

**ROSH HASHANA SERMON
BACK TO BASICS
SEPTEMBER 19-20, 2009
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What is it that brings us to the Synagogue this Rosh Hashana? There are probably many varied reasons that all of us are here this day. Something pulls us to be with our community at the beginning of the New Year. I don't want to analyze why each of you is here today, but I would like you to think for a moment what this day may mean to you and how, if at all, it will change you.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of England, wrote a book entitled "*A Letter in the Scroll*." In it he writes that "there are two ways in which individuals coalesce into a group with its own distinctive identity. The first, is the way of history. Individuals feel bound to one another because they share the same ancestry, the same ethnic origins, the same sense of a shared past. When they look back they find moments of collective memory. They are what they are because of where they came from and what has happened to them."

This is one of the reasons we are here. We share a common past. For all of us, this is the beginning of the year 5770 according to the calendar which enumerates our Jewish years. Our common history, culture, ethnicity and shared language bring us together as one community. Sacks suggests that we are a community of fate, an "Am", a people.

There is another way that we coalesce as a group, as well. Sacks suggests it is based on the future. "Individuals can be bound together as a group not just because of where they came from, but where they are going to; not just because of what happened to them, but because of what they are called on to achieve. They share ideals, a common vision. They participate in a collective life with a distinctive set of rules, values and virtues. They are linked not by history, but by destiny." The Bible calls it an "Edah", a word that political scientist Daniel Elazar translates as: "The assembly of all the people constituted as a body politic."

I think we have come here this Rosh Hashana Day for these two purposes. Something attracts us to the Synagogue based upon our common history, our shared past and a need to recognize the beginning of the New Year. But it is much more important that we be concerned with the second aspect of community. Do we have a shared vision, is there a common agenda? Are we a community with a distinctive set of rules, values and virtues? It is upon this shared destiny that I wish to concentrate this morning recognizing that while we may come to the Synagogue today with different personal agendas, it is critical that we are part of a common communal vision.

This has been a very challenging year for all of us. For some, it has been the most challenging year that we can remember. For a long time in this country we thought that we could ride the crest of the wave and all of our wishes, hopes and dreams would come

true. This past year many of those wishes, hopes and dreams came crashing down around us. For some, the challenge is based upon ill health, unexpected illness and debilitating physical or mental prowess. For others, there are holes in our lives which someone used to fill as a parent, a spouse, a child, an extended member of the family or a close friend. For still others, the expectations of economic independence have been rattled, if not destroyed. We have all felt the decline of our economic fortunes. For some, going back into the job market was a necessity; for others, learning to live with less became a reality. Some of us have learned to cope with lowered expectations and others continue to be concerned about both the immediate and long range future.

Yes, all of us have felt a little more vulnerable this year. Yes, economists can predict whether we are at the low part of the recession or whether we are only part of the way down, but it does not make us feel any more secure. If it happened once, it can most assuredly happen again. Yes, the Synagogue is touched by the decline of our economic well-being. But, I believe, it can serve as an anchor in our lives, for the eternal values that it represents are never subject to emerging markets, real estate downturns and plunging business profits.

How can the Synagogue help in this challenging time? I would like to suggest this morning that the Synagogue can be a tower of support for all of us. I would like to return to the basics and suggest that we need to see our Synagogue as a sacred community, a holy space, a community which cares about one another and which, ultimately, can bring healing to us, our families and our community.

In a new book entitled *“Reset: How This Crisis Can Restore Values in a New America,”* Kurt Andersen, a columnist for *Time Magazine* and *The New Yorker*, looks at our society and examines its problems. He writes that: “Waiting a while to get everything you want is the definition of maturity. Demanding satisfaction right this instant, on the other hand, is a defining behavior of seven year olds. The most powerful appeal of the Web is not the “community” it enables, but its instant gratification: “For better or worse, you can send a message ‘now’, get any question answered ‘now’, pick your airline seat ‘now’ and buy anything you want right ‘now.’ Cell phones and the Internet, together with Fed Ex and UPS, satisfy the permanent child within us, the impulsive child with zero tolerance for waiting. And, as a result, during the last quarter century, delayed gratification of self came to seem quaint and unnecessary.”

We want instantaneous and immediate answers to all of our problems. Judaism, represented by the Synagogue, represents the long view of things, the need for enduring values, the concept of a greater good, the concern for community welfare rather than personal satisfaction.

