

Erev Rosh HaShana: “Remodeling our lives, our relationships and our worlds”

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova! Rosh HaShana is not just the Jewish New Year, it's a time of rebirth and renewal. As the northern hemisphere moves from summer into fall, and we enter the 7th month of our ancient Hebrew lunar calendar, we take stock of where we have been and where we are going.

The world seems to be in a precarious place: war, disease, environmental destruction is combined with hatred and deep division to produce what for many is a toxic hopelessness. But our Judaism reminds us that we are to never give up, there is always a way forward, and that in every moment each of us is tasked with deciding how we react to the world around us, and can make our lives a blessing. If the world seems like it is in a death spiral, we know that we are also witnessing a rebirth. A friend pointed out that we are all being called to assist in the birthing of a new and improved reality. We are all being asked to be a Doula, a person trained to provide advice, information, emotional support, and physical comfort to a mother before, during, and just after childbirth, and to do this for the world, mother earth, and each other. If we could each serve in this sacred role, how would you personally assist and support the birthing of a better tomorrow? What advice do you have to offer? What are your needs at this season of welcoming a new year, a new beginning?

There are other important questions that our tradition calls us to ask over the next ten days of Teshuvah - days of returning - as we enter the Yamim Nora'im - the Days of Awe: What holds us back from renewing our lives and our world? And perhaps, most importantly: what is the goal, the ultimate mission statement for our lives, our family, our community, our world? What is the finished product, the perfected existence, the perfected world that we seek? We need to know the direction we are trying to head to; we need to be able to envision at least an emotional and spiritual blueprint for what a redeemed world and better reality looks like in order to make it happen. Each year, as we gather for the High Holidays, and take responsibility for the ways that we have each missed the mark, we need to know that we are at least getting a bit farther down the road. The goal is not personal perfection, but to use where we have been to help us better be present, and then to figure out where we are trying to go next. While Teshuvah is ideally a regular process of self-reflection and course correction, here is our annual opportunity to do it as a community, and ideally as a world.

Here is the metaphor that I want to offer all of us over the next 10 days through Yom Kippur: we are remodeling our lives. We are not building a new house, or tearing one down, we are making strategic changes; we are charged with thoughtful improvements. As we enter into the birthing process of a new year, we get to reconstruct, renovate, repair, modernize, rearrange and fix up our

existence and our world. And our Jewish wisdom directs us to do this work for our concentric circles of self, family, community, and world, and also with all four aspects of our life: physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. This remodeling involves at least 4 relationships: self, family, community and world, and four aspects of reality: body, heart, mind and soul. It's not a simple remodeling job, but we all know that no reconstruction project ever is quick or easy. If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well.

There is a phrase from the Siddur that can guide us in this holy task of remodeling our relationships and our realities: "Chai Olamim - life of the worlds, life of the universes". These words appear in a mystical Jewish poem "L'chai Olamim - For the life of all worlds" that some sing as part of their preliminary morning prayers on Shabbat and holidays. It is also the conclusion of a bracha - a blessing - that is recited after a snack not made from the produce of the land of Israel. So when we drink a glass of water or eat candy, fish, meat, eggs, or anything else that is not bread, crackers or wheat, barley, oats, spelt, rye, pomegranates, figs, dates, olives or grapes, when we are done drinking or eating we recite a short, powerful blessing that teaches us that even a sip of water should include a moment of appreciation for having our needs met. Here's the blessing Borei Nefashot in translation: "Blessed are You, God our God, Ruler of the universe, Creator of numerous living beings and their needs, for all the things You have created with which to sustain the soul of every living being. Blessed is the divine one who is the Life of the worlds. Chai Olamim - life of the worlds."

What a phrase, what a concept! Judaism makes it clear that there are multiple worlds, universes, realities and not only is there life in all of them, but what we call God - the life force that connects us with all other life, and every moment and place - is present in all. God and life are in each relationship that we have with self, and others. God and life are present in every aspect of physicality, feelings, thoughts, and spiritual interconnectedness. We are not alone in our remodeling; we have each other, and we each have the "life of the universes".

