

BRINGING LIGHT TO THE WORLD

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5763

I don't know if I'll ever be able to enter the New Year in quite the same way again. While I confess the month of September—at least for my 30 years of preparing High Holy Day sermons—has always been tainted with a measure of anxiety and dread, the anticipation of Rosh Hashanah's new beginning would nevertheless bring a feeling unlike any other season of the year. Remaining days of summer, a taste of autumn's color, weekends of football and pennant races in baseball, Rosh Hashanah embodied the best of Judaism's inherent optimism. Buying new clothes. Reuniting with old friends. Hope. Joy. All's well with the world. A new year. A new beginning.

But, of course, now all of that has changed. (Or so it seems.) These High Holy Days have become a kind of *yahrzeit*. An anniversary. Not of the world's creation—which they were designed to commemorate—but of its demise. Of its propensity to self-destruct. A blue sky is not just a blue sky anymore. Memories of harrowing sirens now seem inseparable from the sound of the shofar. Visions of billowing smoke still cast their shadow months after being dispersed to earth's corners. Yet above all, the New Year's assurance that the future will be better than the past has been replaced by a feeling of incredulity. It can happen here.

To be sure, time has healed some of our wounds. We have returned to life. We have resumed routines just as before. We've gone back to the theaters and the restaurants. We drive through the Lincoln Tunnel or across the George Washington Bridge with hardly a pause. Our will, our resolve remains indestructible. Even defiant. Like our *mishpocha* in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, we will not cower to terrorism. Because we love freedom. That is our passion. But it is a child's naivete that could pretend that nothing has changed. We would be foolish to think otherwise. Because now we know. Indeed, the world may be no different than it was twelve months ago, but our perspective has changed. Our rose-colored glasses have given way to a sober realism. And I wonder if I'll ever be able to enter the New Year in quite the same way again?

But the more I've thought about this the more I've come to the conclusion that I'm wrong about last year's tragedy having spoiled these High Holy Days. To the contrary, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are not merely a perfect antidote to our new found insecurity of being, in fact they were designed precisely for times such as this. There is a reason why we label them *Yamim Noraim*—Days of Awe. What is more, they were—I believe—created in response to events the likes of which we have just endured. Events far more devastating and profound than virtually any of us have ever known.

Most of us tend to think that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were always here. That Jews have always miraculously found religion after Labor Day. That Moses ate apples and honey, too. Not really. In fact, for at least the first seven hundred years of our people's history (if you start counting from the time Torah ascribes to the occurrence of the Exodus) nobody even knew from Rosh Hashanah or *teshuvah* or fasting on Yom Kippur. For them the Jewish calendar revolved around Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. The *chagim*. Pilgrimage festivals. When everyone would ascend upon Jerusalem. *Pesach* was the New Year. After all, it fell in the first month. (Springtime does seem to make a much more appropriate time for a *new* year, when you think about it.) In fact, there is no mention whatsoever of Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur in the biblical calendars of Exodus and Deuteronomy. The only place in Torah where these sacred days receive any significant mention is in the book of Leviticus, which was the *last* book of the Torah to be written. In Babylon. *After* the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 before the Common Era.

And did you know that the names of the months of the Hebrew calendar are Babylonian in origin? And the first day of the Babylonian month of Tishri—which, of course, is today—was the *Babylonian* New Year? The day on which they enthroned the king? Only they called it *Rish Shattin*. It doesn't take a linguist to see the parallel. What's more, it's Hebrew equivalent, the phrase *rosh hashanah*, appears for the first time in the book of Ezekiel, who was a prophet in—Babylon. The very reference being:

“In the five and twentieth year of our captivity, in the beginning of the year (*rosh ha-shanah*)....” Yet perhaps most illustrative in this otherwise innocuous verse is the phrase “of our captivity”.

