



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5771*

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*Enter the Heart”*

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The Jewish State of the Union Address  
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The Jewish State of the Union Address

## ABSTRACT

As we enter the Jewish New Year, perhaps the greatest question we need to ask ourselves is: Does Rosh Hashana – and indeed, Judaism itself – have anything to tell us about our unstable economy, our fears, our distrust in leaders, global unrest and all the other issues plaguing us today?

A deep void exists in the world today. To borrow a phrase: A specter is haunting America and the Western world. A combination of an economic meltdown, political instability, the growth of Islam – and its impact on Europe and the United States – all that and more, are contributing to profound unrest and uncertainty in our country.

No wonder that close to a half million people recently gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to demand restoration of America’s values? Whether you agree or disagree with the Tea Party, Glenn Beck and the Conservative Movement, the fact is clear – the entire country is in the grips of a serious transition.

What does Judaism have to say about all of this? Most people see Judaism as nothing more than a parochial religion – isolated and exclusionary. Nothing can be farther from the truth. Judaism offers a global vision to the world – to people of all races, creeds and religions. Yet, sadly the Torah perspective is not, in any way, part of this current discourse.

It is time to change that, and today, Rosh Hashana, is the best moment to begin. Today, when the universe and the human race were born, let us take a look at what Judaism has given the world and how we can apply its message to address our current challenges. Today when the “destiny of nations is determined” (as we recite in the Rosh Hashana prayers), let us attempt to deliver the “Jewish” universal version of the State of the Union and the State of the World.

Grounded in sources and peppered with anecdotes, this sermon presents 11 core Torah principles, which can help heal our wounded world.

## 1. Stereotyping Judaism

As we enter the New Jewish Year, perhaps the greatest question we need to ask ourselves is: Does Rosh Hashana – and indeed, Judaism itself – have anything to tell us about our unstable economy, our fears, our distrust in leaders, global unrest and all the other issues plaguing us today?

For that matter: Does Rosh Hashana and Judaism have anything to tell us about our lives in general? Does it have a relevant message that addresses each of our individual challenges and struggles?

Let's be honest and bluntly express one of the most common perceptions about Judaism and religion today: Judaism may have many beautiful messages and inspiring insights. But frankly, is it really relevant – and indispensable – to our contemporary lives?

How many here think of Torah as a “tradition” – one of which we are all very fond – but which harkens back to another time and place and has little to do with our modern lives, and little to say to the world at large?

You know the one about two fellows who get lost flying in a hot air balloon. Down below they suddenly see a group playing golf. The two lost passengers yell down: “Where are we?” One yells back at them: “You’re in a hot air balloon.” Before they know it, a gust of wind abruptly whisks their balloon away, and they remain as lost as they were with no direction to follow. They look at each other with a bewildered expression. “What was that?” one asked the other. “I have no clue, but one thing is for sure: the guy below who responded to our call was surely a Rabbi.” “How do you know that?” “Simple. Because what he said was true, but irrelevant” ...

One profound stereotype and distortion about Judaism is that it is a parochial religion – filled with its own particular rituals, customs and traditions – insular and exclusionary, addressing only Jews, some of whom prefer to hide behind self-made ghetto walls. Yes, we may have some common denominators with other beliefs, but by definition Ju-

daism is Judaism not Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism or any other religion.

Nothing can be farther from the truth. Judaism, above all, offers a global vision to the world – to people of all races, creeds and religions. And Torah is a universal blueprint for life. Indeed, one could even argue that Judaism is not a religion at all; it is a way of life for all citizens of this planet.

Today, on Rosh Hashana, when the universe and the human race were born, let us challenge the stereotypes and take a look at what Judaism has given the world and how we can apply its message to help heal our wounded world. Today, when the “destiny of nations is determined” (as we recite in the Rosh Hashana prayers), let us attempt to deliver the “Jewish” universal version of the State of the Union and the State of the World.