So this year, over the course of five more short Drashot at each High Holiday Service, I want to guide us through an ultimate remodeling project as we repair ourselves, improve our families, modernize our community, and fix up our world, and also improve our bodies, repair our hearts, modernize our brains, and fix up our souls. It's a lot to do, and the stakes are high, but the time is right, and we have the support of "the life of the infinite worlds - Chai Olamim". And I'm also going to be sharing a story over these next 5 Drashot that may help us better understand this process of Teshuvah and remodeling. We have a lot to do together over these holidays. Shabbat Shalom; Shana Tova!

Rosh HaShana 1st Day: "Today the world is born"

Rosh HaShana is a beautiful and complex holiday. As a clear reflection of the ancientness of Judaism, it has gone through a significant process of transformation since the days of Moses. The Torah speaks of today as a Yom Zikaron - a day of remembrance, and a Yom Teruah - a day of sounding the horn. This day is the new moon of the sacred 7th month, a month that includes Yom HaKippurim on the 10th day of the month, and a week-long celebration of the Sukkot festival which starts on the full moon of this month in two weeks. It is not until the Mishnah, the oral traditions that were written down 2,000 years ago, that the name "Rosh HaShana" first appears. Rosh HaShana means "the head of the year", and while it continues to be marked on the new moon of the 7th month, it becomes one of the four annual Jewish new years. The start of the calendar and the holiday cycle and the reigns of kings and queens is marked as a new year on the new moon of the 1st month, Nissan, two weeks before Passover - the birthday of our people. The new year for the tithing of animals is the new moon of the 6th month, Elul, one month ago. Today is the new year for people, the year, and it's the anniversary of the conclusion of creation. The fourth new year is the full moon of the 11th month, Shevat, which is marked as the new year for trees: Tu B'Shevat.

While it is a complex calendar, it is a beautiful one that reflects the agricultural origins of our people and also honors specific dates each year that celebrate Jewish history. Rosh HaShana does both of that, and also adds a dimension of personal, spiritual growth and reflection. In the natural cycles, this new moon of the seventh month marks the upcoming harvest season. Grapes, along with the other fruit species that the land of Israel is known for: pomegranates, olives, dates, and figs, are harvested in the next few weeks. After the long dry summer in the Mediterranean climate, the first winter rains are hopefully on the horizon in a month or two. The Torah refers to this harvest time of year as the "Tekufat HaShana - the turning of the year". The summer is a quiet time on the Jewish calendar; as we prepare for harvest and preparing for the next year of rain, our sense of survival becomes enhanced, and we look back before we can look forward, and we pause and are present before we gather in the grapes and fresh produce.

From the lens of Jewish history, Rosh HaShana is the birthday of world, it is the anniversary of the sixth and final day of creation, the day that humanity was formed and assigned the task of working the world and protecting the world. As part of our property management role given to the first humans, Adam and Eve were told by the property owner, the landlord of the universe, (AKA God), that there were just a few basic ground rules. Chief among these was to help themselves to anything in the fridge of the Garden of Eden other than the "Eitz

HaDa'at - the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil". Of course we know the story of what happened on this day, this first day of humanity, this primordial Friday afternoon: Eve / Chava ate the fruit and gave some to Adam / Adahm, and when God's voice came walking in the wind of the garden, they hid, and in the world's first documented game of Hide and Seek, God called out "Ayekah - where are you?".

When they emerged from the shrubs where they hid their naked embarrassed bodies, Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the snake. No one takes responsibility and they are banned from the garden of paradise that they had just been given. The morals are pretty clear: making mistakes is part of being human, but we have to own our actions and the ways we missed the mark rather than blame others for our failings. And, to quote Bob Marley, "there ain't no hiding place from the father of creation".

Our mystical tradition highlights the divine question that was asked on the first Rosh HaShana, "Ayekah - where are you" and says that every day the same question is asked of each of us: where are you and why are you there? Rosh HaShana is the day that we begin to answer this question as we face a new year of possibilities, challenges, blessings, and opportunities to follow the instructions or hide in the bushes. This is the time of the year of marking the harvest season, of celebrating the anniversary of the completion of creation, and for Teshuvah: spiritual return and personal renewal. Our Torah reading this morning reflects this focus as we chanted the story of the birth of Isaac, the second generation of the Jewish people, which sets up tomorrow's story of the binding of Isaac. Birth is full of possibilities, and life is full of potentials and also pitfalls, demands that we must face, challenges that we must overcome.

