

שנה טובה –

*Looking around the sanctuary, it brings me joy to see us here today singing, praying, chatting, leaning into the embrace of kehilla, and I feel some sadness. Some of us are not here. We struggle with some painful losses, some quite recent. Most important: for just a brief moment 30 seconds - clasp the hand or hug the shoulder or warmly smile -all of the above with the people seating next to you side to side, front to back. We are all together, and that is a blessing.*

Today I'll tell you two very different true stories, that somehow speak to resilience and faith, and hopefully, ask a couple of important questions as we enter the new year 5772. The first story unfolds over several years, and it's about the last two Jews in Kabul, capital of Afghanistan. I have to admit that you might think I'm telling a joke that fits into the mold of two Jews - three shuls, as in one shul for each Jew and a third that neither of them could imagine stepping inside. But this true story is funny, sad, both... It's the year 2001...For years Zevulun Simantov and Yitzchak Levi lived across a dusty, sun-baked courtyard from each other. They shared two things: a tiny kitchen as well as a unique bond unique in Afghanistan's tribal culture: they were Kabul's last Jews. Shortly after the Americans entered the war the Taliban fell. Zevulun and Yitzchak escaped the long shadow of the fundamentalist Muslim movement, which regarded Judaism as the root of much of the world's evil. By any measure, the fall of the Taliban should have a cause for celebration for Zevulun and Yitzchak. But they were far too busy fighting a private war to take much notice of the dramatic turn in their country's very public conflict.

*"I don't talk to him, he's the devil," Mr. Semantov said. "A dog is better than him." Mr. Levi, peering out his window to see if his nemesis was listening, said, 'He's a thief and a liar.'" The conflict between Zevulun and Yitzchak is cloaked in layers of posturing, evasion and petty arguments. Underneath it all, they fight over two dilapidated shuls -- known in Kabul as "Jewish mosques" -- both men claim stewardship.*

Jews go back quite a long way in Afghanistan, possibly 2,000 years. The present-day shuls were built by the leaders of Kabul's Jewish community in 1966, after an earlier one was razed to make way for a highway. They are in a compound nondescript except for the stone latticework on the outside in the shape of a Star of David. Although Afghan Jews began emigrating to Israel, Britain and the United States after World War II, the exodus gathered speed during the violence of the mujahedeen wars in the early 1990's.

By the time the Taliban seized control in 1996, only five Jewish families were left in Kabul. Now those five families are gone, too, leaving Zevulun and Yitzchak to squabble over a pair of ramshackle shuls that have long since lost their worshipers. Mr. Levi, who has lived in a squalid room next to the temples for 26 years, says that Mr. Semantov stole valuable religious relics -- including a Torah -- after moving into a room here in 1998. Mr. Semantov acknowledges that he *relocated* several items -- the Torah scroll, as well as a necklace and a pair of earrings -- to keep them out of the hands of the Taliban. He says he was acting on behalf of Afghan Jewish émigrés who now live in Israel and are worried about Mr. Levi's upkeep of the temples.

*"I don't have many complaints about the Taliban, but I have a lot of complaints about him,"* Zevulun said. Indeed, the Taliban might have paid little attention to the two men living in the courtyard house on Kabul's Flower Street, had Zevulun and Yitzchak not insisted on drawing the authorities into their dispute. In a 1998 letter to the Taliban interior minister, Yitzchak accused Zevulun of theft, and, later, of spying. Zevulun in turn told the authorities that Yitzchak rented rooms to... women of questionable character -- an accusation that Yitzchak denies. This litany of "he said, he said" landed them both in jail, where they felt the boot of the Taliban. They said they were kicked and beaten by guards wielding rubber cables. The guards repeatedly demanded that they convert to Islam. *"I told them, 'I am Jewish. If you slice me into pieces, I will not convert,'"* Yitzchak said, after lying on the floor to demonstrate how he was pummeled. Zevulun said the guards ceaselessly harassed him. *"They said, 'You don't have the right to have temples. This is an Islamic state. We have only mosques.'"* Tiring of all the fuss -- but sensing that the disputed relics may be valuable -- the Taliban authorities took the Torah themselves. After nearly being sold in Pakistan, the scroll was put in storage at the interior ministry.

With the Taliban gone, our dueling gabbais talked about going to the interior ministry to retrieve the Torah. But they seemed less interested in getting back the Torah than in perpetuating their feud. They appeared as if they might become lost without the toxic energy of their conflict. Both have wives and children who live in Israel. Each man offered various reasons for not wanting to join them there. Yitzchak said his wife was poisoned against him by Zevulun, who spread rumors in the Afghan émigré kehilla that Yitzchak had converted to Islam.

While Yitzchak spoke, two women came to the door to hear holy readings. He is regarded locally as a man of religious learning and these visits seem to be his sole source of income. Zevulun, on the other hand, appears to make a very decent living exporting rugs and copper dishes to Europe. So why doesn't he join his wife and two daughters in Israel? *"I'm waiting for the situation to get better,"* he said. *"The winter is over. Why shouldn't I stay for a while to enjoy the fruits of summer?"*

***Fast forward...***In January 2005, Yitzchak has died of natural causes. Zevulun is the last remaining Jew in Afghanistan. He is trying to recover the confiscated Torah. He has a wife and two daughters who live in Israel, and he said he was considering joining them. However, when asked during a recent interview whether he would go to Israel, he retorted, *"Go to Israel? What business do I have there? Why should I leave?"*

Yitzchak and Zevulun were two very resourceful, resilient Afghani Jews; tough enough to outlast the Taliban. *Do they teach us anything about faith?* They certainly point toward a very painful truth about our most bitter foe facing us in the mirror. Two bickering old Jews managing to lose a Torah in their blind hatred and petty jealousy. They never reconcile. There is no forgiveness or love. There is no Torah among them. Outlasting the Taliban, they became their own undoing.

