



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

ROSH HASHANA 5774 • 2013

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 5, 2013
Rosh Hashana - Day 1

The Greatest Gamble



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart 5774 Enter the Heart"*

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The Greatest Gamble: A Boardroom Without Boredom

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ABSTRACT

Today we ask: Why did God take such a great risk and create the human being? Man has the power to destroy. Indeed, history is testimony to the great injustices and genocides that humans have perpetrated against each other. Why then would God risk his entire beautiful universe and create someone who can destroy it all?

This sermon comes to address the question: Can the world be complete without man? Or, put more cynically: Can the world be complete *with* man?

Rosh Hashana is the day man was created. Prior to Rosh Hashana, everything but man was brought into being. And all of it was working pretty well. Then God created the human being. But was this a good idea? What void did God see, and why did God think man could fill it?

We will analyze the anatomy of a business partnership to answer these questions. And we will discover that when a Jew performs a mitzvah, he or she literally partners with God in creation!

Through the prism of partnership, we discover that, without man, creation itself would be incomplete. It's not like God could have created a perfect world without man, and then just added man to take it to the next level. (Like Coca Cola created the perfect drink – Coke Classic – and then created a new drink to reach a new weight-conscious market – Diet Coke.) Without man creation itself would remain lacking; it would be like Coca Cola without the fizz (in other words, not Cola at all).

Without the bubbles, Coke would be flat. Without you, the world would be flat.

Osmotically, this lends perspective into the Jews' relationship with their Creator. It isn't merely top-down, where God makes all the rules and we follow them like subservient sheep sans personality; it certainly isn't bottom-up, where everything we do is primary and God is but an afterthought; rather, it is a two-way partnership.

THE GREATEST GAMBLE: A BOARDROOM WITHOUT BOREDOM

1. Capital Investment (Joke)

Wishing to provide their students with real-life examples, the MBA program at Wharton's Business School in Philadelphia invited some of the best and brightest financial minds to share their business acumen and economic experience.

In the Q&A period following his lecture, Moshe Finkelstein, a millionaire many times over, was asked this question:

"Mr. Finkelstein, what was the single most powerful influence on your way toward earning your fortune?"

Moshe Finkelstein's response went something like this:

"Well, I grew up in the Lower East Side and didn't have a penny to my name. Then, one day, I found a quarter in the gutter. I took the quarter and bought an apple with it. I polished that apple until it shone as bright as my bald head. I turned around and sold this glowing apple for 50 cents, doubling my capital. With those 2 quarters, I bought 2 apples, polished them and sold both apples for a dollar. Then, with the dollar I was rich and could now buy at wholesale prices. So I got 5 apples for that dollar, and sold those 5 apples for 50 cents apiece. In just a few short transactions, I had turned 1 quarter into 2 dollars and 50 cents – a 1000 percent return on my initial investment!

"Then, after about a week of hustling like this, cleaning and polishing apples, my 100-year-old great-aunt on my mother's side sadly and unexpectedly past away and left me 100 million dollars.

"That was probably the single most powerful influence on my way to earning my fortune!"

2. Rabbi vs. Businessman (Humor)

You might be asking yourself: It's Rosh Hashana, the day man was created, a time of profound spirituality, why is this rabbi talking to me about business? You might even be thinking that the job of a rabbi is completely contrary to the job of a businessman. The businessman's goal is to turn good product into good money; the rabbi's goal is to turn good money into good product.

And I can state this unequivocally: I am no businessman. In fact, I am the opposite of a businessman. (And I can see many of you nodding your heads in agreement.)

Nevertheless, though a businessman I am not, from perusing the wise pages of the Talmud and, from time to time, glancing at *The Wall Street Journal*, I have learned a cliché or two about business, namely: The objective, essentially, of every economic endeavor is to buy low and sell high ... to minimize one's risk and to maximize one's profitability.

Investing wisely and safely is what we call good business. Gambling foolishly and taking unnecessary risks is what we call bad business.

Practically speaking, if someone offered you a proposition where the risks outweighed the rewards, it would be foolish to accept.

For example: If I came over to you (after Yom Tov, of course), and said:

“Hey, Jack, I'm starting this grand venture. Our featured product will be an automobile that possesses rabbinic tendencies – it tells you where to go, it asks you for money, it puts you to sleep whenever it opens its engine, and it always wants to teach you something. We will call it Rabbhicle! Or Rabbinicar! Whatya think? Awesome idea, right? Now all I need from you is a million and a half bucks to get this party started!”

