

*“Hi, I’m Me” – Erev Rosh Hashanah  
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester  
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“Hi, I’m Howie.” My cousin Saul told me to say that as I headed off for my first group wilderness backpacking trip as a young teenager. “Just go up to them and say, ‘Hi, I’m Howie’ and the conversation will go from there. You’ll make plenty of friends. Don’t worry. Just remember, ‘Hi, I’m Howie.’” This would require taking the initiative to go up to strangers and put myself out there. “Hi, I’m Howie” would translate into “This is me, what you see is what you get and I think that we’re going to get along just fine.” That kind of outgoing greeting would mean accepting my authentic self rather than giving into the human tendency to try to be like other people.

The great Martin Buber relates a provocative tale in his classic work Tales of the Hasidim. Rabbi Zusya lay on his deathbed. He lay there crying and his students asked why he would cry. After all, surely God would receive a man such a Zusya, a man who approached the holiness of Moses, to the highest levels of the World to Come. Zusya replied, “In the coming world, they will not ask me: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me: ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”

On the High Holy Days which begin this evening and continue for the next ten days, our traditions demands that we take an accounting of our soul, a *cheshbon nefesh*. In that accounting we do not compare ourselves to Moses or Mozart, to Johnny Depp or Taylor Swift. Our tradition only asks us to compare ourselves to, well, ourselves. Have we taken full advantage of our God-given talents? Have we explored our natural interests? Have we built the relationships that bring meaning to our lives? Have we used our unique gifts to make our world a better place? Judaism does not ask us to compare ourselves to others, only to strive for the most authentic, highest and best form of ourselves. As Zusya reminds us, the question for the Days of Awe is not: “Were you Moses?” The question is: “Were you you?”

In his book, The Seven Questions You’re Asked in Heaven, the great educator Ron Wolfson, a man I consider one of my teachers, recalls one of the most successful slogans in the history of marketing. In 1980, the US Army started to use the slogan “Be All That You Can Be”. The army used that slogan for an astounding 21 years. It’s perfect for the High Holy Days. Question: Did you try to Be All That You Can Be in the previous year? Challenge: Be All That You Can Be in the year to come.

Now living up to this, being all that we can, requires that we try only to be our authentic selves, no one else. We need to be original. My wife, Jennifer, and I went to an art show in Dallas about 10 years ago and fell in love with the work of an Israeli artist named Yoram Gal. Since we were both students living on loans, we inquired about buying a print. No. He told us that he only sells originals, no prints. A copy could never fully capture the essence of his work.

Just like a print of a painting cannot capture the texture and true color of an original, we can never truly shine if we try to imitate someone else. We can only express the most meaningful parts of ourselves when we strive for authenticity of self. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Chassidic master, the Kotzker Rebbe said, “If I spend my life pretending to be someone else, who will be me?” In the Rebbe’s witty turn of phrase we find the Jewish conviction that each of us, created in the image of God, has something special, unique and holy to contribute to this world. No one else can fulfill our personal mission. When we seek our own reds and purples, our textures and brushstrokes that make

each of us an authentic, original masterpiece, we bring unique blessings that our tradition teaches sustain our communities and our world. We each matter in profound ways.

A part of becoming fully our authentic selves is the recognition that we are not perfect. We will never swim like Michael Phelps, think like Einstein, paint like Picasso or sing like Mariah Carey. And while those people approached perfection in their field of endeavor, none of them approached perfection in all areas of their lives. No one is perfect. What a relief. Judaism embraces the fact of our imperfections, allowing us these Days of Awe to reflect on how we might do better.

“Do better.” Not “perfect.” “Perfect” is impossible. Ron Wolfson suggests that our tradition demands not perfection, but perfecting. An ongoing, action-oriented way of striving for our authentic selves with the acknowledgement that, as human beings, we can never achieve actual perfection. The tablets of the Ten Commandments that the Israelites carried through the wilderness were dictated by God but carved by Moses’ imperfect human hands. This made the tablets and the laws of the Jewish people a partnership between humans and God. Since that time Jews have worked as God’s partners in the act of perfecting the laws and ethics and ideals of our people. We can participate in that act. We can strive to make the ethics of the world around us better. We can strive to create a more just, more compassionate, more peaceful world. When we do, we inevitably also do the work of perfecting ourselves, the work of this holy day.

