



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart”* 5771

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Enter the Heart”

Rosh Hashana 5771 > Facing God

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ROSH HASHANA 2010

Facing God

ABSTRACT

A two-part introduction to Rosh Hashana about facing God on this awesome day.

PART I: The Lion's Den

A Baal Shem Tov story tells about the fox who was to intercede with the lion, the king of the jungle, on behalf of the other animals. But when he arrived at the lion's den, he forgot what he was going to say, leaving them to intercede on their own behalf.

This story is a metaphor for the best efforts of the rabbis and the cantors. Their job is only to get us to the “lion's den” so to speak – to inspire and uplift us so that we have the courage to face the King of Kings. Their job is only to get us to leave our own self-contained domains and embark on a journey toward something far deeper and real.

Each one of us has a unique and distinct voice – the voice of the soul. We are gathered here on this awesome day to use that voice to speak to God directly. Each one of us – with our own words, with our own soul.

PART II: Judgment Day or Audit Day?

Rosh Hashana is called a day of judgment. But does God really don the black robes of the judge and seek to condemn us?

God created a universe of mortal, imperfect human beings. Does He now demand to know why we are not perfect? Clearly that can't be. In judging us God does not look for perfection. He doesn't ask, “Why weren't you perfect?” He asks us only, “Why weren't you as much as you could have been?”

Indeed, we should not call Rosh Hashana “judgment day,” but “audit day,” for we are partners with God in making the world a better place, and on this day God examines how we managed His investment in us. Previously, He said to us, “I will be the Investor, but you will stand behind the counter.” Today, He looks over the books.

What will we tell him?

PART I: THE LION'S DEN

1. The Rabbi, the Cantor, and the *Shul* President

On Rosh Hashana night, the Cossacks captured the rabbi, the cantor and the president of the synagogue, and granted them a final wish before they would be put to death.

The rabbi said: "All year round I prepare for my sermon for the High Holidays. You can't kill me before you let me present this sermon and get it out of my system."

"Granted," proclaimed the leader of the Cossacks. "We will allow you to give the sermon."

The cantor said, "For 364 days a year, I prepare for my cantorial presentation for the High Holidays. For this year I composed many new brilliant and extraordinary melodies. You have to let me sing before you kill me."

"Granted," proclaimed the leader of the Cossacks, turning to the president. "And what is your final wish?"

"Kill me first," he said.

2. Sermons and Melodies

It's been a longstanding tradition among Jewish communities the world over, to employ cantors for the High Holidays. Often accompanied by choirs, these cantors seek to inspire and uplift the multitudes flocking to synagogues during Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

In many a congregation, the cantors embody the primary focus of the High Holiday experience. As in a concert or opera, their choice of melodies and their cantorial skills constitute the zenith of the services. And if the musical presentation is coupled with a rabbi who knows how to tell a good joke or bring a tear to the eye, it is a hands-down success story.

So here we are...

I should be the last one to comment on this long-standing tradition, since I, too, am employed for the High Holidays by this lovely community. Says the Talmud, "Spit not in the well from which you drink." And yet a moving thought on the subject of rabbis and cantors from the great Hassidic Master, the Baal Shem Tov, may be worthwhile for all of us to reflect upon.

3. An Angry Lion

The Baal Shem Tov, one of the most profound thinkers in the history of Jewish spirituality, once told the following allegorical story:

Once upon a time the lion grew furious with all of the other animals. Since the lion is "the king of the jungle," and is most powerful and dominant, his ire evoked deep fear in the hearts of his subjects.

"What should we do?" murmured all the animals at an emergency meeting. "If the lion lets loose his anger, we are all finished."

"Have no worries," came the voice of the fox, known as the smartest of the animals. "In my memory banks are stored 300 stories, anecdotes and vignettes. When I present them to the lion, his mood will be transformed."

The animals were overjoyed. And they embarked on a march toward the lion's den to watch the fox placate him, and restore the friendly relationship between the lion and his subjects.

They set off.

