

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5779

Rabbi Amy Cohen, Rabbi Alan Freedman, Cantor Abby Gostein

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Rabbi Cohen: In Alan Morinis' book, entitled *Everyday Holiness*, he explains, "Every one of us is assigned to master something in our lives. You have already been given your assignment and you have already encountered it, though you may not be aware that what faces you is a curriculum, nor that this is the central task of your life." This evening, we gather as a community to take the next steps in our personal curriculum; to support each other in fulfilling the central tasks of life. Again, this year, we come together to seek what God demands of us, that "you shall be holy because Adonai, your God, is holy." This is the central, yet unending, task of life. As Morinis explains, living a holy life is our curriculum, it is our overarching goal in life, and it is a process.

But what does this mean, how do we actualize the search for greater holiness and meaning in our lives? This work, this central sacred task, begins with recognizing what is already holy or sacred in our lives. For if we can realize where we already find a sense of the sacred, what elements of life are already holy to us, then that might be a starting point for bringing more holiness into our lives.

This is not as easy as it might appear. Like so much else during these Yamim Noraim, these days of Awe, finding holiness in our lives requires honest reflection. It also requires us to stop and notice things that we otherwise may take for granted. This is no less true for your clergy than it is for anyone sitting here tonight. Our clergy team each have our own ways of accessing, practicing and identifying holiness in our lives. As we embark together, as a community, on our path towards holiness this High Holiday season, we wanted to take a few minutes to share, where and how in our lives, we find holiness. Our intention in no way is to be “holier than thou”. In fact, it is directly the opposite. For it is our hope that in sharing with you tonight, our own thoughts will be a catalyst to your own; that we might be an aid to you, our community, in identifying those experiences in your lives where you too find holiness. Holiness can be found in the simplest things, from that first sip your morning coffee to the cozy feeling of pulling your covers over your head at night. Ultimately, we are all responsible for identifying our unique paths, our personal curriculum that provides us the tools for creating holiness in our lives. But it is in community where we recognize the humanity of others, and it is in community where we recognize that holiness is all around us.

We find holiness...

Rabbi Freedman: In feeling part of something larger than myself; in understanding that I am but one small link in a much larger chain of eternity. This extends not only to such things as being part of the Jewish people but also more mundane aspects of life, like being an Eagles fan. All the universe existed before me and will exist after me; I have the privilege and responsibility to add what I can while I can to this much greater drama of the universe.

Cantor Gostein: In the awesome feeling of connection with friends, when I get or give just what is needed emotionally in a conversation or when I connect with a friend from long ago whom I have not seen for decades and it's as if no time has passed at all.

Rabbi Cohen: In the waves of the ocean. Feeling the current try to pull me back while I climb up through the sand. Swimming, kayaking and simply being surrounded by water and the beautiful creatures that inhabit it. Listening to loons as I fall asleep at night on a lake in Maine.

Rabbi Freedman: The sharing of every day of my life, and every aspect of my life, with my wife. It is our relationship that is the central truth and source of meaning in my life and her sharing not only in our personal lives but in my rabbinate as the rebitzin of this congregation is the most sacred element of my life.

Cantor Gostein: Seeing my mom's unconditional love for me as she continues to walk with me every morning and do special things to support me in my busy life even when I am not living up to my view of a model daughter.

Rabbi Cohen: Picking up my one-year old daughter, our baby Noa, when she holds her arms open inviting my embrace, watching her smile and giggle when her brother and sister dance and play, rubbing her back as she falls asleep with her head snuggled into my neck.

Rabbi Freedman: Jewish intellectual life. The study of Torah, in the broadest sense of that word, especially when the search is shared with others, is when I most directly encounter the Presence of God.

Cantor Gostein: When the sanctuary is full, as it is tonight, and the whole congregation sounds like a choir, filling the sanctuary with beautiful harmony, causing the meaning of the prayers go beyond their words.

