or other Jews. Like the forgotten underpinnings of that spirit of New England independence, respectful acceptance of diverse views as part of our own interdependence has disappeared from the main stream, and with it the ability, the obligation, to lovingly question, to challenge, and to admonish. Whether in America, in Israel, or in Boston, the lines are quickly drawn defining who is in and who is out of a tent that once seemed bigger and safer. It breaks my heart, both in regard to Israel and in regard to our own Jewish community. With much talk of civility, it does not mean to put aside passion or commitment, but to hear the passion and commitment of others when expressed in a way that allows for hearing. For those who would seek peace and pursue it, it means to strive to do so in a way that joins people, rather than divides them, that brings people along, rather than leaves them behind.

There is such a reservoir of good among us waiting to be tapped. The wellsprings of our faith and being as a people, so much of what makes us who we are, flow through these days and through the pages of the Machzor. Words of prayers, read and felt, are quickened through our own lived experience, our own commitment to their fulfillment, our own depth of feeling. The beautiful new Machzor we are using, *Lev Shalem*, "Wholeness of Heart," amplifies the beauty, pointing the way beyond its own covers, beyond this holy moment in time. Drawn to words that soothe and inspire, I find myself pausing, even while leading, at a line repeated many times through these days, *v'ye'asu*

*chulam agudah achat la'asot r'tzoncha b'levav shalem/ויעשו כולם אגודה אחת לעשות רצונך בלבב שלם*, "May all be bound together as one, to do Your will with wholeness of heart." It is about all people, of a world at peace in which all have come to know the other, even if they don't. In our rising many times throughout this long and beautiful day to acknowledge sins, the acknowledging always in the plural, we stand side by side, alone together. There are more sins than any one person could commit, but they have happened among us, fraying the ties of human connection. Toward healing, we take collective responsibility, "we abuse..., we destroy..., we gossip..., we hate..., we oppress..., we are violent...." Taking responsibility for the damage done, often in our name, we necessarily take responsibility for its corollary, to repair what has been damaged, and to lift each other up to act in concert for the common good. While it is not among our words of formal prayer during these days, there is a teaching that expresses the essence of what it means to do all of this davenning together, *kol Yisra'el areyvin zeh ba'zeh/כל ישראל ערביין זה בזה*, "all Israel are responsible one for another." In our gathering during these days, it is a challenge to each of us to bring healing and repair among our own people. In the global village in which we live, it is a challenge that quickly extends beyond ourselves, expressing in Hebrew the essence of what it means in real terms to know each other, even if we don't.

We are at the start of a journey together, each one a holy vessel, as in that which holds our essence, the beauty of who we each are, and so too, a vessel as that which carries us out upon the deep, that beautiful cargo called a soul stowed within. That is why a ship is called a vessel, it is a container out there upon the waters. Our journey, therefore, is more aptly a sea voyage, casting off now on forgiving seas. Some of us know each other by name or by face, from other times and places, some knowing each other well, perhaps, or just a little bit, as in ships passing in the night, sidelights warm and bright, some have found this snug harbor alone, arriving unknown and unknowing, but not remaining so for long, because we are here in this place all together. There will be storms upon the waters, not always so forgiving as on this day. That we know with certainty, for that is the way of life, and the knowledge of life given to us through many voyages upon her seas. The question is, when the waves rise before the gathering storm, will we be there for each other, whether we know each other or not? Here, by the waters edge, we have stopped to picnic on this fast day, to share the sustenance of song and prayer and the blessing of each other's presence. In that sharing, we are joined together, whether we are from here or from away, though all are warmly invited to return again to our little village at voyage's end and become part of us beyond today. And if from this harbor we would take with us words to help set our course, may the words of one wise woman of twinkling eye and slow of gait be carried to us on the breeze, "we all know each other, even if we don't.... You know what I mean?"