

## Erev Rosh Hashanah 2021 - Where are We?

Erev tov, good evening, and shanah tovah tikitayvu - may each of you be written in the book of life. As we gather together this evening to begin the first of what I hope will be many many High Holidays together, I want to share one of my absolute favorite stories for the High Holiday season. It is the story of an absent-minded man, who has trouble every morning finding his clothes in a stress free and timely manner. Knowing how absent-minded her father is, his daughter gives him some practical advice. She suggests that before going to bed each night, he should carefully write down exactly where each of his clothing items is to be found. And so he does. The next morning he looks at the list and one by one finds each item - socks in bottom drawer - pants in closet - shirts in top drawer, all the way until he has everything ready to get dressed. After gathering everything he again looks at the list and then cries out in desperation, "But where am I, where am I?" The editor of the collection in which I first found this story concludes by saying - "And so must we all ask ourselves each day, where am I?"

I have always liked the story because of the "moral" at the end, the question "Where am I?" This question can be understood literally. Where am I? I am in Temple Beth Am in Margate, Florida. Some of you are here with me. Others are participating in our service from the comfort of your homes in Coral Springs, Boca, New Jersey, Canada, or elsewhere. But this question is not truly meant to be literal. It is in fact supposed to be understood much more metaphorically, philosophically, or perhaps even mystically, especially as we gather together on the precipice of a new year.

Where am I, & you, on the path of life that we are walking? Am I, & you, actively working towards the goals we have set for ourselves? Have we even bothered to set goals? Where am I on that metaphorical ladder of mitzvot that so many rabbis talk about all the time? Have I progressed up the ladder this year or have I gone down a few steps? Where am I in relation to my family and my friends? Where am I in relation to my synagogue, my community, country, & the world itself? Finally, where am I in relationship to God, to Judaism, to my own soul?

As Rosh Hashanah 5782 begins, we will all have the opportunity to contemplate these questions over the next ten days, answer them honestly, and think about what WE ourselves can do to change any of the answers we don't like!

Tonight I want to focus for a few minutes on just one of those questions - where are we in relationship to Judaism itself? In his book *To Life: A Celebration of Jewish Being*, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote: "Judaism has the power to save your life. It can't keep you from dying; no religion can keep a person living forever...But Judaism can save your life from being wasted, from being spent on the trivial...Judaism is not just a matter of getting on God's good side by obeying some strange rules He gave us...Judaism is a way of making sure that you don't spend your whole life, with its potential for holiness, on eating, sleeping, and paying your bills. It is a guide to investing your life in things that really matter, so that your life will matter. It comes to teach you how to transform pleasure into joy and celebration, how to feel like an extension of God by doing what God does, taking the ordinary and making it holy. ....Judaism, done right, has the power to save your life from being spent entirely on the trivial and elevate it to the level of authentic humanity." (pp. 293-299)

He continues (pp. 300-301): "My teacher Mordecai Kaplan has written that some nouns are self-sufficient. Words like *table*, *chair*, *knife*, need nothing else to be what they are. But some words

imply relationship, words like *wife, parent, leader*. You cannot just be a wife; you have to be somebody's wife to be a wife. Kaplan suggested God is such a relational noun. God, to be real, has to be somebody's God....We, by the way we live our lives, make Him God. But we don't change the world just by remembering that we are Jews; we have to *do* something about it..... *Being Jewish* is a state of mind; it is something that takes place inside you. It may make you feel proud or it may make you feel uncomfortable, but it remains a private matter. *Doing Jewish* is something that happens between you and other people, between you and the world. Doing Jewish means living differently because you are a Jew."

I truly like what Rabbi Kushner wrote. To my mind "doing Jewish" means many things. It means to participate in Jewish life, to create a Jewish family, or be part of a Jewish community. It means to celebrate the holidays and Shabbat while simultaneously being ethical and following the standards we have as a community. It means respecting the sacred nature of your body and the bodies of others, recognizing that our bodies have the power to bring holiness into the world when we use them to do *mitzvot* and improve the world. Finally, it means understanding that learning Torah, memorizing Torah, and quoting Torah is not enough if you are not simultaneously embodying Torah values. Simply put I don't care how much Torah you know if you are violating the teachings of not standing idly by the blood of your brother, love your neighbor as yourself, be holy for I your God am holy, do not act with arrogance (Pirkei Avot) etc.. When you do all of these things, you are truly "doing" Judaism, putting in the work that earns you the pay-out of a more meaningful life and a better world!

All of these ways of "doing Jewish" are supposed to connect us to God, to our ancestors, and the people we claim to love and care about. With the start of Rosh Hashanah we are all asked to do a *heshbon nefesh* - an accounting of our own souls, determining exactly where we are in our path of life? Have we done all that we have been called to do this year as spouses, children, grandparents, siblings, friends, employees, students, Americans, human beings, and Jews? I want you to be honest with yourself between now and Yom Kippur. But I also want you to remember that in Pirkei Avot (2:13) Rabbi Shimon said "... be not wicked in your own esteem." The last sentence is incredibly important. Be not wicked in your own esteem. I have spoken before about how sad it makes me when congregants begin a conversation by telling me what bad Jews they think they are. So let's do a quick reminder of how many mitzvot you all do every day. Did you - steal today? commit murder? adultery? incest? Did you defraud someone today? Did you move your property marker? Did you engage in sorcery today? Look at that! Seven mitzvot you didn't even know you did today.

My dear congregants, tonight we are beginning a new year, as always filled with hope and possibility. I began tonight by asking where we are so that we know where we want to go, and I believe that our tradition, our synagogue, our community can help each of us on our individual yet overlapping paths. Shanah Tovah.