You know what you would do? Either you would punch me in the face or, if you were a decent human being, you would commit me to an insane asylum. Why? Because the odds of this venture turning a profit on your million-and-half-dollar investment are zero. You are virtually guaranteed to lose your money. This is called *atomically* high risk. And if this rabbi has the sheer chutzpah to approach you for a million-and-half knishes for such an idiotic idea, then this rabbi must be clinically insane and, therefore, it is a mitzvah to institutionalize him.

With this economic logic at hand, allow me to paint a picture...

3. World as a Business

Imagine the world around us was a business, a privately held company, controlled by one Ultra-Powerful, Omnipotent shareholder.

As a business, imagine this universe was highly successful, a very profitable, predictable, safe market. Every element in the business knew its place and the whole enterprise was streamlined from beginning to end, from concept to production.

There were no flaws, no underachieving departments; every fiscal quarter met the projections. Never did a product of this universe malfunction, and never did its value decrease.

My dear conjurers, my fellow dreamers, this is exactly what the universe looked like this very morning 5,774 years ago, on the sixth day of creation. The heavens and the earth, the sun and the stars, the trees and the flowers, the birds and the bees, the mountains and the oceans – the entire universe, from the smallest molecule to the greatest galaxy, was completely in tune, in sync, like a perfect Fortune 500 company.

Say such an entity was your business, wouldn't you be happy? Wouldn't you be satisfied? Wouldn't you be smiling as you cruised around in your Rolls Royce, while wearing a ten-thousand-dollar pair of sunglasses? I know I would!

Indeed, the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of this universal company *was* happy! The first chapter of the Torah, the Book of Genesis¹ states that on the morning of the sixth day of creation, God looked around and, *God saw that it was GOOD.*

The world was good. Business was good. Creation was good. Life was good. That's it, end of story. *Sholom al Yisrael!*

But then, in the blink of an eye, two of the worst things that could happen to a business happened. The first was that the CEO had a completely irrational, risky, sentimental idea. The second – yup, you guessed it – was a board meeting! (No disrespect to the president or the treasurer or the board members of this synagogue).

God had a ludicrous idea to create man. And then, more ludicrously, decided to take this idea to the board.

¹ Bereishit/Genesis 1:25.

4. First Board Meeting

Mirroring modern boardrooms everywhere, the first board meeting in history divided into two disagreeing groups. And – I kid you not – someone actually took the minutes of the meeting. Seriously.

The Midrash describes the agenda and outcome of this board meeting – of God and angels – in minute detail. Consider the following transcript from the Midrash:²

When the hour came for the Holy One to create the first human being, the angels divided themselves into two groups. One group said, “You should not create man.” The second group said, “You should create man.”

This is what the verse [in Psalms] states: “*Kindness and truth have met; justice and peace have kissed.*”³ Kindness said you should create him, for he will deal in kindness. Truth said you should not create him, for he is all lies. Justice said you should create him, for he will do just deeds. Peace said you should not create him, for they will all fight. What did the Holy One do? He took Truth and cast it off to earth. This is what is written [in the Book of Daniel], *And it will cast truth to the earth.*⁴ Said the ministering angels before the Holy One: “Creator of the Worlds, why do You shame Truth, Your royal seal? Let Truth rise from the earth.” For this is what is written: *Truth will sprout from the earth.*⁵

5. Why Create Man?

Picture it. The world is complete, it is humming, it has that new-world smell. Everything is fresh, crisp, sharp.

²Bereishit Rabbah 8:5.

³Tehilim/Psalms 85:12.

⁴Daniel 8:12.

⁵Tehilim/Psalms 85:12.

Really, as any biologist, naturalist, botanist, physicist, environmentalist, or flora fundamentalist will tell you the universal symphony is pretty much perfect. Just look at the infinite elements of existence as they interact with one another – bees collecting pollen from flowers leads to fruit production which, in turn, leads to seeds sprouting saplings and the resulting trees exhaling oxygen ... the forests affect the weather and rainfall which, in turn, leads to irrigated fields and plant production, to fauna, flora, life, etc. etc etc. In its natural state, the world is a well-oiled machine.

And then God decides to throw a cog into this well-oiled machine.

God, the Founder and CEO of this enterprise, takes six days and manufactures a product like no one has ever seen before – arts, parts, parcels, atomic particles, subatomic particles – a particle party!

Then God sits down with His board of angels – and has a crazy idea. Let us throw a character into this precision mix that will shake things up. The company is raking it in, and God wishes to essentially throw away the rake.

Using logic, God should be minimizing His risk, not maximizing it!

And, make no mistake about: placing the human being into the world is the greatest risk of all!

6. Talmudic Take (Optional)

The Talmud⁶ describes the risk clearly:

When the time came for God to create the human being, God created one class of ministering angels, and asked them: What's your opinion, do you think we should create man in our image? Asked the angels: How will this creature perform? God told them exactly how this creature will perform. When they heard, they quoted from the Book of Psalms,⁷ *What is man that You should remember him, and the son of man that You should be mindful of him?*

⁶Sanhedrin 38b.