Our Rosh HaShana prayers make it clear that today is the Birthday of the world, a time of new beginning for the universe. We ask to be written in the Book of Life, but we also know that we write our own story. While we can never control what happens to us, we can control how we respond. And that is how we write the story of our lives, with the intention that we respond with thoughtfulness and compassion. This is the season where we take stock of who we have been and focus on where we wish to go, and how we learn from our mistakes and take responsibility for what we have done. Over the course of the next 9 days, I will be sharing 4 more Drashot and they will focus on remodeling. How do we wish to remake our lives, and our relationships with family, community and the world? To do this we will also explore taking account, not only of our souls, but also of our bodies, our hearts and our heads. And I'd like to share with you a story that can help us understand Teshuvah; it's about how I lost some items of clothing and I have entitled it "The story of my Lost Hawaiian Shirts and the Road Ragers". I'm

going to share it with you between now and the Neilah Service and this is how the story begins:

“The story of my Lost Hawaiian Shirts and the Road Ragers“ Part 1:

Since this is the story of my lost Hawaiian shirts, I should probably begin with what exactly these shirts were, and to be clear, it's also the story of a handmade Beduin vest which I owned for 26 years, so let's go back a bit. I lived in Israel for 8+ months in 1990 - 1991 when I studied in Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva as part of my finishing up my bachelor's degree in Sociology and Judaic Studies. At the time, Beer Sheva was a pretty sleepy city, this is before a passenger rail connection was built and before more than 1 million Russian Jews moved to Israel. Literally across the street from my dorm was the Negev Desert and a Bedouin encampment with sheep and camels. Part of my studies there were to learn more about the Sociology of the Negev and Southern Israel, and these nomadic herders were of significant intrigue to me. The clothing that they wore was mostly hand-made from black wool, with vibrant colors such as red, purple and yellow sewn into it.

When I was back in Israel, probably in 1997, I purchased a Beduin vest in the Jerusalem Old City Shuk with a similar pattern of colors. It wasn't something I wore often, but enjoyed on holidays and special events wearing this black vest with purples and blues. It made me feel good to wear it and remember my days exploring the Negev and learning about these gentle people.

Some people love shopping, particularly for clothes. That's not me. I see it as a chore and often try to get in and out of the store as quickly as possible. Occasionally, particularly when traveling, I do enjoy buying something to remember the place. Other than concert t-shirts which I often buy for my kids and myself as souvenirs, I tend to want to buy something with personality, like the Beduin vest.

My first time in Hawaii was in the summer of 2013 which was part of an extended or delayed honeymoon trip with Shoshana. We went to the Big Island for a week and really enjoyed the hiking, swimming, and laid back vibe. While I never really related to Hawaiian shirts before the trip, and was not planning to buy one there, on the last day, Shoshana found one in blue - my favorite color, which included a pattern with palm trees - also one of my favorites, and a map of Hawaii. I love maps. It seemed like a perfect way of honoring our time there so I bought it even as I wondered where I would wear such a shirt. While for a while, it hung in my closet, it eventually became my party shirt - worn on Simchat Torah, and at concerts, sometimes with a Phish shirt underneath. (To be clear, that's P.H.I.S.H. and it's an improvisational jam band from Vermont with a cult following). In 2017,

we returned to Hawaii, with my close friend and colleague Rabbi Eli Cohen of Chadeish Yameinu in Santa Cruz, and spent a week in Maui. I again fell in love with the water, the hiking, the scenery and the swimming. On the last day, Shoshana bought me a second Hawaiian shirt - this one was also blue, and had a bright design featuring a Volkswagen Camper van (I've owned three over the years). It quickly became my second "party" shirt - for festive gatherings, Phish concerts, and parties. So for the last 26 years, 10 years and 6 years, my go-to feel good party clothing usually included some combination of my Bedouin vest and my two Hawaiian shirts. To be continued tomorrow in my next Drash.