## 2. Global Vision

From its very inception, Judaism was about a global vision of peace, justice and social responsibility, of a whole world living as one, under One God. Judaism was also anything but conformist. It was a revolutionary movement defying the status quo of self-interest and narcissism. During his lifetime, our forefather, Abraham – the pioneering founder of monotheism – sat in an open tent in the heat of the day to welcome strangers and tell them about that vision. During his lifetime, Moses – the founder of the Nation of Israel – refined that vision according to the precepts of the Torah. During his lifetime, the Prophet Isaiah, and the Prophet Ezekiel, and the Prophet Zachariah and many other prophets (some of whom we read during this holiday season) sounded the clarion of Torah’s universal message for all human kind.

While it is true that at times we all – and especially children in their formative years – need spiritual insulation to reinforce a strong value system that can withstand fluctuating social norms ... And while it is true that Judaism emphasizes the importance of building a home and a personal life of integrity, which should never be compromised by involvement in global projects (save the whales, but don’t forget to save

your children, right?) ... While all that is true, *at the same time*, the Torah's message is distinctly *global*, not just local, not just reserved for the Jews.

It is a vision that has transformed the world when it first made its appearance more than five millennia ago, and it is meant to transform the entire universe. So the Torah certainly has what to say about the current state of things – about the teetering economy, about the political unrest, about the uncertainty that grips the world.

How many of us appreciate that?

For many, Judaism today is still a throwback to the old world shtetl. It may even feel good to connect to the nostalgia of our innocent past. (Nostalgia is not what it used to be, they say). But for all its beauty and warmth, that old Jewish message does not seem to have much to say to our *moderne velt*, our modern world and its fashions and concerns. Let alone a message that is relevant to the “big issues” like government, finance, leadership, global turbulence.

*You may have heard this one:*

*The year is 2016 and the United States has just elected the first woman as well as the first Jewish president, Susan Goldfarb. She calls up her mother a few weeks after election day and says, 'So, Mom, I assume you will be coming to my inauguration?'*

*'I don't think so. It's a ten hour drive, your father isn't as young as he used to be, and my arthritis is acting up again.'*

*'Don't worry about it Mom, I'll send Air Force One to pick you up and take you home. And a limousine will pick you up at your door.'*

*'I don't know. Everybody will be so fancy-schmantzy, what on earth would I wear?'*

*Oh Mom, replies Susan, 'I'll make sure you have a wonderful gown custom-made by the best designer in New York.'*

*'Honey,' Mom complains, 'you know I can't eat those rich foods you and your friends like to eat.'*

*The President-to-be responds, 'Don't worry Mom. The entire affair is going to be handled by the best caterer in New York, kosher all the way. Mom, I really want you to come.'*

*So Mom reluctantly agrees and on January 20, 2017, Susan Goldfarb is being sworn in as President of the United States. In the front row sits the new president's mother, who leans over to a senator sitting next to her.*

*'You see that woman over there with her hand on the Torah, becoming President of the United States*

*The Senator whispers back, 'Yes I do.'*

*Mom says proudly, 'Her brother is a doctor.'*

### 3. The Torah's Impact on Civilization

Today, on Rosh Hashana when we begin a new year, let us take a look at what the Torah has given the world and how we can apply its message to help heal all the wounds of the Planet Earth.

When the Torah made its appearance on the world stage, circa 3300 BCE, law codes did exist (for example the Code of Hammurabi) but they were strictly concerned with the orderly function of society and the protection of the wealthy upper classes. "Might makes right" was the motto of every great civilization - the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman.

Reverence for life? Are you kidding? Kill or be killed. Conquer, seize and pillage.

Save the children? Forget it. Unwanted children were dumped alive to die slowly on a trash heap and scores of such mass baby graves have been found by archeologists.

Charity to the poor? Unheard of. Free education of the masses? Unheard of.

Noble ideas of the Golden Age of Greece? Here is Aristotle writing on handicapped children: "There must be a law that no imperfect or maimed child shall be brought up, and to avoid an excess of population, some children must be exposed, [that means 'discarded on the dump'] for a limit must be fixed to the population of the state."<sup>1</sup>

Pax Romana? It's a break the Romans took to catch their breath because they conquered it all. Incidentally, *tens of thousands* of people died during that peaceful age, savaged by wild animals or massacred by others in the amphitheaters of which the Roman Coliseum is but one example. Talk about blood thirst! Talk about brutality!

