

*The Fluttering of Our Spirits*

Rosh ha Shanna 2014/5775

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All over the world tonight Jews are gathering.

In synagogues and temples and churches; in social halls and classrooms and military-issue tents; across date lines and time zones, Jews gather.

We join together in the here and now, according to a dictate that comes to us from ages past. "In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion."

Tonight we remember and revel in the birth of the world, we remember and revel in the birth of the Jewish community, a community that has always meant each of us is responsible for ourselves as well as for each other.

As we gather tonight, among the many that do, here in the United States we are not - and wonder of wonder; miracle of miracles - preoccupied with our *personal* survival. On this Erev Rosh Ha Shanna we gather and join together in a community of conscience, a community of faith; a community of prayer.

We gather for a million reasons.

Each of us is here for our very own reason.

Why, I wonder, are you here?

Do you know why you are here?

Each of us here can look around (go ahead - look) and see how we are surrounded - by family and friends and strangers. Some we have known for decades. Some we have just met. We are all one community.

I speak to each of you.

We arrive here tonight, most of us, with memories of high holy days past, my memories no more special than yours -

Shopping with my Mom for a new dress

Cooking with my Nana Fannie,

Most especially sitting in services next to my Father, having him gather me in close next to him, under his tallis, to show me the Hebrew in the prayer book; his finger pointing to each word right to left.

Years after I had learned to read English; years after I had learned to read Hebrew without help, my Dad, well into my adulthood, continued to bring me in close to him, and show me how to follow each word of the Hebrew in the *machzor*.

His desire to envelop me, to engage me in the community of Jews, never wavered, never lessened, no matter how old I was, no matter how old he was.

No longer alive, his memory is blessed, and one I hold dear, and as I entered this sanctuary tonight - whenever I enter a sanctuary for High Holy Day services - I still can feel him here, right next to me.

I ask you, as you listen, to think about what brings you here tonight, to *this* community?

During the Passover Seder there are four questions, tonight I ask my own four questions.

Are you here to talk to God? To fulfill this ancient and sacred obligation, to commit yourself to *T'shuva*, turning to God, in repentance, praying for a year when you act as your better self, the one you always should be?

If so, then welcome.

Open yourself to the words in the machzor, the words in the white spaces in the machzor, and search for your clearest path to holiness.

Are you here because - although you really don't believe in God - you simply cannot stay away? Do you feel religiously disconnected or spiritually numb?

Does the prayer book hold nothing more than words for you?

Do you sit here thinking about things outside of this room, outside the realm of prayers? I make no judgment of that, I have done that some years myself.

If so, then welcome. Take this time to listen just enough so you may hear a word or two that you find meaningful.

Are you here so you can call your Mom or your Dad or someone else - and honestly report you went to services?

If so, then welcome. Take home the supplement so you can mail it to them, or just maybe you'll read through it later and find something – something meaningful you did not expect.

Are you here so you can hold someone else's hand?

Help someone else pray?

If so, welcome.

Bring them in close to you, whisper to them when they seem lost; point out where we are on the page - whether left to right or right to left - hold them if they cry.

For each person that is here tonight has a reason - perhaps one I have not mentioned or even guessed; we are all welcome here.

I hope this is the beginning of a good year for you, a year filled with a sense of the mysterious.

Albert Einstein wrote that the most beautiful and deepest experience anyone can have is the sense of the mysterious - which he felt was the underlying principle of not only religion, but of art and science as well.

To sense that behind anything we *can* experience is something our minds *cannot* grasp; whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly, that he wrote, is religiousness.

To wonder at these secrets and to attempt to grasp with our minds a mere image of the holy, that, Einstein wrote, is faith.

Or, as Jay Michaelson wrote a few weeks ago in the Forward – in more contemporary language - Judaism is a religion for those who know they do not know; Judaism is the religion of mystery.

We all know the story of Genesis; or perhaps even more than one story explaining the mystery of how the world we know came into being.

Rabbi Eric Weiss writes that in B'reishit the world's creation is written as "*ruah elohim mirahefet al p'nei ha-mayim*" - usually translated as "a wind from God swept over the face of the water"

But he discovered that *mirahefet* is also translated in the *Torah* as "*fluttering*" so that creation can be envisioned as "a wind from God *fluttered* over the face of the water".

