



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHABBAT SHUVA 5772 • 2011

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 1, 2011
Shabbat Shuvah

Do You Matter?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”* 5772

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ABSTRACT

Do you feel that you matter? That you and your contributions are indispensable? Do you wake up in the morning feeling like you have an important role to play in the grand scheme of things?

We live in a large, depersonalized world where we increasingly feel that our individual contributions don't matter and are hardly recognized, where there is no real sense that life – ours or anyone's – is truly significant or meaningful.

Coming from Rosh Hashana, when we celebrated our collective birthday, and standing on *Shabbat Shuvah*, when we return (teshuvah) to our true and innate selves – now is a perfect time to revisit our *raison de etre*: Who exactly is that true self, and how do we actualize it?

Today God asks us: *Ayekoh?* “Where are you? What are you doing? Are you living up to your potential? Are you making your unique mark on the universe?”

What technique was lost on the losing Jewish rowing team, and what is the single most important truth that Rosh Hashana teaches us – a truth that will change your life?

Filled with inspirational stories, anecdotes and humor, this sermon addresses the most powerful question of all: Are you dispensable?

Do You Matter?

1. Inferiority Complex

Renee goes to see Dr. Rabinowitz. "How can I help you?" asks Dr. Rabinowitz.

"I've not come about myself," replies Renee. "It's about my husband Mordy."

"So what's the matter with Mordy?" asks Dr. Rabinowitz.

"Over the last few weeks," replies Renee, "Mordy has begun exhibiting signs of developing an inferiority complex."

"That can happen sometimes as we get older," says Dr. Rabinowitz. "But don't worry, I can help him."

"Oy, I didn't come to you for help in treating Mordy," says Renee. "I came to you for advice on how I can keep Mordy that way."

Do you feel that you matter? That you and your contributions are indispensable? Do you wake up in the morning feeling like you have an important role to play in the grand scheme of things? Or not?

We live in a large, depersonalized world where we increasingly feel that our individual contributions don't matter and are hardly recognized, where there is no real sense that life - ours or anyone's - is truly significant or meaningful.

Coming from Rosh Hashana, when we celebrated our collective birthday, and standing on *Shabbat Shuvah*, when we return (teshuvah) to our true and innate selves - now is a perfect time to revisit our *raison de etre*: Who exactly is that true self, and how do we actualize it?

2. Our Depersonalized World

Our highly industrialized and market-oriented world - where people are often seen more as customer than as humans - works overtime in sending us messages that devalue us as individuals that truly matter.

Just the other day, I googled the phrase “do you matter?” to see what the World Wide Web would tell me about this issue. And you know *the first result I got back? A link to a book titled Do You Matter? How Great Design Will Make People Love Your Company!*

Do you hear that? This is saying that you matter when people love not you, but your company! What message does that convey? And what impact does that have on the collective psyche and self-esteem?

We are inundated with this kind of message thousands of times a year. Statistics show that by the time we (in the Western world) are 20 years old, we have seen 1 million advertisements. One million!

Is it then a wonder that so many suffer from poor self-confidence?

3. Do You Matter?

When your *self worth* is defined by your net worth, when your value is based not on your inherent qualities but on your looks, your buying power, social status, and productivity, then your *self esteem* will be dependent on and proportionate to those temporal criteria.

Have you been damaged by this attitude? Do you feel that you matter? That you and your contributions are indispensable? Do you wake up in the morning feeling like you have an important role to play in the grand scheme of things? Or not?

A lot of you are probably thinking “or not.”

For we all grow up in a world where we feel that our individual contributions go unrecognized, where there is no real sense that life – ours or anyone’s – is significant or meaningful.

4. Wine or Water (Story)

There was once a great king who was visiting a poor town. In preparation for the king’s visit the impoverished townspeople wanted to do something special. But what could they do that the king would value?

So, they fell upon this idea: They decided to fill a giant barrel with wine and present it to the king upon his arrival. Each family of the town would bring one flask filled with wine and pour it into the giant barrel until it was full. Knowing how poor they were, the king would surely appreciate their effort.

And so this is what they did. They placed a giant barrel in the center of the town with a ladder reaching to the top, and every day people lined up to pour their flask of wine into the barrel.

The day finally arrived when the king visited the town. The people were so excited to present the king with this wonderful gift. The king was shown the barrel and was given a kingly goblet. They filled his goblet with wine from the giant barrel. He took a sip ... and ...