As they were wending their way through the jungle, the fox suddenly turned to one of his animal friends and said, "You know, I fear I just forgot 100 of my entertaining stories."

Rumors of the fox's lapse of memory spread immediately. Many animals were overtaken by profound trepidation, but soon came the calming voice of the bear.

“Have no worries,” he said. “Two hundred vignettes of a brilliant fox are more than enough to get that arrogant lion rolling in laughter.”

A little while later, as the extraordinarily large entourage of animals was nearing the lion’s den, the fox suddenly turned to another colleague. “I can’t believe it. I just forgot another 100 of my anecdotes. They simply slipped my mind.”

The animals became more fearful, but then came the reassuring voice of the deer.

“Have no worries,” she said. “One hundred fox stories will suffice to capture the imagination of our king.”

A few moments later, they were all at the lion’s den. The animals were trembling as he emerged, rose to his full might and glory, and cast a fierce gaze upon them.

5. The Moment of Encounter

As the moment of truth arrived, all of the animals looked up with beseeching eyes to their bright representative. Now was the time for the fox to approach the lion and accomplish the great mission of reconciliation.

At that very moment, the fox turned to the animals and said, “I am sorry, but I forgot my last 100 stories. I have nothing to say to the king.”

The animals went into hysteria. “You are a vicious liar,” they cried. “You deceived us completely. What are we to do now?”

“My job,” responded the fox calmly, “was to persuade you to take the journey from your own homes to the lion’s den. I have accomplished my mission. You are here. Now, let each and every single one of you discover your own voice and rehabilitate your own personal relationship with the king.”

This story, concluded the Baal Shem Tov, illustrates a common problem in institutionalized religion. We come to synagogue on the High Holi-

days and we rely on the cantors and the rabbis to serve as our representatives to the King of Kings. Like the animals who depended on the fox, we depend on them to get the job done for us.

Yet, that is not what they are here for. Their job is only to get us to the “lion’s den” so to speak – to inspire and uplift us so that we have the courage to face the King of Kings. Their job is only to get us to leave our own self-contained domains and embark on a journey toward something far deeper and real.

Each one of us has a unique and distinct voice – the voice of the soul. We are here to use that voice to speak to God directly. Each one of us – with our own words, with our own soul.¹

PART II: JUDGMENT DAY OR AUDIT DAY?

7. A Kabbalistic Insight

As we sit here today a very special thing is happening in the universe. According to Kabbalah, when the sun goes down on Erev Rosh Hashana, the universe goes into a comatose state. A slumber descends on all existence ... everything comes to a standstill in a cosmic silence ... in apprehension of its contract being renewed.

Then as Rosh Hashana begins, the awakening starts ... slowly, slowly ... until the wake-up call the next morning, when the ram’s horn – the shofar – is sounded.

The shofar is like an “alarm clock” that wakes up the universe and us from this cosmic sleep. We needed this sleep to wake up refreshed – to be renewed.

¹ Rabbi Simon Jacobson extends his thanks to his brother, Rabbi YY Jacobson, for this rendition. See www.theyeshiva.net

The Kabbalah says that this process can be compared to exhaling in order to inhale. And this is, in fact, exactly what happens on Rosh Hashana. As the year ends, there is a cosmic exhaling and then a cosmic inhaling of fresh air.

So as Rosh Hashana begins, let's all take a deep breath!

Shana Tova!

Now that we have arrived and are refreshed, we can speak a bit about the meaning of this awesome holiday.

8. Head of the Year

As most know, the simple, literal meaning of Rosh Hashana is "head of the year" – this is an appropriate name, for this day begins the Jewish New Year. However, this simple meaning belies the deeper, more profound content of this great holiday.

- Rosh Hashana is a holiday when we celebrate the birthday of the world – the day that humanity came into existence. We set out lavish feasts, dipping apples in honey, for a sweet new year.
- Rosh Hashana is a holiday when the earth trembles as the shofar (ram's horn) is blown and its heart-rending sounds vibrate through us. It reminds us that this is the day when God sits in judgment of us.
- Rosh Hashana is a holiday when we ask God to remember us for life and to inscribe us in the Book of Life.

