

**“Who are You?” – Sermon – Rosh Hashanah Evening 5769  
September 29, 2008- Rabbi Larry Karol**

The same man served for many years as the wagon driver for the 18th century rabbi Landau of Prague. He accompanied him everywhere on his lecture tours. Many of the rabbi's talks were repeated and the driver soon learned every talk by heart. One day shortly before they entered a city where they had never been before, the driver said to the rabbi, "In every town we visit, Rabbi, I see the great respect that people show you. I'd love to know what it feels like to be given such honor." "Then today you shall," said the rabbi. "We will exchange clothes and you will give the talk. But remember, clothes alone don't make the rabbi." They arrived in the town, and everything proceeded well. The driver, dressed as the rabbi, gave the talk he had learned perfectly, while the rabbi, dressed in his driver's clothes, listened at the back of the synagogue. The driver even managed to answer all the questions – well, almost all of them. There came a question he had never heard the rabbi answer before, so he was totally stymied - but, standing quietly beside the lectern, he knew just what to do. He announced with great confidence in his voice, "That question is certainly not as difficult as it may sound; in fact, it is so easy that even my driver can answer it! Driver, come up and tell the people what they want to know!"

That is one of my favorite stories – not only because it is about a rabbi, but because it reminds us not to judge people by appearances or labels. Just as the driver had to earn his reputation as a good and faithful coachman, so did the rabbi become known not only because of the lectures he gave but also because of the way in which he used his knowledge to interact with people and to address their immediate concerns as well as their overarching questions.

When we characterize people and their abilities, we hopefully reach much deeper than the surface. Over this last month, we have been trying to get to know more about our presidential and vice-presidential candidates beyond

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labels that have been assigned to them. For example, we have heard people ask: Is John McCain “Bush Three” or a maverick Republican? Is Barack Obama a devoted member of the United Church of Christ or, as one of our relatives from Israel claimed, a muslim who went to a madrassa when he was young? Is Joe Biden the “gaffe machine” that some claim he is or the dedicated father and husband who takes a long train ride home every night to see his wife and children? Is Sarah Palin a confident leader or an executive who used the privilege of her office to deal with a family problem (or is she really Tina Fey)? We have heard all of these questions and more about the candidates over the last few weeks. We know, however, that the most important questions about these presidential and vice presidential nominees relate to who they are as leaders and to how they will bring their intelligence and experience to the offices they seek. We want to know that the candidates we elect are dependable, consistent, forthright, insightful, ready to fight for what they believe, willing to listen to us and what we believe, flexible enough to compromise when such a decision will still bring progress, calm in the face of a challenge and able to use their best judgment in moments of triumph or crisis. Any focus on superficial notions about a public figure should not overshadow our best attempts to ascertain the essence of his or her personality and his or her willingness to connect with people of all ages, occupations and backgrounds. Whether or not we agree with Senators Obama, Biden and McCain and Governor Palin, we could, hopefully, find some way to relate to each of them as we would expect them to find a way to relate to each of us.

Creating connection across ideological lines may be difficult, but not impossible. Even when we participate in groups in which members mostly agree on values, politics or faith, it still may be hard to engender relationships and a

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sense of community simply because of time. We find our weekdays and even weekends consumed with driving back and forth to work, carpooling to extracurricular and leisure activities, and getting out of those routines by catching precious moments at home or going on vacation. We don't always have the time we really need and want to get to know people who could bring something special to our lives. Yet, through our full schedules and complicated itineraries, what persists for each of us is a desire to belong. I was intrigued with the television news report about this year's revival of the 1960s musical "Hair" staged in Central Park in New York City. One of the cast members talked about how "Hair" told the story of young adults who formed a "tribe" because of their similar approach to life. At least some of us are members of that tribe, whether we know it or not, especially if we have hummed or sung along with songs like "Aquarius," "The Flesh Failures (better known as "Let the Sunshine In")," "Where Do I Go?," "Good Morning, Starshine" and "Easy to Be Hard." The cast member of "Hair," in the interview, said of the renowned rock musical, "It was just about people wanting to be part of a group – just like so many people are on facebook now."

The facebook analogy resonated with me as, I am sure, it resonates with at least some of you. So now for the poll – how many of you have an email address that you check at least five times day? How many of you have your own website for business or for a personal interest? How many of you have a myspace page? How many have a your own page on facebook?

Even those of you who aren't on facebook probably know about this online networking tool that "connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them." Through facebook, people send messages to friends, upload videos and photos, and learn more about people they know by viewing

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their profile page, which they can only do if they are officially “facebook friends.” Each person’s list of “confirmed friends” offers a virtual map of his or her relationships, including people in their lives now, someone they met just once and long-lost friends that they have welcomed back into their lives. When combined with all other modes of communication, facebook helps us reduce the degrees of separation within our society from six down to at least three, and maybe even down to two.

Creating a facebook profile can include sharing with friends information about school, work, personal interests., favorite books and music, college degrees, and personal goals. It offers a snapshot of each member’s character and identity on a particular day or even at a specific moment in his or her life.