The townspeople were shocked by the look on the king's face as he drank the wine. The king was obviously very unhappy. Why?

"It's just plain water," he declared.

It turned out that instead of pouring wine, each family decided to skimp and pour in water, believing that one flask of water would sure make no difference among so many flasks of wine. But, because everyone became a "shpitz-chochom" and thought that way, no one poured in any wine.

5. It Matters

This is what happens when you don't think that you and your contribution matters. Your flask of wine - no matter how little it may seem to you - is absolutely necessary in the grand scheme of things.

Think about that for a minute. If you don't feel like you make a difference in the world, how excited can you be about the things you do and the choices you make? When you wake up in the morning and you feel like what you do that day doesn't matter anyway, how committed or passionate can you be?

But Rosh Hashana - the birthday of humanity, of every individual human - is here to tell you: "Your birth is God's way of saying you matter."

This means you are absolutely necessary. You are indispensable to God's vision of the world, chosen to fulfill a mission in this world that you and only you can accomplish. You are one musical note in the grand divine composition, but without your note, there would be no symphony.

On this *Shabbat Shuvah*, let this message sink in.

6. A Letter (Optional)

Let me now share with you another story. This is actually a letter that I was given permission to read to you:

I am a 47-year-old executive – very successful and accomplished, admired and respected. Yet beneath this fine veneer lies a woman in shreds. You see, my soul was murdered as a young child when my parents abused me physically, emotionally, sexually. Every day of my life is essentially a struggle against suicide. I feel no self value, actually no self at all. I am a sum of my parts, and my value is based on how others value me. I have tried many therapies but essentially have remained the same. Intimacy doesn't work in my life, relationships are either unhealthy or nonexistent.

In order to compensate for this deep void and lack, what I have done, as do people in this situation, I have become super-ambitious and hyper-productive in order to create some semblance of outer control in place of no inner control. It helps distract me somewhat and helps get me through the day, but it doesn't really change anything. Inside I am a wreck, and every day, sometimes every moment, is another struggle.

I had long given up hope and resigned myself to this life of misery. But then a miracle happened. Someone gave me a book [of Chassidic teachings] as a gift. I am Jewish but non-observant, and I was glancing through the book with a measure of skepticism until a line jumped out at me and struck me like a thunderbolt, like a silver bullet between the eyes:

The line said: BIRTH IS GOD SAYING THAT YOU MATTER. I read it again. BIRTH IS GOD SAYING YOU MATTER. I read it over and over at least 500 times. And I will continue to read it every day of my entire life.

I suddenly realized, after 47 years, that no matter what my parents told me, no

matter how they said I was an accident and a source of misery in their lives, that no matter how society tells us that we are just a statistic in someone's balance sheet, that our value is measured in buying power, productivity, looks, youth, contacts, and money – none of that matters because I matter to the One who matters most. To God, who created me and said, "I want you on this Earth. I need you."

The mere fact that I was born, that I exist, regardless of my mood, my performance level, my looks that day. The mere fact that I am here is a vote of confidence from God that I am indispensable, absolutely necessary, irreplaceable. No one can replace me. I matter. I truly matter.

Do you know how that made me feel? That I have permission to matter. I am commanded to matter.

So though I still have many years to heal, now, for the first time in my life, I have hope. And I know what I need to do. I need to create bypass surgery to bypass the infected arteries that my parents gave me when they touched me, criticized me, hit me, for the first time, and reconnect to that first, pure, innocent moment of birth, when God said YOU MATTER, YOU ARE INDISPENSABLE.

Knowing this, for the first time I feel that I have my life back. For the first time I feel that I have a life!

7. Are You Indispensable?

Even if you grew up in a relatively healthy home, where you were nurtured and made to feel valuable, Rosh Hashana [and *Shabbat Shuvah*] challenges you to ask yourself: "Do I matter because my parents valued me and because of my achievements, or do I matter in a more permanent, cosmic way?"

So now, it is time to ask yourself again the question I posed earlier: Do you think that you really matter?

The knee-jerk response is usually: Of course I matter – I feel that I am important. My family, friends and work colleagues value me. I have a series of accomplishments under my belt. Awards and honors on my wall. But let me rephrase the question: Would it make a difference if

you were never born? Remember, before you were born, it would not be a catastrophe if you did not appear; no one would miss you because no one was expecting you.

Of course, you can – and we do – justify your existence once you were born. But does your existence have any merit beyond your justifications?