Jonathan Sacks reminds us: “Because we can change ourselves, together we can change the world. That means a massive effort of togetherness. It is the work not of individuals, but of families and communities throughout the world and of many generations. Much of Judaism is about creating those structures of togetherness in a way that honors individuality and yet, brings us together to create the themes that exist only

by virtue of being shared. Judaism is the ambitious attempt to build a society out of covenantal relationships, associations of free individuals, each respecting the integrity of the other, bound only by words, moral commitments, given, received and honored in trust.”

The most striking prayer of the High Holy Day liturgy is the *U’Natane Tokef*, recited on both Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur outlining for us in stark reality the matters of the day. It reminds us that so much is out of our control including life, death and the journey in between. It can leave us fatalistic and despondent. Yet, the author of the prayer reminds us that there is a significant amount of choice that we do have. As he concludes the prayer he writes:

“Repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severity of the decree.”

The author, basing himself on the Midrash in Genesis Rabbah, suggests a lesson applicable not only to the High Holy Days. It reminds me of the famous phrase in Pirkei Avot taught to us by Shimon Ha-Tzaddik:

“The world rests on three things: on Torah, on service of G-d, on deeds of lovingkindness.” I would like to suggest this morning that the way to meet the current challenges in our lives of whatever category they may be, is to concentrate on these two phrases, which I believe, have a great deal to do with one another.

Teshuva, repentance, reminds us that we can always do better, that circumstances are not necessarily out of our control and that we must uphold a value system which is exemplary in all walks of life. This can be defined as living a life of Torah. Torah for us is not merely a book we put on a shelf, nor merely a scroll to be taken out of the Ark, but is a way of life and living, a standard by which we set our internal clocks and a code of behavior which enables us to reach for the highest ideals of our faith and our people.

This has been a difficult year for us and all I need to do is mention Bernard Madoff, Agriprocessors and Deal, New Jersey. Individuals who were thought to be pious, upholding religious ideals not only let themselves and their families down, but let all of us down as well. In Chapter 19 of the Book of Leviticus we are told:

“You are to be Holy for I the Lord your G-d am Holy.”

In living a life of correct behavior we are witnesses to G-d’s unity here on earth. In displaying unacceptable behavior we desecrate G-d’s name and, in fact, shame the name of the Jewish people as well. A life of Torah is lived in an appropriate fashion with the highest of values present in our everyday lives. The concept of Teshuva reminds us that we can always do better, we can uphold a high standard of behavior. The good name of G-d and the Jewish people are dependent upon it.

It is the role of the Synagogue to embody those values and it is the task of the members of this sacred community to recognize the essential nature of appropriate behavior within the Congregation's walls and in the community as well.

Kurt Andersen points out that the current crisis gives us an opportunity to recognize what is truly valuable. He reminds us that money does not immediately create happiness. In fact, studies of lottery winners have very often shown us the opposite has taken place. He has found that many people in these tough economic times have switched careers, leaving jobs that earned them good salaries in order to pursue their abiding passions. He tells us that in Tacoma, after Ron Amegatcher's construction management firm went belly-up last summer, he decided that what he really loves to do is cook and make things out of wood. He now spends half his time preparing meals for residents of an old people's home and half his time producing one-of-a kind furniture pieces he crafts of scrap wood and sells in galleries. Since losing her investment bank job, Christine Marchuska has become a fashion designer, making and selling stylish ecoconscious women's clothes.

Teshuva, Torah values, remind us that we do have many choices in our lives and living by the high standard of our tradition we can, indeed, create a life worth living as we build a society of noble vision.

The second pillar, according to Shimon Ha-Tzaddik, is the service of G-d, by which is meant prayer. The author of U'Natane Tokef agrees that this is the second pillar for creating a better life. Prayer allows us to recognize our true place on earth; it teaches us humility and serves as an ego-deflating activity. Each day, not only on the High Holidays, we offer the words: "Master of the Worlds, not upon our merit do we rely in our supplication, but upon Your limitless love. What are we? What is our life? What is our piety? What is our Righteousness? Where is our attainment, our power, our might? What can we say, Lord our G-d and G-d of our ancestors, compared to You, all the mighty are nothing, the famous non-existent, the wise lack wisdom, the clever lack reason."