⁷8:5.

But, instead of listening to His board's sound advice, God sticks out His little finger and burns them. What a boss!

He does this again with a second group [of so-called 'board members'].

Until the third group said: "God, the first two groups gave their counsel and what did it help? It is Your world, do what You want with it."

Then, a few generations into creation, during the Era of the Flood and the Era of the Division, which were both completely evil and corrupt, the angels turned to God and said: "Did not the first two groups [of board members] speak correctly? [Their predictions were spot on!]"

God replied, echoing the Book of Isaiah: *And until old age I am the same, and until you turn gray I will carry [you].*⁸

What is going on here? God knows the human being is going to be highly flawed, a risk like no other. (And we are talking life and death here.) There will be the generation of the flood – completely corrupt. There will be wars and murders. There will be a Pharaoh bathing in the blood of Jewish babes. There will be mass-murders during the Babylonian exile, then again during the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. There will be Crusades, Jews were slain from horseback in the name of a Jew the world had deified. There will be an Inquisition where the greatest of Jewish communities will be completely obliterated. There will be pogroms, massacres, wholesale evil. And there will be the Holocaust, six-million flames snuffed out only because they were imbued with a Divine Spark.

Why? Why then did God create man?

It isn't a game. It is real. So, what could God possibly be thinking? What purpose could warrant such a risky move?

Why take such a gamble – the greatest gamble possible?

The answer is: for the sake of partnership.

⁸ 46:4.

7. Business Partners (Joke)

A very wealthy businessman had a meeting with his new son-in-law. "I love my daughter, and now I welcome you into the family," said the man. "To show you how much we care for you, I'm making you a 50-50 partner in my business. All you have to do is go to the factory every day and learn the operations."

The son-in-law interrupted, "Wow, that's really so generous of you. But, you know, I hate factories. I can't stand the noise."

"I see," replied the father-in-law. "Well then you'll work in the office and take charge of some of the operations."

"I hate office work," said the son-on-law. "I can't stand being stuck behind a desk all day."

"Wait a minute," said the father-in-law. "I just made you a half-owner of a profitable corporation, but you don't like factories and won't work in an office. What am I going to do with you?"

"Easy," said the young man. "Buy me out!"

8. Partnership

What is a healthy business partnership? When both parties bring something to the table that the other, on their own, does not have. Otherwise it's not called a partnership.

Generally, a relationship is the dynamic between two parties, and there are three types:

1. Top-down: I am everything and will give you some of it, if you subjugate yourself to me.
2. Bottom-up: I will create everything on my own and do not need your input or contribution.
3. Partnership: I bring something to the table; you bring something to the table. Without me, you are incomplete; without you, I am incomplete.

Let's apply this to religion:

1. Top-down: The most common (misconceived) notion of religion is subjugation – God is all and I am nothing, but in return for a prayer or a mitzvah, God will bless me with some of His all.
2. Bottom-up: I can only rely on myself. God is in heaven and has nothing to do with me. I will create my life, my success, my purpose and God is really irrelevant. I am not even sure that He exists.
3. Partnership. God and I are in it together. God creates existence, and I complete it by fulfilling its purpose.

9. Why God Took the Risk

And this is why God took the risk – why God *had* to take the risk – and created Adam, the first human being:

The Talmud⁹ explains:

Everyone who prays on Shabbat Eve, and says, *Vayechulu*,¹⁰ is considered by Scripture as if he has partnered with God in the act of creation ... do not read this as *Vayechulu* (and they were completed), but *Vayachlu* (and *they* completed).

Though according to today's mathematically engineered calendar the first day of Rosh Hashana can never fall out on a Friday,¹¹ the first Rosh Hashana of existence was a Friday, the sixth day of creation, the sixth day of the week.

We know that as the sun sets on the work week and Shabbat begins, during the Friday Eve prayers and again during Kiddush, we say *Vayechulu hashamayim v'haaretz v'chol tzevaam ... and they were completed, the heavens and the earth and all their legions...*

⁹ Shabbat 119b. Note also Zohar Pinchas, pp. 238b re: partnership.

¹⁰ *Bereishit/Genesis* 2:1.

¹¹ Because Yom Kippur, which is 9 days later, cannot begin Saturday night when Shabbat is going out, so that the beginning of a somber fast day does not clash with the joyous end of Shabbat.

Says the Talmud: do not read *Vayechulu* – and they were already completed by the time Man came into the picture. Read *Vayachlu* – and they, God and whoever fulfills God's desire, *completed* the creative process.

