

Name That Shul: Zedeck
Rosh Hashanah Second Day
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I am honored to be serving as your rabbi and speaking to you on this day, the beginning of the Jewish year of 5777. I am humbled to be speaking to the congregation that Rabbi Milton Steinberg presided over from 1927-33 when he merged Congregations Beth-El and Ohev Zedeck. I am in awe to follow Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso's trailblazing legacy of this congregation into its second century of existence. And I am pleased that I get to learn from and with Rabbi Dennis Sasso as a mentor and guide in the transmission of knowledge, skill, and tradition from one generation to the next.

On this second day of the New Year, I would like to look back and explore the meaning of names, specifically the name of this grand congregation: Beth-El Zedeck. Now, names and naming are central to the Jewish tradition. The very first story in the Torah tells of our creation myth and opens with God creating the world out of the word. "God says, "Let there be light" and there was light... And God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night."¹ God could not merely create the existence of light and darkness, God also had to give them names for them to fully come into existence!

So what does it mean, then, that our congregation is called Beth-El Zedeck? I will spend my sermon on Yom Kippur exploring Beth-El or "House of God." Today I would like to focus on Zedeck, or *Tzedek*, commonly translated as righteousness or justice. It is most appropriate to explore what those Hungarian Jews were referencing when they named their congregation Ohev Zedeck, or Lovers of Justice. This band of Jewish pioneers who found themselves in the American Midwest, or perhaps at that time the American Wild West, certainly knew what they were doing when they created their name out of two different character traits within the Kabbalistic mystical understanding of God. The Kabbalists of the 15th and 16th Centuries imagined God as containing opposite forces: Love and Justice, Effusive Knowledge and Quiet Contemplation, Beauty and Foundation. When the world and the cosmos are perfectly in balance, there is the right amount of Love in the world and the exact amount of Justice needed to keep unbridled Love in check. When the system is out of balance, however, as the mystics experienced in their day, and as we can claim about our world today, we learn that, "judgement [or justice] untempered by love brings about evil, [and] power obsessed with itself turns demonic."²

Perhaps as our Jewish pioneers helped to set up a new community on a new continent and strove to work with their neighbors to create a new city surrounded by farms and wilderness, they wanted to call into being the qualities of Love and Justice. Perhaps they wanted to remind themselves and the larger community that neither Love nor Justice can stand on its own but when they are perfectly matched, the righteous society is unstoppable in its redemptive vision and the attainment of its goals. Or, another opinion might be that the founders of Ohev Zedeck thought that Justice was 'a-coming' for all of the worldly compromises

¹ Genesis 1:3-5

² Green, Arthur. [A Guide to the Zohar](#). Page 44.

that they made as they created new lives for themselves in a new land and they were saying, “We tremble before the God of Judgement.”³”

This image of God as the “enforcer,” is not popular among modern Jews, especially after Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan argued so persuasively against a conception of a God who controls every detail of our lives and for an understanding of God that is within us and moves through us to transform the world. Kaplan famously spoke of God as “The Power that Makes for Salvation,” meaning that which motivates people to work together to heal the broken pieces of our world. And, perhaps the founders of Ohev Zedek were imaging a powerful God like a waterfall is powerful or an awesome God, like the Grand Canyon, both of which have the potential to be Awesome and Awful at the same time.

Now that we have looked at Zedek in the context of Congregation Ohev Zedek, let’s consider the word Zedek all on its own. A quick search in a Biblical Hebrew dictionary yields some interesting results. The root letters for Zedek are *tzadi-dalet-koof* or Tz-D-K, in English. These same letters make up various related words meaning righteousness, justice, loyalty, to be true, or clear. This word is often used in the Bible in relation to honest weights and measures and just governments including judges, rulers, and kings. The root *tzadi-dalet-koof* also makes up the word *tzedakah* which is best translated as an “act of justice or righteousness.” It is also appropriately understood as “a just case or cause” or “to be ethically right.”

A commonly made distinction between the word *tzedakah* and the concept of charity is that one can give charity when she is feeling particularly generous or is inspired to do philanthropy in that moment, while the giving of *tzedakah* is deemed a religious duty, an obligation, a commandment, or a *mitzvah*. Every Jew is obligated to give of her money and food to take care of those in need, even if she herself receives assistance from the community. And, *tzedakah* is not only given in the form of dollars and cents but is given in the way that we choose to spend our time. What causes do you hold dear? Where have you spent your volunteer hours in the past year? What pressing problems plague you when you lie down to sleep at night? What issues would you like to work for in the coming year? How do you want to move the needle a little closer to Justice, or perhaps a little closer to the sweet spot, that perfect balance between Love/Compassion and Justice/Righteousness?

In my short time serving Congregation Beth-El Zedek, I have already become aware of some pressing needs and social justice issues in our community. I started my term here in the week when two black men were killed by police officers in Baton Rouge, LA and Falcon Heights, MN and then the sniper killings of five police officers in Dallas, TX. These events serve as a painful reminder to me of the havoc that gun violence wreaks all across our great nation and prompt me to commit myself to acts of *Hesed* and *Tzedek*, Love and Justice, to heal the racial divide in our nation. And, the only way that I can do that is by starting close to home which is why one of the meetings I attended in my first 50 days in office was a clergy gathering of IndyCAN or Indianapolis Congregation Action Network. This scrappy community organizing outfit is working to improve the lives of low income people, many of them people-of-color. The issues that IndyCAN is working on are not flashy but they get at the building blocks of our society that need to be reinforced for the system to work for everyone. The coalition of

³ Green, Arthur. [A Guide to the Zohar](#). Page 43.

IndyCAN, of which Beth-El Zedeck is part, wants to add more bus routes and more frequent service to help those without cars get to their jobs in an efficient manner. It also works to advocate for fairness in law enforcement and judicial systems for African Americans and other minorities. This is an urgent issue regarding which both Rabbi Dennis and I together with the JCRC and many of you are concerned and involved.

I also took a meeting with a representative from a foster care agency who alerted me to the problem of having far fewer safe and affirming homes in which to place children in the foster care system. Her goal is to add 50 new homes to her roster this year. I know that taking on the challenge of raising a teenager, many of whom have multiple issues, is quite a burden to bear but if anyone in the *kahal* today would like to explore this tremendous opportunity to live out the values of Love and Justice, please let me know!

And finally, as I sat with Board Members at our most recent meeting, I heard from several of our congregational leaders about the issues that keep them awake at night. One member spoke of the suicide of one of her son's friends several years ago. Her passion is this issue. I heard in her voice the pain that such a young death has caused and I would like to create a religious container to hold some of this grief. In the coming months I will endeavor to create a monthly week night creative healing service where Jews in our community who are dealing with illness or loss can come and be together. In sitting together in our pain, perhaps we can find our way to some balance of cosmic Love and Justice?

So where does this wide ranging discussion leave us? Our congregation is called Beth-El Zedeck so perhaps "Beth-El" stands in for Love and we understand God as a Loving God of Justice? Or perhaps we stick with only the words that are present and understand our own name as "The House of the Just God" or "The House of God and Justice." I look forward to hearing what Beth-El Zedeck means to you in the months to come. And, please join me on Yom Kippur as we explore the "Beth-El" aspect of our name. Shana Tovah!