Yet, the prayer goes on to remind us that we are partners to G-d's covenant, descendants of the Patriarchs, and inheritors of the tradition of Israel. Reminding us of our place on this earth is important. Sometimes we live lives thinking that we are more powerful than G-d, refusing to acknowledge that not everything is in our hands. A little bit of humility goes a long way to making us better people and more respectful of others on the face of this earth.

The third pillar in each triad is righteousness or deeds of lovingkindness, reaching out to another and making sure that they are cared for. In Midrash Tehillim we are told: "In the future world everyone will be asked: 'What was your occupation?' If they reply, 'I fed the hungry,' then angels will say, 'This is the gate of the Eternal, they who feed the hungry, let them enter.' So, with giving drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, with those who look after orphans, and with those generally who do deeds of lovingkindness,

all these are at the gates of the Eternal and those who do such deeds shall enter within them.”

According to the Midrash we will be rewarded in the world to come, but we are also rewarded in this world. By helping others, we create a stable and better society. By reaching out to those in need we create a world which is stronger for our deeds and softer for our compassion.

So how does the Synagogue help in this grand venture? We teach Torah, we hold daily prayers services 365 days a year, and we allow opportunities for deeds of righteousness and of lovingkindness. I encourage you to partake of all three pillars. Take a class, attend daily minyan, help us serve others. Become involved in your own synagogue community. I urge you to recognize that having a mainstay in your life to withstand the strong winds that buffet us is critical when all is changing around you. There is no more important thing in our lives than a strong social community.

In 1979, a study was undertaken of Roseto, an Italian-American community in North Hampton County, eastern-central Pennsylvania by John Bruhn and Stuart Wolf. They found striking evidence of a correlation between health, especially cardiovascular and mental health, and the character of human relationships in the community. Roseto enjoyed a remarkably low death rate from heart attacks and a low incidence of mental illness, especial senile dementia. They looked into the factors that might have created this anomaly. They were able to rule out ethnic and genetic factors, as well as other conventional factors as well. However, they suggested: “One striking feature did set Roseto apart from its neighbors, mainly its culture, which reflected tenaciously held old-world values and customs. They found that family relationships were extremely close and mutually supportive. This cohesive quality extended to neighbors and to the community as a whole. The elderly are cherished and respected and they maintain their authority throughout life. There is an enthusiastic and an optimistic attitude toward life.”

The book, based upon the study, proposes the theory that the way of life in Roseto, its social pattern, may have contributed substantially to the healthy state of the community. Significantly, they conclude, as its traditional values were gradually abandoned by the next generation, the death rate from heart attacks in Roseto appeared to be climbing toward the American norm.

Now, I cannot promise you a longer and more healthy life. But I can promise you a more meaningful one, one attached to eternal values creating a significant purpose in life for all of us. I encourage you to be part of our community. I urge you to use the time of crisis and challenge to re-evaluate your life and to concentrate on what is really important rather than what is fleeting and transitory. I suggest to all of us that we keep in mind that the Chinese word for crisis “weichi” also means opportunity. Each challenge offers us the possibility for growth, each crisis affords us the opportunity to better ourselves and our community. Each difficult moment can be seen as a time to test our inner strength and our faith.

It is for that reason I believe that the author of U'Natane Tokef tells us: "Repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severity of the decree." We cannot control everything, but we can control how we meet each crisis, each challenge and each difficult moment.

There is a story told that in a mountain village in Europe many centuries ago, there was a nobleman who wondered what legacy he might be able to leave for his townspeople. At last, he decided to build a synagogue. No one saw the plans for the building until it was finished. When the people came for the first time they marveled at its beauty and completeness. Then someone asked, "Where are the lamps? How will it be lighted?" The nobleman pointed to brackets that were all throughout the Synagogue on the walls. Then he gave each family a lamp which they were to bring with them each time they came to the Synagogue. "Each time you are not here," he said, "that part of the Synagogue will be unlit. This is to remind you that whenever you fail to come here, especially when the community needs you, some part of G-d's house will be dark."

Let us, this year, lighten up G-d's house, this Synagogue. Let it serve as a beacon of light for us and our entire community. Let us use the present challenges to contemplate upon what is really important in our lives and how we can be better people. Let us all uphold the eternal values of our people and create a better life for ourselves and our families. Let us create a holy and sacred community which will serve as an anchor for whatever may come our way.