And then consider what the Torah says: "Love your neighbor as yourself ... love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt ... protect the widow and the orphan ... render equal justice to the rich and the poor ... set slaves free every seven years ..."

Just *one* chapter – chapter 19 of the Book of Leviticus – has more groundbreaking laws for kindness and love between people than anything heard of before. And that's just *one* chapter of the Torah.

Do you have any idea how wild that was? Revolutionary, folks. Absolutely revolutionary!

To live by the Torah, the Jews had to know how to read it. And thus they – men, women and children – had a literacy rate of nearly 100 percent,<sup>2</sup> when the world literacy rate was less than 1 percent!

Jews established charitable organizations – because *tzedakah* means justice. Even a beggar had to contribute. They established free loan societies. They helped those down and out get on their feet again. They set up hospitals and cared for the sick, often free of charge, whether they were Jews or not.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* VII.16.

<sup>2</sup> *World Perfect: The Jewish Impact on Civilization* by Ken Spiro.

Now, I am a rabbi and so maybe you suspect me of being partial to Judaism and coloring the truth a bit.

So let me refer you to just three of many books, all written by non-Jews, that set forth these facts: *Gifts of the Jews* by Thomas Cahill, *The Jewish Mystique* by Ernest Van den Haag, and *The History of the Jews* by Paul Johnson.

Paul Johnson, by-the-way, an eminent historian and a Christian, set out to write a definitive history of Christianity, when he realized he could not do so without writing about Judaism. The result is the admittedly dry *History of the Jews* in which he concludes:

“Certainly the world without the Jews would have been a radically different place ... To them [that is, to their Torah] we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and dignity of human person; of the individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind ... It is almost beyond our capacity to imagine how the world would have fared if they [the Jews and their Torah] had never emerged.”<sup>3</sup>

#### 4. Torah and the Founding of America

*In 1972, when President Nixon took his historic trip to China, opening up relations with that closed country, Western journalists had their first opportunity to speak with Chinese leaders. When they asked Chinese leader Zhou En Lai about the impact of the American and French Revolutions, he replied: “It's too early to tell...”*

It is a historical fact that all the values we hold dear in the Western World today originate with the Torah – reverence for life, social responsibility, peace, justice, equality, free education, etc.

How did these values become part of our lexicon – how did they become the values of democracy?

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<sup>3</sup> *History of the Jews* by Paul Johnson.

They were brought to the New World by the Puritans, who sought to outdo the Jews in their observance of the Old Testament (as they called it). This is why nearly every colony established in what would become the United States of America had codes of law all sourced in the Hebrew Bible.

By-the-way, this is why the early universities – like Harvard and Yale – taught Hebrew. And how many people are aware that there was even a proposal among the founding fathers to make Hebrew the official language of the new nation?

It is no accident that when they penned the Declaration of Independence in 1776, they wrote: “We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed *by their Creator* with certain inalienable rights, that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Once they took root in America and became wedded to American-style democracy, these Torah values spread like wild fire. This, too, is documented in a book written by a Christian scholar: *On Two Wings* by Michael Novak.

So now, let me ask you: How many of us know this, and even if we do know it, how many of us are turning to the Torah to find a solution to the huge problems that face us today?

*A few academics were mocking an elderly Jew for being a “greenhorn”-ignorant of American culture. The Jew insisted that they test his knowledge. So one of the scholars began reading off names of the founding fathers that signed the Declaration of Independence: John Hancock, Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams... As he mentioned Adams, the Jew knowingly smiled, and with a confident chuckle said: “Yes, I knew that man, Sam Adams. He lived down the block from me. But I bet that you don’t know his real name! His original name was Shmuel Odom...” The academics began laughing. “What’s the joke?” asked the Jew. “Samuel Adams died.” “Really!” said the Jew, “how sad.” After a short pause, he added: “Ahh, you’re right. Now I remember. I was at his leovayeh (funeral)...” The scholars burst out into even greater laughter. “And now, what’s so funny?” “Samuel Adams died 200 years ago.” Without missing a beat the Jew cried out: “Oy! Vi di zeit loyft” (oh my, how time flies)!*

## 5. A Specter is Haunting America and the World

To borrow a phrase: A specter is haunting America and the Western world.