Try to imagine what it must have been like for those who endured the destruction of Jerusalem. We still have their words in what they termed a book of lamentations:

“Alas! Lonely sits the city once great with people. She that was great among nations is become like a widow; the princess among states is become a thrall. Bitterly she weeps in the night, her cheeks wet with tears. There is none to comfort her of all her friends. All her allies have betrayed her; they have become her foes. Judah has gone into exile...Zion’s roads are in mourning, empty of festival pilgrims; all her gates are deserted.” (Lamentations 1)

And among the most famous of psalms:

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion. There on the poplars we hung up our lyres, for our captors asked us there for songs, our tormentors, for amusement, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’ How can we sing a song of Adonai on alien soil? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory—even at my happiest hour.” (Psalm 137)

That, of course, is all they wanted us to do. Remember. Just remember. No one should ever forget the devastation. The anguish. The pain. But—and this is so important—they did not give up hope. They did not despair. They could have. No one would have blamed them. Instead they held fast to their belief that life’s potential was greater than life’s disappointments. And out of their experience of destruction they forged a new faith. A Judaism not merely shaped by past miracles but by the prospect of what might be. To their pilgrimage festivals they added a unique observance: a new year. And while what we do now is certainly the result of centuries of evolutionary development, of countless generations of Jews who added their own experiences of misery and trial to further develop these awesome days, I am convinced that this celebration—and it is supposed to be a *celebration*—was borne in the wake of our people’s greatest tragedy. Their experience and that of generations to follow helped to create what I believe to be our most potent tool in our war against the withering of the soul. These *Yamim Noraim*. These Days of Awe.

In the next ten days I encourage you to read our prayers more carefully than you normally would. Try to imagine what kind of event inspires such passionate petitions of God? What might have motivated our ancestors to see these days as “awesome and full of dread”? When we intone *Unetaneh Tokef* tomorrow morning, when we wonder who will live and who will die, can we imagine the terrors that might have been the background for such fatalism? And when we read the martyrology—the *Eileh Ezkerah*—on Yom Kippur afternoon we won’t have to wonder at all. These days are a compendium of our people’s dance with death, but their song is one of life. And their melody was a tune composed for times just like this.

I offer to you this evening three primary values that form the basis of this theology of survival. They are the essence of the High Holy Days. The central themes of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. They are lessons our ancestors bequeathed to us in our shared challenge of learning how to live in a world of uncertainty.

The first is *Malkhut Shamayyim*—the sovereignty of God.

Despite everything that has ever happened to us, we have never lost our faith in a world where God is at the center. Everything we do and believe in Judaism revolves around God. But faith for Jews is more than blind obedience or intellectual submission. Our experience has taught that life’s realities don’t always conform to a belief that God will protect us—no matter what. This is not the kind of faith that Judaism embraces. For Jews, faith can only be understood within the context of relationship. God is the place to which we turn in times of need. God is the source of our strength. God is the voice calling out to us to rise above ourselves. God is our partner.

On these Days of Awe, when we affirm God as Sovereign, when we stand before the open ark and beckon *Avinu Malkeinu*, we do more than coronate an anthropomorphized deity on a heavenly throne. To acknowledge the sovereignty of God is to humble ourselves. It is to admit that there is something greater than we in this perpetually consternating world. I was tempted to say, "...in this perpetually consternating world *of ours*," but it is not our world: "The Earth belongs to God—everything that is in it" (Psalm 24). We didn't create it. We didn't make it. We are just travelers, passing through. To acknowledge the sovereignty of God is to relinquish ultimate authority over judgements of right and wrong. It is to surrender any pretense that we *really* know. We know nothing. To acknowledge the sovereignty of God is to behave in a way that transcends our instincts. It is to see ourselves as vessels of potential. Divinity in the making.

In a world corrupted by man's inhumanity to man—especially when it is perpetrated in the name of God—our best hope is not to abandon a faith in God (or as Emil Fackenheim taught, in the wake of Auschwitz there is an 11th Commandment: "Thou shalt not despair"), but to affirm God. To place our stock in the belief that we are not here by chance, that life has meaning precisely because we are created by God. And that as we traverse "the valley of the shadow of death" we must have faith that God is with us.

Not long ago a good friend of mine noted that so many members of his congregation were looking for signs of God. I nodded in agreement. But as the days passed and his words kept echoing in my mind, I became increasingly uncomfortable. This is not the Jewish way. To be sure we seek God. It is our most primal religious instinct. Psalm 27. "O God, I seek Your face." But Judaism is not a tradition that is rooted in the search for God as much as it is a religion where God is in search of man.

Second: *Teshuvah*—Literally "Repentance". But what it really means is: Man is responsible for his behavior.