During the Days of Awe, we focus us on the task of perfecting with the process of *teshuva*. We commonly translate *teshuva* as repentance. And that is an idiomatically correct translation. But *teshuva* more literally means “return”. This is not return in the sense of going back in time. Rather, the repentance of *teshuva*, the return of *teshuva*, means to return to a more authentic, better version of ourselves. Ron Wolfson suggests three areas, in particular, that we ought to examine as we seek to return to a more authentic version of ourselves. We should work on perfecting our vocations, relations and ministrations or service to others.

First, vocations, the work we do. If we think about our authentic, natural passions, interests, and skills, do we get to use those in our work? Using the words of the notable psychologist Abraham Maslow, does our work help us to “self-actualize”? If not, why not? I’m not necessarily suggesting that we go quit our jobs to work at a ski area (though that is tempting!). But instead, given how many hours a day we spend working, how are we able to express our authentic selves through our vocation? We should seek pathways to express and revel in our unique talents and passions in the work that we do day in and day out.

Next, relations. Humans exist in relationship with one another. We can only approach an authentic version of ourselves when we have authentic relationships with others. The great 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and theologian, Martin Buber, taught that we experience the Divine in moments of true connection with others. When we connect in an authentic, respectful, and present way, we can glimpse the Divine spark within another person. Every kind of relationship, therefore, deserves work and effort. With our partners, do we really listen? Do we really share? Do we really strive to understand one another? With our children, do we focus on nurturing them and loving them for their own sake? And what about family and friends and co-workers? Nurturing those relationships, glimpsing the Divine spark in another, helps to foster the unique, authentic Divine spark within ourselves.

Finally, ministrations – service to others. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, “We are called upon to be an image of God. You see, God is absent, invisible, and the task of a human being is to represent the Divine, to be a reminder of the presence of God.” How can we authentically help others and thereby bring God’s presence into the world? Our congregation provides myriad ways to make our world a better place. Children bring *tzedakah* during religious school and participate in meaningful social action projects. Our social action committee provides monthly opportunities for families to volunteer in our communities. We collect food and other necessities throughout the year for those in need. We all intend to volunteer, to help others find a pathway towards a better life. Working on perfecting ourselves means committing to actually do it and celebrating the ways that we already help one another.

As we do *teshuva*, as we seek to return to a truer, more authentic version of ourselves, we can also focus on our own character. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe, the Musar movement developed within Judaism. Musar focuses on ethical living as a basis for leading a more reflective, meaningful life. Musar asserts that even the most pious among us can always work to improve their character. A few of the many traits that we might consider as we strive for *teshuva*:

Humility – Do we act humbly?

Patience – Are we able to summon patience in moments of frustration?

Honor – Do we elevate those around us?

Silence – Do we have an island of quiet in our lives?

Moderation – Is there balance in our lives?

Trust – Can people count on us?

The ten Days of Awe we begin tonight give us the rare chance to look inside, to reflect and to strive for authenticity that can carry us into the next year and beyond. Abraham left his father’s house when God called to him and said, “*Lech l’cha*,” commonly translated as “go forth”. But we could translate this more literally as “go to yourself.” With this literal translation, the ancient rabbis suggest that what God really meant with these words was: “Go forth and discover your authentic self, learn who you are meant to be.”

Before that backpacking trip I did follow my cousin Saul’s advice. I went up to people and said, “Hi. I’m Howie.” It was a *lech l’cha* moment for me, opening me to the lifelong journey of striving for authenticity. Each of my names – Howie, Howard, Rabbi Goldsmith – reveal a facet of my authentic self, by turns spiritual and pastoral, intellectual and compassionate, committed friend and dotting father. Though we stray along the way, these High Holy Days allow all of us to affirm each part of ourselves in a quest for authenticity, a quest to strive for the best version of ourselves. May the prayers of Rosh Hashanah inspire us to be like Abraham, fearlessly answering the call to *lech l’cha*, to learn who we are meant to be. In that discovery may we draw closer to those we love and may we find the drive to serve others. May God grant that in the coming year our continual self-discovery will lead us to contentment, wholeness and peace.

כֵּן יְהִי רָצוֹן

May this be God’s will.