HaYom HaRaht Olam - Today the world is born. Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tovah!

Rosh HaShana Day 2: "Choose life that you may live!"

My theme for the high holiday Drashot is remodeling. This is the season for spiritual renewal when we are to give ourselves a soul make over. As I explained on Friday night, to do this involves four concentric circles of relationships: to self, to family, to community and to the larger fuller world. It also means that we focus not only on the spiritual aspects of our life, but what the Kabbalists, the mystics of our traditions, describe as the four worlds or dimensions: physicality, emotions, intellect and the soul. This morning I want to talk briefly about how we renew our relationship with self, and how we begin with a focus on our bodies. And, I'll also continue the story that I started yesterday.

The Torah teaches us in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 30, verses 19 - 20 "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life that you may live, you and your offspring, to love God your God, to hearken to God's voice, and to cleave unto God; for that is your life and the length of your days". It's a fascinating phrase: choose life that you may live. While we know that we have choices to make that may bring us to life, blessings and opportunities, or to death, curses and challenges, let's be clear that none of us, as far as we remember and know, asked to be born. What does it mean to choose life that you may live? I believe that this verse is not only encouraging us to make good life-affirming choices with our lives, but is reminding us that we not only will ourselves to live, to continue, to thrive, but that we have an opportunity to make our lives meaningful.

Judaism is clear that we are a civilization, a culture, not just a religion. A religion is focused on rituals and holidays, and yet most of the instructions, the mitzvot of the Torah, are not discussing spiritual life, it's discussing interpersonal life: what we eat, how we pay our workers, how we plant and harvest our crops. "Do not murder" or "honor your parents" is not about our relationship with God, it's about

our relationship with ourselves and each other. In Judaism, the body is not just a distraction to the spiritual goals of the faith, it's the way that we live and fulfill the obligations of our faith. There is not a single mitzvah that does not relate to a thing, a place, a time, an action or a body part. They are all physical. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the French paleontologist, biologist, and philosopher, said: "We are not physical beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a physical experience" In mystical Judaism this world of the physical is called Assiyah - the world of action, doing, making.

It is through the prism of our self and our physical senses that we know the world. From the moment that we are born, we are bombarded by physical sensations. If all we do is focus on what our body wants and needs, we don't accomplish too much with our lives. If we don't take care of what our body wants and needs, we can't even exist. Choose life that you may live!

What would it look like to remodel our relationship with our self? How well do we know ourselves, how closely are we willing to look into the metaphorical mirror and examine our lives, our actions? This is the time of year that we are to look closely: who are we? Who are we becoming? Who did we hope to be, plan to be, want to be when we grew up? Where are we, and where we are trying to get to, with our lives? If all we do is ask these questions we can become paralyzed; if we never ask these questions, if we are afraid to examine our own lives, then can we truly be living a life that is worth living?

What does it mean to take an accounting of our selves, and our physicality? It means to honestly reflect on how we have cared for ourselves and our bodies for the last year. According to the website socratic.org: "99% of the mass of the human body consists of six elements: oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus. They are worth about \$576. All the other elements taken together are worth only about \$9 more." So we are \$585 worth of stuff, but we are also made in the image of the divine. How did we honor our bodies? How did we attend to them, exercise them, feed them, and appreciate them? These are the questions that we should include as we contemplate what this new year will look like.

We are the only us that has ever existed and will ever exist. We are a unique creation, a one time collection of DNA and experiences. To start a spiritual journey we have to first take stock in what we have. We are to start with appreciation for self, and that begins with our physical bodies. We are to know ourselves and appreciate who we each are. We are to take care of this less than \$600 worth of atoms and elements, because it's the only vessel that we'll ever be given on this ride. We are to choose life, so we can live - with awareness, with integrity, with gratitude, with connection, and with meaning.

Speaking of meaning, I want to tell you more about these meaningful articles of clothing that I started to tell you about last night.