8. The Single Most Important Truth

Rosh Hashana teaches that the only absolute reason why you truly matter is because you were chosen by God to come to this world. And this contract is renewed every Rosh Hashana.

Every year on the birthday of the human race we are reminded anew of the single most important truth you will ever hear: “Birth is God saying you matter.”

Yes, you matter, not because you think you are important, or because others tell you that you are, or because of your buying power, monetary value, looks, performance or productivity level. But because God put you here.

You are an indispensable musical note. Irreplaceable. Period.

The world would be different if you were not here or if you do not fulfill your calling. You have been allotted a certain section of this globe, with certain unique talents. And people you will meet, experiences you will have, places you will go, objects you will obtain – all are allocated to you in order for you to transform them, to leave them differently from how you found them. And this changes lives forever. Eternally.

When you know that you and your contribution are crucial, it infuses all that you do with a compelling sense of urgency.

I believe that this simple, clear message is preventive medicine for much of the tragedy and suffering that plague our world today. We need to reach to every person, to every child, every parent, every educator, every leader, with the message: You matter. Your life and what you do with it matters. You are indispensable to God and to this world.

9. Where Are You?

But it's not enough to just be armed with this awareness. It's not sufficient to feel for this one day that we are unique and indispensable. This awareness is a gift but also a responsibility. We have to do something about it. It behooves us to act on it.

And besides, if we don't act on it we will succumb to society's incessant message that we don't really matter. The only defense is offense. If we don't take a stand and act on our indispensability, we will revert back to feeling inconsequential.

On the first Rosh Hashana in history, Adam and Eve wandered away from God and betrayed their calling. As a result the Torah tells us that God came into the garden looking for Adam, who was hiding in shame for what he had done.

In a most dramatic fashion, God called out to Adam: *Ayekoh?* "Where are you?"

Did the omnipresent, all-knowing God not know where Adam was? Of course He did.

Explains Rabbi Schneur Zalman that God was asking Adam - as He asks each one of us all the time: Where are you? You have wandered away from your calling and from Me. I don't recognize you - I don't see the Divine Image - in which you were created.

It's like asking someone who spaces out: "Where did you go?" The person is sitting before you, but you are wondering where is his mind and heart just went. You don't feel that he is present with you.

Every Rosh Hashana recreates the experience of the first one. As a new year begins, each of us - like Adam - is asked this question: *Ayekoh?* "Where are you? What are you doing? Are you living up to your potential? Are you making your unique mark on the universe?"

10. Collective Effort (Joke)

Yeshiva University's new rowing team was the embarrassment of the entire sports department (which wasn't so hot to begin with!). They not only finished dead last in every competition, but consistently crossed the finish line many minutes, even hours, after their opponents.

Finally, they sent Goldfarb to spy on the top-rated Harvard crew team, in the hopes of gaining some helpful insight. Lurking in the Cambridge boathouse, he watched the team practice in the Charles River. For an entire week he observed their methods.

Finally, he returned to New York, where his teammates anxiously awaited to hear his information.

"I figured out their secret!" he told them excitedly.

"Nu!?! Tell us! Tell us!" demanded his teammates.

"They have *eight* guys rowing and only *one* guy yelling!!"

11. Are You Rowing the Boat?

Are you merely an "observant" Jew – observing others, waiting for others to row the boat, yelling instructions, but not doing any rowing yourself?

Where are you? Are you a player in the game, are you lifting your oar, pouring your wine?

There are three types of people: Those who make things happen. Those who watch things happen. And those who ask "what happened?"

Rosh Hashan [and *Shabbat Shuvah*] calls upon us to take a good look ourselves ... to live up to the fact that we matter ... to step up to the plate, to rise to the occasion, to become a proactive player – *to make things happen*, rather than watch things happen or wait for things to happen, or even worse – ask what happened after the fact.

When we wander away from our mission and betray our destiny, we

soon begin wondering: What happened? How did my life turn out this way?

Once we lose sight of our identity, we become vulnerable to all the winds of change swirling around us. And let's face it – the winds are swirling. It is a real tornado out there.

12. In the Eye of the Tornado

Of course, our people have faced strong winds before ... tornadoes, hurricanes, tsunamis. Yet they have always been able to withstand all the pressures and navigate amidst the harsh uncertainties throughout history. Because their roots were strong, they were like a tree that no hurricane could fell.