The second story - also a true story - is about faith and resilience. It is 1992. Maria Sirois is in the midst of a one year psychology internship on a pediatric oncology ward at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. At the nurse's station Maria is getting a quick summary of her new client's case. Her name is Amelia, she is ix years old. Amelia had been diagnosed as a baby with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, she had been given a course of chemo and had been in remission for over two years. The lymphoma had returned two months ago. Amelia was in the hospital for a transplant. Our intern, Maria went into a small conference room to meet with Amelia's parents, Suzanna and Samuel. Maria is describing how a psychologist could help Amelia negotiate the strain of a transplant. After a moment, Amelia's mom held up her hand, interrupting Maria.

*"You seem like a nice person. You might even be a good psychologist, but my daughter is quite special."* The dad nodded.

***"How? Tell me what you mean."***

*"She talks to God, to spirits."*

***"Oh my."***

Looking straight into Maria's eyes, Amelia's mom asked, "Would you like to hear a story?" ***"Please."*** Maria put down her pager, datebook and folder, and Suzanne told her she had received the call about Amelia's relapse in her car. The cancer had returned aggressively, and there was no option but surgery. Amelia was sitting behind her and could sense that her mom was in tears. She held her hands out toward her mother and asked, "What's wrong?" Suzanne told her. Amelia responded quickly, "Don't worry, Mom." ***"What do you mean, don't worry? This is worse than it was before, Amelia. The surgery itself might kill you. I might lose you."*** "Mom, don't worry. The cancer is not important." Almost running off the road, She pulled the car over to face her daughter.

***"What are you saying, Amelia?" "The cancer. It's not why I'm here, Mom."***

Suzanne stared. "What are you talking about, Amelia?"

***"It's not why I'm here. I'm here to teach you to love better."*** "

Amelia, what are you saying?"

Amelia continued. ***"When you learn that, then I'll go home again. I'll go back to God."***

***Fast forward;*** post-transplant surgery. Thursday morning, twenty four hours before she was to go home, Amelia decided to tell Maria, the intern a story. She said, "When we came here, I heard you asking my mom if they thought the surgery would make me better."

Maria explained, ***"I wanted to know if your parents felt comfortable with the doctor's choice to do a transplant."*** "Why did you ask that?" ***"I asked because sometimes it's important for me to help moms and dads tell the doctors what they really want."***

"You didn't need to you know." ***"What do you mean, Amelia?"***

"You didn't need to because it didn't matter what the doctors did. I was going to be okay."

***"How did you know that?"***

"God gave me a shield when I got sick. It keeps the bad stuff away."

***"What shield,?"*** asked our perplexed intern. "This shield, the one right in front of me."

All Maria could see in front of Amelia was a Barbie travel case, two Barbies, and four neat piles of Barbie clothes. ***"Amelia, I don't see a shield. Can you show me again?"***

"Right here, it's right here. If you look at me, you can see it." She gestured impatiently with one hand, up and down in front of her chest. ***"Amelia, I think that's a shield that some people can see and some people can't. I don't think I can right now. Can you tell me what it looks like to you?"*** "It's sparkly like white beads. It goes up to my neck."

*“How does it work?” Maria asked. “I don’t know. God gave it to the angel, and she didn’t tell me. The angel just told me to keep it on and it would make the bad stuff go away.” “So you knew you would be okay.” “Yep.” “What angel brought you the shield?” “The big one.” “The big one?” “There are big ones and little ones.”*

Fast forward: Amelia left the hospital two weeks after surgery, Barbies and faith intact. Maria saw her again for her checkup one month later. They chatted about the Barbies. Her collection had grown since she returned home, compliments of loving relatives. Maria inquired about the shield, asking if it still helped keep bad stuff away. Amelia looked at her conspiratorially and motioned for Maria to put her ear close to Amelia’s mouth. *“I gave it to mom. She needs it more than I do.” “That was generous of you.”* Maria whispered. *“What do you use now to keep yourself safe?” “I don’t need it anymore. God says it’s inside me now and it will be there till I get really old.”*

***Praised are you, Adonai, Shield of Abraham – ברוך אתה ה' מגן אברהם***

If only Amelia could have a heart to heart chat with Zevulun Simantov. If he and Yitzchak hadn’t lost their Torah, they’d find that searching question in Deuteronomy where Moshe asked his people: *ועתה ישראל... And now, O Israel - What does Adonai your God ask of you today?* God cannot command us to love and safeguard the Torah and hold it higher than our petty poisonous quarrels and jealousies. God cannot show us why the beauty of Jewish tradition must be something more than outlasting the bad guys. We must open our eyes and hearts to acquire that wisdom.

Today I say to you that, for all their toughness, Zevulun and Yitzchak were blinded to many important things. They have no Torah. Amelia, however, knows where her shield is. Today, when we hear the shofar, when we chant the melodies, let us listen deeply to the question: *And now, O Israel - What does Adonai your God ask of you today? Let us stop employing the sharp tongue and the poisonous withering stare. It is time to extend an open hand, to approach each other with an open heart. שנה טובה ומתוקה – a Good, Sweet Year.*