Everything that we do, everything that we say, everything that we pray for during these days revolves around the notion that what we do matters. We are not helpless. God does not want our praises. God wants us to be human beings. *Menschen*. "It hath been told thee O man what is good and what the Lord doth require of thee: Only to do justice, and love mercy and walk humbly before God" (Micah 6).

Judaism is a religion of *mitzvot*—not good deeds but a dialectic of commands and responses. Judaism demands that we be responsible. *How* we respond to life's challenges, *how* we respond to those in need are the questions being asked of us these days. Our confessions of sins say less about the wrongs we have committed than the rights we have failed to perform. The question to be asked these days is not "Where is God?" but rather "Where is man?" "Who am I?" "What have I become?" "What have I *not* become?"

I read a story the other day about a teacher who was trying to help a particular young student who was having great difficulty with world geography, so the teacher ripped out a map of the world from a magazine, cut it up into numerous pieces and then gave them to the boy. "I want you to try and piece back together this map," the teacher said. "This will help you learn what our world looks like." Yet while the teacher thought the assignment would take up most of the afternoon, the boy returned in just a few minutes. To the teacher's amazement, the map was reassembled perfectly. "How did you do this so fast?" he asked. The boy responded, "It was simple. On the other side of the map was the picture of a person. I just put her face back together."

This, ostensibly, is God's challenge to us. Ours is to repair the world. *Tikkun Olam*. And the way in which we do that is to repair human beings. Indeed, just a single person. Ourselves. The picture is of us.

Third: *Selichot*—Forgiveness.

This is the hardest, but it is also the most important. No faith in God, no self-repair can do what forgiveness does.

The truth is, I don't know if I can ever *forgive* those who commandeered those planes last September. I don't think it is in me to *forgive* those who wantonly walk into Jerusalem's cafes and schools with

nothing but murder on their minds. But neither is it mine to forgive. My anguish, my anger is that of a bystander. I do not have the privilege—if I can use that term—of being a *forgiver*.

By the same token, I reject the theology of erring being human while forgiving is divine. Such thinking presumes that we are inherently flawed, beyond repair; that forgiveness can come only from one who is beyond sin. On the contrary, forgiveness is our most valuable tool as we wander through life's narrowest canyons. It redeems us from the shackles of anger and hatred. Forgiveness is not an act of acquiescence. Or weakness. It does not affirm. Or condone. It admits nothing. It is simply a permission to move on. Not to the offender, but to the self. It allows us to let go.

Anthony de Mello, in his book *Heart of the Enlightened*, tells the story of two survivors of the Holocaust who meet years later. "Have you forgiven the Nazis?" one asks the other. "Yes. Yes I have," he responds. "Well I haven't," the first man says. "I'm still consumed with hatred for them." "In that case," said his friend gently, "they still have you in prison."

While the withholding of forgiveness might *seem* to satisfy the cravings of our souls, while holding on to anger and hatred might seem *as if* it meets a deeply felt need, in fact it is nothing more than a spiritual malignancy that destroys from within. Such resentment, which literally means to "feel again" in the sense of "feeling backward" as in clinging to the past is like poison to our souls.

Forgiveness, rather, is an invitation to start over. And is this not the whole point of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? Starting over? Is not our ultimate prayer that God *renew* upon us a year of goodness and sweetness? "Renew" not in the sense of *recycle* but to begin again. This day, our tradition teaches, the world is created anew. This is the wellspring of hope.

The truth is, I do not believe that the events of last September have tainted these days; on the contrary they validate the wisdom of our ancestors. Perhaps, indeed, this is the very reason for our existence as a people. When Isaiah imagined us as an *Or Lagoyyim*—a *light* unto the nations—perhaps that *light* was a metaphor for nothing other than perseverance. The ability to transcend the darkness, to rise above despair, to maintain hope. Is there any other people so acquainted with the darkness as are we? Is there any other people so experienced in the art of rising out of the abyss? Perhaps this is our *raison d'être*? Not to suffer but to teach how to transcend suffering. If so, then Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—the most sacred ten days of our year—is our exercise in this art of spiritual survival. It is a gift from our mothers and fathers who have endured the valley. And its lesson is rooted in an abiding hope for the future, a future we have the power to shape, because God—our Creator, the One who rules—is also our partner.

Shanah Tovah. We will continue to believe that the new year will be good. This is what makes us Jews. Ours is to bring light to the world.