A combination of a tottering economy, political instability, distrust in our leaders, the growth of Islam – and its impact on Europe and the United States – all that and more, are contributing to profound unrest and uncertainty in our country.

This is not exclusive to a global upheaval. The impact is affecting every one of us – our livelihoods, our futures, our children.

No wonder that close to a half million people, recently gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to demand restoration of America's values. Whether you agree or disagree with the Tea Party, Glenn Beck and the Conservative Movement, the fact is clear – the entire country – and world – is in the grips of a serious transition.

People everywhere and of all political persuasions are restless, wondering where this country is headed. In the USA, many of the staunchest supporters of President Obama are turning away from him; many are confused by him and his policies.

A large segment of the population recognizes that there is something seriously wrong with our value structure – with the deep erosion in trust in our institutions, government, education systems, and the usually reliable infrastructures that we have built our confidence upon.

The economic meltdown, with no signs of abating, has only driven the point home that greed destroys, and that regulators cannot be trusted. And so, many are asking: What will be? What should we do?

Yet, sadly the Torah perspective is not in any way part of this discourse. Indeed, most people you will ask will unequivocally state that Judaism has nothing – and should not have anything – to say about our current state of affairs.

This is sad, even tragic, indeed.

## 6. Back to the Point of Departure

When a business is floundering, the first thing we do is return to the point of departure – revisit the initial mission and assumptions of the business. When a tree is struck by a storm and its moorings are in question, we look to the roots of the tree to ensure that they are intact, and that the tree remains strongly attached to these roots.

Why should we not do the same when our country is reeling?

And indeed, when we return to the roots of the founding of this country, we find it firmly rooted in the Torah's unwavering principles.

*Marx – Groucho, that is, not Karl – once met an adversary, and adamantly declared: "I have my principles!" When the other fellow frowned, Groucho continued: "If you don't like them, I have other ones."*

The modern world, its freedoms and prosperities, present us with major issues and fundamental schisms that need to be bridged: balancing faith and modernity, individuality and the common good, freedom and anarchy, virtue and secularism, capitalism and greed, church and state.

Judaism offers a global vision that the world is in need of now more than ever. Unfortunately, Judaism has become marginalized, and in many minds is no more than a series of ancient rituals irrelevant to the modern age and its challenges. We must reinsert ourselves into the discourse.

I submit that the challenge for us Jews from this day hence is to look closely into our heritage – and we will surely come up with real time-tested solutions to our current challenges.

## 7. Key Universal Principles Rooted in Judaism

Rosh Hashana, the birthday of the world and the human race, offers us the vital core principles that we need to reclaim, foundations that we need to reinforce, in order to restore confidence in our infrastructures and institutions. Here are some of the key principles:

1) The foundation of a healthy society – the force that allows diversity and individuality to flourish, while maintaining harmony between different interests (E Pluribus Unum) – is the unwavering belief that each human being was created in the Divine Image, and by virtue of this fact, is endowed by the Creator “with certain inalienable rights, that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

2) Humans – collectively and individually – were sent to this earth on a mission, to “serve and protect,” to reverse the otherwise natural tendency toward selfishness and self-interest, and illuminate an otherwise narcissistic world with virtue and integrity, with ethics and morality – with the universal moral laws given to Adam and Noah (known as the seven Noahide Laws), which honor God and all of life on this earth.

3) We are all people with unique destinies. Life has purpose and progresses forward toward a destination. Everything in creation is suffused with reason. This vision inspires our hopeful belief in progress and the sense that tomorrow can be better than today.