They were strong in their faith, in their unwavering commitment to their indispensable divine mission in life.

Nietzsche said, "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how." And they had their "why" so they could bear any "how."

This profound awareness – that every single person is absolutely necessary and has an indispensable mission – empowered the Jewish people through the ages to remain steadfast and forge ahead notwithstanding all the storms raging around them.

When asked *Ayekoh* – they had their answer ready.

13. Today's Challenges

And so must we.

For the secret to withstanding the tempest of our times – not just withstanding, but coming out stronger – lays in how we answer this question:

Ayekoh? Where are you? Who are you? Who and where is the real you?

Are you connected and living up to your unique calling? Do you feel in your very *kishkes* that you matter and are indispensable? That if you don't do what you were sent to do, the entire world will be less?

14. Baal Shem Tov Story

In case you are wondering how a little person like yourself can be that significant, here is a beautiful story about the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidism.

Whenever he and his disciples gathered together in prayer, the Baal Shem Tov would be completely absorbed. This was particularly true on Rosh Hashana. During such a sacred and inspirational time, the prayers of the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples would continue for hours. At the conclusion of their worship, they would go home for a festive holiday meal.

Each year, however, it happened that the disciples finished their prayers long before the Baal Shem Tov finished his. The disciples would respectfully wait until their leader finished. Even so, while he prayed the disciples couldn't help but think about joining their families for the holiday meal. It didn't help much that they smelled the sweet aroma of the delicacies wafting in from the adjoining buildings. But they knew they had to wait for the Baal Shem Tov.

One Rosh Hashana, after the disciples concluded their prayers, one of them whispered to the others. "You know, if we just got up and tiptoed out, we could quickly make Kiddush for our families, grab a quick bite at home and return right away. We wouldn't make a sound. The Baal Shem Tov was so immersed in prayer that he wouldn't notice that we left and returned. What would be the harm?"

The others weren't so sure. "It's not the right thing," many remarked. But the clock ticked and they watched the Baal Shem Tov davening beneath his *tallis*, swaying back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Their families beckoned. The holiday foods beckoned, and the disciples' hungry stomachs won out.

Without making a sound, one of the disciples motioned for everyone to get up. Just when they rose from their seats, the Baal Shem Tov lifted his head, threw his *tallis* from his shoulders, and cried out, "What happened? Where are you going?"

The disciples were embarrassed. They looked at one another and then back at their leader. They hemmed and hawed and stammered. "Um, well . . .um. We hardly even moved. How did you even know? We didn't make a sound!"

The Baal Shem Tov looked at his followers. “Prayer is like a ladder stretching from earth to heaven. And as I was praying, I was ascending the rungs of that ladder. But you my beloved students, you hold up that ladder. And when you stood up to leave, I fell.”

15. Who Needs You?

My dear friends, in God’s mysterious world we are all interconnected in a symbiotic relationship. We are in need of each other. And the most fascinating aspect of this is the mystery – we don’t usually know who needs whom and when. Who is holding up whom. Who is in need of us, and who we are in need of.

Divine Providence leads each of us to places where others are in need of something we, and only we, can give them. We may not be aware of our own indispensability, but that doesn’t make us less indispensable.

The Baal Shem Tov once told one of his great disciples: “A soul comes down to earth and toils 70-80 years, just to do a favor for another.”

Do you know what favor that is?

So let us all ask ourselves today, on Rosh Hashana [and *Shabbat Shuvah*]:

Ayekoh? Where am I? Am I in the right place in the right time, so that I can prevent someone from falling?

Imagine a life in which we ask ourselves this question all the time. Imagine a world in which people are always asking themselves: Am I doing everything I can to fulfill my mission. Or do the delicacies of life distract and seduce me?

Ayekoh?

And finally, when you are solidly grounded by the certainty of your indispensable calling, while the world around you is helplessly flailing with uncertainty – a very special opportunity opens up:

When EVERYTHING is uncertain, ANYTHING is possible. Amen.

16. Specific Suggestions (Optional)

- Make a new commitment to a mitzvah, even if you are not in the mood for it, but you just know it's the right thing to do.
- Instead of being paralyzed, go out there and do something good. Initiate something – like a gathering in your home. Invite friends and do some reading and praying together.
- Find a cause and dedicate yourself to it with absolute passion and commitment.
- Take time each day to shut out all the outside static, and focus on God and the blessings in your life.
- Train your children to do all of the above, for the best way to teach your children is by example.

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