Rabbi Cohen: Rejoicing with new parents, sitting with families in mourning, celebrating lives just beginning and those who left permanent marks on this earth. Counseling couples as they prepare to begin their lives together, all of these moments remind me that God lives within our relationships with one another.

Rabbi Freedman: In my interfaith relationships and I mean this not only in regard to non-Jewish clergy but also to people of faith of all religions, especially those in this congregation who are not Jewish but have chosen to enrich our temple with their presence and support.

Cantor Gostein: In composing music, being amazed at the process of creation and wondering about the origin of what flows through me.

Rabbi Cohen: Connecting with others in groups large and small with a common purpose but composed of individuals from vastly different backgrounds-interfaith gatherings, my second time around partners in parenting mother's group, my early morning and late-night walking partners.

Rabbi Freedman: Ilo. She is our granddaughter and she has brought a new source of love, and a new way to love, into my life. Grandparenting is like nothing else; it is everything that so many of you told us it would be and more.

Cantor Gostein: In my connection to my husband Michael, in how we communicate with and are present for each other and how we complement and balance one another out.

Rabbi Cohen: On my morning drive with the twins, listening to Adi and Lev build the foundation of their twin connection through singing, giggles and *once in a while* yelling at each other. Being present for their big emotions, while using as much compassion as I can find within my soul to help them grow and evolve into confident and kind human beings.

Rabbi Freedman: The sacred trust that you have given to me as your rabbi. You have allowed me the privilege of sharing in your lives and being there at many of life's most significant moments; it is a blessing and responsibility that I treasure in my professional life.

Cantor Gostein: When I see our youth rejoicing in Judaism and taking on Jewish communal responsibilities and leadership roles within and beyond our congregation.

Rabbi Cohen: When I begin each day reminding myself why I became a Rabbi, and when I dream about the ways in which I will continue to create an intentional and meaningful career.

Rabbi Freedman: Being an American. In these past two years of great tumult in our civic lives, I have come to better understand both the fragility and strengths of a democracy as well as my own responsibility as a citizen to preserve and enhance it.

Cantor Gostein: When I'm privileged to hear a eulogy that, as often happens, inspires me towards becoming a better person.

Rabbi Cohen: Teaching and learning with conversion students, B'nai Mitzvah students, our teenagers and life-long learners of all ages. Being present as their eyes light up with insights and new understandings.

Rabbi Freedman: Watching our daughters continue their life journey as adults. One a dedicated teacher, another a future rabbi about to be married to a wonderful woman who is a future cantor, another we get to watch parent along

with her loving husband. There can be nothing more satisfying than watching children who are menchen, and who marry menchen, build a life of menchlikeit together.

Cantor Gostein: Walking behind my grown boys and seeing them in front of me holding hands or with their arms around one another.

Rabbi Cohen: Parenting together with Ian, laughing through our challenges and keeping our extended family, and our friends who have become family, as central to our lives as possible in order to lift us up when life with three young children becomes overwhelming.

Rabbi Freedman: The covenant that I have with my colleagues, particularly with my fellow clergy but also with all the members of our professional staff who each day work to make Temple Beth Shalom a kahal kodesh, a holy community.

Rabbi Freedman: Having now shared our visions of holiness with you, we ask that you do the same with us. During the Yamim Noraim; either in person, by email or on the community Facebook page, we would love to hear about moments of holiness in your lives as well. Rabbi Baruch Levine writes that “The modern distinction between religious and secular is unknown to the Torah. Everything we do has the potential of being holy.” With that reality in mind, let us bring special meaning during these High Holy Days to something that we do in most every service. During the Kedushah, the praising of God’s name, we sing the word “kadosh”, Hebrew for holiness, three times—each time rising on our toes to indicate our desire to rise in holiness each day. As we perform this ritual in the days ahead, let it symbolize our renewed dedication to raising ourselves, and our community, to ever higher and higher levels of holiness in the year ahead. Cain yehe ratzon!