“The story of my Lost Hawaiian Shirts and the Road Ragers” PART 2:

So yesterday I began the story of my favorite Beduin vest and the two Hawaiian shirts. The main summary is that these were three articles of clothing that mean a lot to me because I had them for many years and they reminded of special places that I had been in, and it's also useful to know that I wear them mostly at parties and festive occasions. So, about three weeks ago I was heading out on an annual retreat that I do to prepare for the High Holidays. I have discovered over the years that the best way for me to feel grounded and inspired before these Days of Awe, and to also feel creative in terms of writing these Drashot and thinking about how to approach the holidays, is to physically get out of town and spend time in some place beautiful in nature. My favorite band, an improvisational group called Phish, has been playing a Labor Day weekend concert series outside of Denver, Colorado for the last 12 years, and the combination of music, friends, colleagues, and easy access to the Rocky Mountains has proven to be a perfect setting for my High Holiday preparations. I have experimented with flying there, driving there, and taking the train there, and every combination with the there and back, and the travel time is a perfect occasion for clearing my head, reflecting on where I've been in the past year, and thinking about the experience of leading a community into a new year. This year my plan had been to drive there and back, and have a couple of days before the concerts to do my high holiday prep. I was also going to meet up with my brother who is in the process of moving to Israel and spent this past summer in Breckenridge, CO where he had some family photo albums and other items for me to bring back with me. But as we all know the wisdom of Yiddish expressions: “a person plans; God laughs”.

About a week before I was going to leave for Colorado, my aunt Judith passed away. She had been ill for most of the previous year, and had asked me to officiate at her funeral when the time came. Not only has my aunt been a part of my entire life, but I'm extremely close to her son, my first cousin, who is just 5 days older than me and we grew up together in Albany, NY, went to Hebrew School together, went to college together, went to concerts together, and it was in fact my cousin Aaron who first introduced me to the band Phish more than 33 years ago. My aunt is one of the last members of my family from the previous generations. When I heard that she had passed, I knew that I would find a way to honor her, celebrate her life, and provide spiritual support to her husband and my cousin and her family and friends by officiating at her memorial service and funeral. These events ended up being scheduled for the day I was originally

planning to leave for Colorado, so I left the night before and planned a stop in Las Vegas where my aunt had lived for the last couple of decades. My car was loaded up with my bike, guitar, clothing for a funeral, books, and clothing for the concerts which included my two Hawaiian shirts and my purple Beduin vest. The suit and tie were on a hanger on one side of the back seat, and my Hawaiian shirts and the vest were on a different hanger on the other side of the car. The seat was folded down to fit in the bike, and somehow it all fit.

It was a long drive with a detour through the Mojave Desert. Meeting up with my cousin in Las Vegas was surreal, but the funeral was powerful and meaningful, as was spending time with my aunt's friends back at her house. A few hours before sunset, I said goodbye and started to drive towards Utah. About three hours later I stopped to move my suit into the back seat and take out my jacket which was in the back of the car on the other side. I pulled off the highway and off the exit ramp, moved some things around in the car, and opened up both back doors to rearrange. It was late, I was tired, and in a rush to finish the drive, and it was a very dark night. I spent the night in the cute town of Beaver, Utah and got moving the next day very early to get some work done including a Zoom meeting with our preschool staff, meeting up with my brother to get the stuff, and make it to Denver before sunset. It was another long day of driving but the scenery was beautiful as I traveled east on I-70 through southern Utah and between phone calls and long moments of quiet, it was a good day of thinking and reflecting. I met my brother in a hotel parking lot in Frisco, CO right off the highway, and opened the car doors to fit even more stuff in and discovered... the hanger with the Hawaiian shirts and my Beduin vest was gone. I looked under the seats, and even ran back to look at a gas station a block away where I had just stopped, and then checked to see if somehow as part of putting my bags in the car early in the morning, this clothing had ended up somewhere else. I quickly realized that when I had stopped the night before in the dark on the side of the road, the hanger with my favorite clothing had slipped out of the car, and was probably hundreds of miles away on the side of the road in rural Utah. To be continued on Yom Kippur...

Choose life that you will live. Shana Tovah U'metukah - a year of goodness and sweetness!

Rabbi Shalom Bochner