Rosh Hashana is a holiday when – regardless of background or affiliation – Jewish people feel compelled to attend a synagogue, any synagogue, in order to fulfill some obligation, even though they are not even sure what it might be. And yet when they get there, many inevitably get lost. There are hundreds of pages of prayers, which are moving at a brisk pace. A great many of those prayers are in Hebrew, a language that many don't understand at all, and others not well enough to truly connect to the meaning of the words. Of course, there are English translations, but these – in trying to be faithful to the Hebrew – often use

stilted, archaic language which hardly expresses the desires of anyone's heart.

If you feel like this today, the key is not be intimidated. It's definitely good to follow along with the cantor and to pray with the group. But even when you are able to do that, you'll find that there are times when the cantor falls silent, and you are on your own before God. Ultimately, this is what counts.

9. God as Judge

Today is the day when God judges you and only you can know how to answer Him.

Lest that idea makes you so uncomfortable you want to flee the synagogue right now, let me tell you a story:

A rabbi in the Old Country once sent his students to observe a local innkeeper as part of their preparation for Rosh Hashana. The students dutifully checked into the inn, but on the first day of their observation witnessed nothing remarkable. They went to sleep, only to be awakened at midnight by someone praying loudly.

They tip-toed out of their rooms to find the innkeeper fervently reciting Psalms. When he finished, he opened up a cabinet and removed two big ledgers.

From one ledger he proceeded to read all his sins of the past year. He confessed that he was insensitive to his wife, that he didn't fulfill all his obligations to his community; that he didn't study enough Torah, and so forth.

Then he opened the second ledger, saying to God: "These are my failings. Now here's what You didn't do ... I had asked for a better living wage, and You didn't give it to me. My wife is ill. My children need shoes..."

In the end, he concluded, "Look! I didn't live up to my obligations, and

You didn't live up to Yours. So let's call it even. I'll close my book. You close Your book, and we'll start a new year again with a clean slate."

10. A Partnership

What the rabbi in the Old Country wanted to teach his students is that the relationship between us and God is a partnership. When God created us human beings in His image, He invested something divine in us. There is a partnership between us and God to make the world a better place.

It is as if He founded a business and said to us, "I am the Investor, but you stand behind the counter."

Partners are accountable to each other. And Rosh Hashana is audit day. God checks the books to see how we took care of His investment in us.

Many people mistakenly believe that we should be frightened of this kind of examination, that we should be trembling before God. If we sinned – and who hasn't? – God's wrath and punishment are imminent.

But that kind of thinking is a religious distortion. It is a perpetuation of the negative stereotype that God is "angry" or "vengeful" or "filled with rage," and determined to "get even with us."

11. Day of Judgment

Yes, Rosh Hashana is a day of judgment, but not the kind of judgment we imagine. It is the ultimate insult – and nothing more than an anthropomorphic projection imposed by human beings upon God – to think that God judges us the way we judge each other.

Instead of imposing our ideas of judgment upon God, we should be seeking to discover *how* God judges us.

God created a universe of mortal, imperfect human beings. Does He now demand to know why we are not perfect? Clearly that can't be.

In judging us God does not look for perfection. He doesn't ask, "Why weren't you perfect?" He asks us only, "Why weren't you as much as you could have been?"

On this day God gives us the opportunity to face Him and report on our progress in fulfilling the divine mission we were charged with. And we are given the power to renew our partnership contract with Him.

Even if we feel uncomfortable with how little we have accomplished, there is nothing to fear. God's judgment is filled with wisdom and mercy. And it is really a great gift. It implies God's confidence in us that we can live up to our greatest potential.

This is what we should keep in focus on Rosh Hashana as we open our hearts to God as we pray:

"Remember us for life, King Who desires life. Inscribe us in a Book of Life ..."

When we recite these words, in our hearts we can also add:

"Please remember me, and when You do, please remind me of my mission on earth, so that I may never forget it."