4) The mission of a healthy country and community is not economic prosperity, comfort or happiness. Free commerce and financial success are symptoms, not causes, of freedom. The Founding Fathers of the United States (and the same in other Western countries) recognized this fact, that the bedrock for all success is that the country is established by Divine Providence endowing equality derived from the Divine rights of man, not the other way around.

5) Leaders must be driven and inspired by this mission, not by glory, money and power. This mission statement became a force that inspired our great leaders to lead by example, and not govern by polls or public favoritism. This Divine ethos of integrity gave birth to this mighty nation and created the climate for its thriving economy.

6) Confidence and trust derives from faith, a belief in the unseen Divine Providence directing the forces at work in a society. It requires the ability to believe, or put one’s faith in the abilities and honesty of others. In a complex society, this is absolutely essential. This is the only basis of trust, freedom and all the compo-

nents necessary to allow for healthy relationships and successful businesses. Without faith, without accepting a higher authority that gave us all the gift of life and liberty, what is there to protect one greedy man from another?

7) Capitalism, which is driven by personal gain, can survive only through temperance – the wisdom derived from an understanding of a fundamental responsibility to the customer. All the regulation in the world won't make capitalism work without the understanding that we have to answer to a higher authority, which instills responsibility, integrity and the drive of positive individual aspirations to a higher good.

8) Our economic experts, and our leaders, should look at the money in their own pockets. Engraved on every coin, etched on every bill, are the words "In God we trust." Our leaders ought simply to reiterate this nation's original mission statement, declaring the core of our union is the Divine gift of life that we were all given equally, that "In God we trust" and with that trust "E Pluribus Unum," from the many, one, we can thus trust each other, and become one despite our diversity. Without this common bond our system cannot endure. Without answering to a higher authority, we will end up in the same place as so many mighty empires before us: the dustbin of History.

9) Our leaders must declare that integrity is good for business. Greed may work in the short-term, but it can never endure. Of course, this alone will not solve our problems. We need to rebuild or create new models for our institutions and systems, ones that incorporate trust in the Divine, or a higher authority, in ways that will infuse all business with the trust it needs to thrive. Some may argue that it is wrong to invoke the Divine in establishing the proper guidelines for behavior, but we need only look at the founding fathers, and their repeated reference to the Divine as the bedrock that guarantees our rights.

10) This, I submit, is the call of our times: Will our leaders rise to the occasion – as the founding fathers did when they were challenged – and write a new chapter of this country's history; creatively develop a "new" sophisticated capitalism, built upon a higher trust. Without this essential trust, without the foundation, the structure cannot stand.

11) And finally, even in times of hardship, we gain strength from each other and from God. As the Declaration of Independence concludes: with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.

On this Rosh Hashana, let us all firstly celebrate our great heritage – the vision that we were given, a vision that has literally shaped our world. But even more importantly, let us commit to embracing the Torah’s relevant message to our lives – and look for ways to address our present challenges, both globally and personally.

Beyond the global vision, Judaism ultimately speaks to the individual. Today, on Rosh Hashana, Adam and Eve were created as individuals. Everything begins with personal responsibility. Each of us is a complete universe, and each of us must see ourselves as if “the entire world was created for me” – for me to fulfill my personal calling. By changing yourself, you change the world.

## 8. Call to Action

How do we begin?

I propose a few steps here:

- 1) Learn Jewish history
- 2) Read some of the books I’ve mentioned about the Jewish contribution to civilization in general and to America in particular.
- 3) Study the Torah and its ground-breaking ideology!
- 4) Study the Jewish prophets and their vision for the future!
- 5) Share what you learn with others, be they Jews or non-Jews, your next door neighbors or your seat-mates on the train.
- 6) Most of all, ensure that your children know their proud history, know how to access the Torah, and are armed with its insightful teachings for the hard road that is surely facing us and them.

As the destiny of nations is determined on this day – may this be a year of peace, harmony and health. A year in which all individuals recognize their unique role, their special musical note, in the cosmic composition. A year in which our Rosh Hashana prayer is fulfilled:

“May everything that has been made know that You made it, everything that has been created understand that You created it.” Amen.

Shana Tova!