In other words: prior to man saying, attesting, showing, demonstrating that the heavens and earth are complete, the heavens and the earth remained incomplete. Only through man's deed does the universe become whole.

10. Essential Point: Truth

The conclusion of our Midrash helps illuminate this subtle and essential point. Remember what it said?

He took Truth and cast it off to earth. This is what is written, *And it will cast truth to the earth*. Said the ministering angels before the Holy One: "Creator of the Worlds, why do You shame Truth, Your royal seal? Let Truth rise from the earth." For this is what is written, *Truth will sprout from the earth*.

Truth, God's royal seal said do not create the human for he is full of lies. So God cast Truth to earth, but so that Truth can sprout from the earth itself.

Truth is an interesting thing. They say, adversity doesn't test a man's character, but reveals it. One only knows if something is true, when that truth is placed in a hostile environment. Truth is best known when surrounded by falsehood.

God didn't punish Truth, His royal seal, by sending it to earth. By casting Truth to earth, God revealed His reason for creating Man – for only man, God's partner, can reveal truth "*from the earth*."

The whole reason for existence, the purpose of creation in the first place, was so that Truth, God's seal, could be stamped.

And only man can do the stamping – through his and her mitzvahs. Only the human being, charged with free will, can reveal a higher divine truth in a material world where truth and Godliness is concealed.

11. Why? (Optional)

Ah, but then comes the obvious question: If God knew His plan and knew all along that He would be creating the human, then why did He create a “board of angels” in the first place? Why did God consult with the angels, again and again, when He wasn’t going to listen? Was God looking for yes-men? Essentially, what is the meaning of God’s answer to the third class of angels: *And until old age I am the same, and until you turn gray I will carry [you]*?

With all the purpose and the meaning and the reason for creating man, God nevertheless knew the pain and suffering that would accompany it. God, the Founder, Creator, CEO, knew that creating man was the riskiest thing He would ever do. Essentially, God was imbuing a creature composed of the earth with a divine spark, which means the ability to be transcendent, but also the ability to be evil.

This was the most painful thing. So God created angelic groups to consult, to discuss, to see if there was a way to limit the risk and perhaps create man in such a way that there would be no pain, no hurt, or at least not on such a horrific level.

But the angels, who have no free will, said: There is no way to limit risk or pain. If you want a full partnership with man, then it will come along with great risk and possible negative consequences.

So, God responded: *And until old age I am the same, and until you turn gray I will carry [you]*. Through all the pain and suffering, I – your God – am here. I am always here, and though you say it is too risky to create man, I say I will imbue man with this eternity, and together we will partner in creating a divine world!

12. Consequences

It is Rosh Hashana, a time when we reflect on our contribution to the universe. And how indispensable this contribution is.

I mean, who really cares if they blow a ram’s horn? Who cares if they dip lobster into butter instead of an apple into honey? Who really cares?!

Says God: You are a partner with Me. You're not some *schlepper* filling envelopes in the mailroom ... you're not some mid-level manager with a comb-over ... you're not even a head of a department - you are MY FULL PARTNER, and everything you do impacts this firm, this corporation, the value of this company's stock.

Imagine that Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple Inc., gets up and casually says, "You know, I'm thinking we should no longer allow the iPhone to make phone calls." What do you think would happen? Apple's stock would plummet; that's what would happen. But who cares? So some idiot got up and said he's thinking of doing something. First of all it didn't even happen; second of all, if it does happen, there are a thousand other phones out there I can make calls on; and, thirdly, who gives a hoot - it's one foolish guy in a company that has tens of thousands of employees!

Yeah, but this guy Cook is the CEO of the company - he represents the brand, the product, the institution that is Apple. And if this guy says that he is thinking of perhaps, maybe, possibly, removing an essential feature (or adding a detrimental one) the stock market will plummet.

This is the power of partnership. Nothing is inconsequential. Everything is essential.

13. Indispensable

Rosh Hashana, the collective birthday of the human being, teaches all of us that we are each indispensable partners with God.

The idea is as astounding as it is awesome - and it infuses your life and your choices with infinite meaning.

Just think about it: God Almighty, who is beyond all of existence, chose you and I to be his partners in his grand master plan!

Is there a risk in this choice? Absolutely! But that only makes this choice even more precious. For, despite all the risks involved, despite the tremendous amount of pain and suffering humans have caused, it is all worth it in order for you and I to be partners with the One and Only in creation! Why? Because of God's eternal confidence that we, His partners, *will* fulfill our role.

Today we must all ask ourselves: Am I living up to my end of the partnership? Am I justifying the reason that God created me and took great risk in so doing?

This New Year, may the two partners - God and man - write each other into the Book of Life, and then seal it with a kiss.

Shana Tova. Amen.