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Monmouth Reform Temple
Erev Rosh Hashanah – 5776 –September, 2015

Welcome to the New Year. It has been a very full year. I want to recount a few things ... a few happenings here for you, because I want to set the tone for this coming year's engagement. I am first going to say something really heretical. I love that you are here tonight. I miss this crowd over the year. I want, though to tell you how wonderful it is that you are here tonight, and that so many of you, while not in this room, show up to be part of so many good / valuable / and community healing things throughout the year.

Sometimes these things that you do are tied to MRT. Sometimes they are simply tied to the Talmud's command to be relevant in your community in a way that makes other folks pay attention. Some of you work in different agencies. Some of you lead folks into better health. I hear that you read to children, supervise volunteer work, donate to meaningful causes, and do all sorts of things that help change the world. Here is the heresy ... THAT IS SO-O-O JEWISH OF YOU! Seriously, your membership in this congregation demonstrates that you are committed to the continuation of the sacred teachings of our tradition that revolve around tikkun olam – healing the broken world ... and you and I both know how broken it seems to be. As I am about to speak of

some of the things we do here and through our membership, here, I first wanted to acknowledge the amazing things that we do as part of our lives out there. Here is the kicker ... there really is no in here and out there. We are a people who live holistically. We absolutely should take the best of our world and share it in every venue. Our synagogue should be our home and our home should be our synagogue. If we pray in here, we ought to be praying out there. It may look different, but our hearts should be committed to this work equally ... wherever we are. Congratulations and thank you.

This past year, as we are now, we welcomed the whole community to celebrate the holy days with us. You should not have to buy tickets to pray, as you would if you were going to a football game or opera. Can you imagine calling ticket master and having to choose between the front orchestra seating for 3 times the price of the seats in the social hall back? Where is the 50 yard line in this sanctuary? OK, in all seriousness, we do need you to make a donation for being here. If no one supports our effort, we will not be here in the future. Asking you to invest in our mutual ability to continue sharing these holy days together is different than funding our annual budget on mercenary sales. Of course, you realize that I have just spoken heresy. We are moving into a brave new world. An era that will call on us to rethink our traditional paradigms looms, and we have to figure out how we are going to keep

our tradition's vibrancy available to people. This effort will require change and renewal. Here are a few more examples of how MRT is renewing.

Our youth group changed its name. Monmouth Reform Temple Senior Youth (MRTSY) became Senior Monmouth Reform Temple Youth (SMaRTY). That may not seem like much, but over the last year, the group has taken on a whole new look and identity. It is growing. Its programming is growing and diversifying. We have had some great adults helping in the transition. They hang out with each other and even help each other with homework ... I think that is cool. We have just dedicated a new youth lounge for them, as well.

Speaking of new space, I invite you to view the Monmouth Reform Temple Marteff. Ok, we used to call it a basement, but WOW! WHAT A TRANSFORMATION! The Hebrew word "marteff" literally means lower level, and the marteff is now our teenage campus as all 7-10 grade activities ... and the youth lounge are there.

Adult Ed ... you can see the brochures demonstrating some of our already calendared offerings this year. We have a really eclectic group that meets every Saturday morning ... trust me; this is not your normal Torah study! The conversation is all over the place!

I can also tell you that our Religious school is a happening place. Our new educator, Stephanie Fields has revamped our curriculum, re-energized our programming. Your children are in for a real treat this year. Some of you met Stephanie as school opened ... if you have not ... give yourself a treat and get to know her.

Last May, we resurrected Mitzvah Day. Over 200 people took on roles of planning, preparing and serving a host of projects, causes, and other people. I relished in the joy and energy watching our youngest children and our ... most seasoned veterans ... take care of park trails, Habitat Houses, our building, folks in need of safe bikes, greeting cards, hospital blankets ... and the list goes on. We are already planning for this year, and are in contact with two other houses of worship who are thinking of joining us in the community effort.

Our garden produced just under 1000 pounds of produce this year. Our ingathering for the holidays last year brought in over a ton and a half of food.

We participated in peace and healing prayer vigils. Rabbi Priesand and I took our turn marching for Justice with Reform Rabbis and the NAACP walking form Selma Alabama until tomorrow, when many of us will be in Washington DC to rally for voting rights, employment equality, and to the honor the God given rights of our citizens to live and serve

without fear of racially motivated discrimination and violence or hate based retaliation. I am partnering with other clergy in working with our local police officers to help secure the safety and training of those who have committed their lives and careers to serving the public.

Our congregation serves the needs of others at Family Promise, The Center at Asbury Park, Interfaith Neighbors, Lunch Break, St. Anthony's Church pantry, animal shelters, retirement homes, libraries, parks, hospitals, and many other places. These are congregationally sponsored/identified programs and projects, in addition to what, as I alluded earlier, people do just because they believe it is the right thing to do.