He goes on to say that because we are created in the image of God, each of us has our own deep and internal *mirahefet*; our own spiritual fluttering.

It is this fluttering, this ongoing, never-ending search for spiritual understanding that can make tonight a valuable time for each of us, no matter what brought us here.

When I think of *fluttering* I visualize a butterfly, its wings moving, searching for a place to land, the *right* place to land. No matter the color, the size, the wing span, it searches on and on until it finds the exact place it experiences as the *right* place.

The Jewish community is like that; each member made of flesh and blood, of hearts and minds and souls. Each of us experiencing our own fluttering, looking for the *right* place to land, the *right* community, the *right* congregation. As we gather here tonight I hope this is the *right* place for you to be and the *right* place for you to belong.

This is not an online community where in a brief flash of a click, with the speed of your connection to the web, you are miraculously transformed into a member of the tribe. No matter what brought you here tonight you have joined the community of Jews beginning the year 5775 in this Bet Mishpachah, a house of the family.

Almost 40 years ago a *mirahefet* came over those who founded this congregation. This fluttering, this search for a spiritual home led our founding members to create something new – a congregation that allows us to search for the Divine while bringing our authentic selves to the search.

We may not be a high-status congregation and we are certainly not a drop-off-the-kids congregation. What we are is a family of seekers. Some of us who seek the spirit and others of us seek community. Together we build something we could not find alone, could not create alone. Perhaps your own *mirahefet* led you here to join us on this eve of a New Year.

Among the four questions I asked tonight I did not include my reason for being here with Bet Mishpachah.

For years my Judaism was not one of faith, not one of belief, but a deliberately chosen political action. For me, for most of my life, politics trumped all. It was important for me to make peace with the Jewish community as I wandered without faith because others would see me as Jewish and I needed to claim membership in the community for myself instead of letting others label me as *other*.

And for much of my life gay politics trumped all. It was important for me to join and support Bet Mishpachah because in other congregations I would be seen as "that Lesbian" and I needed to claim my Jewish Lesbian self for myself instead of letting others label me as something *other*.

Tonight I am here to pray, to re-discover again the fluttering in my own heart. I stand here knowing that every day challenges me to be *more* present, kinder; more conscious of my fluttering spirit. If I have not one more day on this plane of existence I will have behaved in a way that would have made me pleased with myself; would have made others happy to know me.

I am here tonight to experience a community of others that share my search for the right place to be, like that butterfly searching for the right place to land.

Over the years I have searched for some easy explanation about how Judaism allows us a more personal relationship with the Divine. We do not need an ordained priest to serve as an intermediary between God and people.

Now I realize my Dad had it right all those years ago. Judaism is not a religion; it is a way of life. Every moment of the day; every act we take, can help us reply to the fluttering of our hearts; the fluttering in my heart.

Most of us know – at some level of consciousness – that we have a limited time to live on this plane of existence. We may not know exactly how long we have, but as this New Year approaches we know there are

people in the world whose lives are at risk. Bombs are falling. Uncertainty is palpable. We tend to forget that uncertainty.

I am luckier than many of you in that regard. I have been diagnosed with an incurable illness.

It allows me to live knowing – really knowing – that my time is limited. Not exactly how long I have, but that it will be more limited in time than most.

This challenges me to pay attention; to experience each minute more vibrantly, to not only find and listen to the fluttering of my soul but to behave in a way that responds to its search for meaning. So I am here tonight, speaking to you of God and faith and prayer and High Holy Days.

My Father's Judaism is not my Judaism.

The Judaism I grew up in is not the Judaism I now know.

Judaism changes and evolves. It is, at its core, a living entity.

Your reason for being here tonight may not be the same as why you attended last year. (It probably shouldn't be the same as it was last year.)

We gather tonight to pray for redemption, forgiveness and a good year ahead.

The Talmud says that on Rosh Ha Shanna God sees us as we were born to be. From that very first breath, that first moment of fluttering, we grow into the people we are.

What a blessing this annual opportunity is - to re-create ourselves and our relationship with God. To land here amongst the fluttering souls.

As Jews gather, here and all around this world created by a God beyond time and space - we pray. We pray together, in community, as Jews always have, as *mishpachah* as family.

We pray for a sweet year, good year, a *Shanna Tova*.