The question of personal identity at a given moment and for the future was the subject of Maria Shriver’s new book. **JUST WHO WILL YOU BE?** The book emerged from a discussion she had with her children about who she is. While she considered herself a journalist and an author, her children told her that she is just a housewife, first lady of California, mind you, but a housewife. According to the book, it was during that discussion that Maria Shriver’s nephew called to ask her to speak at his high school graduation. Her address – and this book – gave her an opportunity to redefine who she is and who she wants to be, especially by claiming that she is not done with “who she is” – that she, like each of us, is a work in progress, always with something valuable to share. Her graduation talk challenged the students to consider all of the possibilities for their future, which could take them in diverse but equally fulfilling directions. I found one section of this book even more valuable than the graduation address itself. Included in **JUST WHO WILL YOU BE** is Maria

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**Shriver’s list of TEN THINGS I PLEDGE TO MYSELF which can direct or redirect our quest to discover who we are:**

- 1. I pledge to "show up" in my life as myself, not as an imitation of anyone else.**
- 2. I pledge to avoid using the word "just" to describe myself. For example, I won't say, "I'm just a mother," "I'm just a student" or "I'm just an ordinary person."**
- 3. I pledge to give myself ten minutes of silence and stillness every day to get in touch with my heart and hear my own voice.**
- 4. I pledge to use my voice to connect my dreams to my actions.**
- 5. I pledge to use my voice to empower myself and others.**
- 6. I pledge to serve my community at least once a year in a way that will benefit other people.**
- 7. I pledge to ask myself, "Who am I? What do I believe in? What am I grateful for? What do I want my life to stand for?"**
- 8. I pledge to sit down and write my own mission statement.**
- 9. I pledge to live my own legacy.**
- 10. And I pledge to pass it on.**

**These are pledges that we can consider on our own, or as part of a community like Temple Israel. We have the opportunity, whenever we are together, to articulate our dreams, to discuss how we can make a difference in the world, to share our talents to enhance Temple programming, and to declare who we are and who we will be. Being members of this community is like facebook in that we are a network that features connections and interconnections between people that, hopefully, reduce the degrees of separation between us as we bring more people into our circle of relationship and caring. Temple Israel, or any congregation, is unlike facebook because, in person, we are in three dimensions, while virtual reality is still only in two. The fact remains that we can find out more about each other through conversation and camaraderie in Temple activities than we would from a written profile on a website.**

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**Pledge #7 on Maria Shriver’s list echoes themes that permeate our High Holy Day worship. That pledge asks: "Who am I? What do I believe in? What am I grateful for? What do I want my life to stand for?" Tonight, we are members of a community who try our best to stand and pray with integrity, to be honest with ourselves about who we are and “just who we will be,” and to give thanks for what we enjoy in life. We are called upon in each new year to grow in character, to learn from our mistakes, and to be forgiving and compassionate towards others around us who hope to learn from their mistakes as well. Most of the prayers we recite during the High Holy Days are stated in the plural rather than the singular because we need each other. We need to know that we can turn to each other for the support and strength that will enable us to face the ongoing challenges of being human, overcoming narrow labels that may be placed upon us so that we can truly get to know one another and show who we really are and who we can be.**

**A rabbi once asked his students, "How do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?"**

**The students thought they grasped the importance of the question. There are, after all, prayers that can be recited, and rites and rituals that can be performed, only at night. And there are prayers and rites and rituals that belong only to the day. They assumed the rabbi was talking about doing the right ritual at the right time.**

**The brightest of the students offered an answer: "Rabbi, when I look out at the fields and I can distinguish between my field and the field of my neighbor, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun."**

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A second student offered his answer: "Rabbi, when I look from the fields and I see a house and I can tell that it's my house and not the house of my neighbor, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun."

A third student offered an answer: "Rabbi, when I see an animal in the distance and I can tell what kind of animal it is, whether a cow, a horse or a sheep, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun."

A fourth student offered yet another answer: "Rabbi, when I see a flower and I can make out the colors of the flower, whether they are red or yellow or blue, that's when night has ended and day has begun."

Each answer brought a sadder, more severe frown to the rabbi's face-until finally he shouted, "No! Not one of you understands!"

"You only divide! You divide your house from the house of your neighbor, your field from your neighbor's field; you distinguish one kind of animal from another; you separate one color from all the others. Is that all we can do? Divide, separate, split the world into pieces? Isn't the world broken enough? Isn't the world split into enough fragments? Is that what Torah is for? No, my students, it's not that way, not that way at all!"

The shocked students looked into the sad face of their rabbi. One of them ventured, "Then, Rabbi, tell us: How do we know that night has ended and day has begun?"

The rabbi stared back into the faces of his students, and with a voice suddenly gentle and imploring, he responded: "When you look into the face of the person who is beside you and you can see that that person, whoever it is, is your brother or your sister, then finally the night has ended and the day has begun."

May our times together enable us to turn night into day, to move beneath the surface, beyond labels, so that we will see each other as we are and,

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**individually and together, explore and ultimately become who we want to be. May our hands and hearts reach out to each other and to the world with sincerity, with compassion, and with hope in this New Year. And let us say Amen.**

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