Yes, it is my job to cheerlead; I get it. In one year, we have taken an already strong and vibrant community and bumped what we do and who we are to a new level. You are sitting amongst some amazing people who care deeply for our congregation and our community.

We touch lives in so many ways, and these holy days provide us a chance to check in with each other to assess whether or not we are on the right paths; whether or not what we are doing really is or can be more sacred; whether or not there are others amongst us with whom we can mutually converse to expand opportunities to serve, celebrate, engage, and grow.

The individual programs are the things we do, so that we can bring people together. The purpose of Torah is not to tell stories or provide answers to questions or problems. The purpose of Torah is to create conversation between people. We can run a bad program that was amazingly successful because it gave people there a lot to talk about. We can run a great program that fails, if it breeds no relationship building opportunities. You do not join congregations because of events. You join because of the values for which we stand. You join because of the ways in which we add to your life as a return on your investment in us. You join because of the ways that we demonstrate our commitment to meaningfully impact our families and communities. You join because we help make 21st century sense of a Jewish tradition that continues to evolve over the course of its thousands of years.

Our tradition calls on us to commit our time here to growth. Our involvement here helps grow our sense of community and our community's sense of blessing. Our time and energy here must also help grow our sense of spirit, our sense of values, and our capacity for respect and dignity. Take a moment and think about the times that you have experienced disagreement with anyone else here. Some of them resolved well on their own and some may still fester. Our membership in this family takes into account the reality of our disagreements, and by bringing us together, also gives us the ample opportunities to learn

how unimportant any one disagreement might be, given our sharing of this tradition based in love, acceptance, t'shuvah and healing. This holiday calls on us to free ourselves of the burdens of baggage so that we can better appreciate and grow with each other.

We live in a culture trained in the art of "fight" or "flight," the most destructive of behaviors. This day calls on us to break this acculturated tradition, and instead to commit to learning with and from each other. Our tradition calls on us to let die the angst that separates us. How many people have folks we have not spoken to in years ... and may not remember the details of why we stopped ... remembering only that something they said or did was hurtful? How important is the one thing ... compared to the rest of our lives? How can we be sure of truth, when not knowing what happened inside their heads in the moment? This is exactly why our tradition has evolved and continues to grow in vibrancy. We have these holy days that remind us that too much of what we hold on to is really small stuff, in the big picture. We communicate in different ways. We live very different cultured lives. We practice our tradition in very different ways. Still all, from yesterday through tomorrow, and from every corner of the world today, what we hold sacred is not what we do, rather it is the heart with which we do it.

We may not walk in the same shoes as did our ancestors. We may not speak in the same dialects as did our ancestors. We absolutely honor the same traditions as did they ... even if our way of doing so does not resemble theirs. There is a Khasidic story from the earliest days of the 18th century of Rabbi from the Ukraine area. He changed the world. Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer was known as the Baal Shem Tov – the master of a good name was believed by his disciples to be so great as to be able to create miracles here on earth. Whenever he sensed that his people were in great danger, he would go to a secret place in the forests surrounding his town, light a special fire and say a special prayer. And then, without fail, his people would be saved from danger. In the due course of time, the Baal Shem Tov passed on, and when other crises loomed, it fell to his disciple, the Maggid of Mezeritch, to solve it. He went to that same, secret place, of which his teacher had taught him, and he said, “Master of the Universe, I don’t know how to light the special fire of my teacher, but I know his prayer. Please, let that be good enough.” And, it was.

When the Maggid passed, the task fell to his student, Rabbi Moshe-leib of Sasov. In a time of crisis, Rabbi Moshe Leib would go to that same place and say, “Master of the Universe, I don’t know the prayer of my teacher, and I don’t know the fire of his teacher. But, I stand in the

place where they stood, and I beg for your mercy. Please, let that be good enough." And it was.

And, then, it fell to Moshe-Leib's disciple, Israel of Rizhyn. When told of a danger to his people, the Rizhyner would sit in his chair, and sigh the deepest of sighs. He would bow his head and say, "Master of the Universe, I know not where my teacher stood, nor how his teacher prayed, nor how *his* teacher kindled the fire. All I know is how to tell their story. Please, let that be good enough." And it was. And, it always was.

So, welcome to the New Year. Welcome home to MRT. Welcome home to all that which is familiar and to all that which evolves. Make this day the new beginning. Whatever we do, I know we can do more. Whatever value we provide, I know we can provide more. Whatever we share, I know that we can share more. "Kol ha-olam kulo, gesher tzar me'od – The whole world is separated by only very short and narrow bridges. Wherever our world changing work takes us, remember that we take each other with us on each journey. We take the past; the places where our ancestors prayed, the words their hearts spoke, and the rituals that marked the moments in their lives. We take our own hopes and dreams; our expectations, our desires ... our needs. We merge the past and the present with our prayer for the future. Having been with each

other, shared this time, conversation, controversy, and restoration with each other, we are blessed through each other every step that we take, every word we speak, and every breath that sustains our lives. L'shanah tovah.