

# Erev Rosh Hashanah 2014/5775

Rabbi Dean Kertesz



Temple Beth Hillel Richmond

I want to welcome you, this *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, ברוכים הבעים (*beruchim ha'ba'im*) blessed are those who come. We welcome you whether you have been part of this congregation for more than 30 years or for just a few days. We welcome you whether Judaism is an integral part of your life, or you just drop-in on the High Holy Days. We welcome you if you have never sat in a synagogue before, or whether you have never sat in this synagogue before. We welcome you whether you are a member, or a visitor, or a seeker. Because tonight, on *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, everyone who is here belongs here. So lets pause and look around. If you see someone you don't know, take a moment and introduce yourself to them. If you see someone you know who you haven't greeted yet, greet them. Say "Shannah Tovah;" because tonight, on *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, no one should be a stranger.

The High Holy Days are a gift. They are refuge from our busy lives, a sacred opportunity to pause and to reflect on our lives, on where we have been and where we would like to go. But the High Holy Days can only be a refuge, can only work their wonder on us, if we are self-conscious, aware and present. We must prepare ourselves. So, if you have not done so already, take out your cellphones and turn them off. Don't silence them. Turn them off. First of all, we won't be interrupted during a special moment by a ring-tone. Our lives are interrupted far too frequently already and, if I may editorialize, far too often for trivial reasons. Additionally, by turning your phones off completely you are declaring an intention. You are committing to being fully present, here... and here alone. Constant connectivity divides our consciousness. Our cell phones ensure that we are always in two places at once. Tonight I ask you to just be here and to be focused on the task at hand.

What is the task at hand? It is simply this, to reflect on the most important questions we face. Who are we? What is our purpose in life? Are we living lives of which we can be

proud? What is our place in the world, in the universe? Do you believe in God? If yes, then what is your relationship with God? What kind of life does God call you to live? Are you living it? If you don't believe in God, or if you are uncertain, as I'm certain some of us here are tonight, then the question is what do you believe in? What do you hold sacred? What are your ideals and your values? Are they worth living by? Are you being true to them?

We do not frequently engage in this kind of reflection and during the High Holy Days we do this in a particular way. We do not do it through intellectual discourse, or through philosophical musings. We do it through prayer, at times individually and at other times as a collective. Prayer, as a form of self-examination and exploration, is alien to many of us and hard for all of us. We tend to think of prayer as a form of supplication and petition, of asking for things. The Hebrew word for prayer is תפילה (*tefillah*). It is derived from the root פ-ל-ל (peh-lamed-lamed) and comes from the reflexive verb form להתפלל (*l'hitpalel*) meaning to judge oneself. Thus, at its deepest rooted Jewish meaning, prayer is self-examination. We may appear to be speaking to God, but we are supposed to be opening our souls to self-assessment, because the goal is to change.

Change is hard. That's why most of us avoid it as long as possible. Tonight and throughout these Days of Awe our worship will be different, we will be experiencing change. We have a new cantor, Cantor Fran Burgess. She brings many gifts to our community, but she also brings a new voice and new insights into the service. We will be singing some new melodies. Actually they will be new to us, but they are the melodies of the High Holy Days. The נוסח (nusach), the melodies of the High Holy Days are different than those of Shabbat or week days. They are more majestic. They are designed to invoke a sense of God's rule over all existence. So they may not be as familiar as you would like. I ask you to be open to these changes. There are three keys to the High Holy Day experience: memory, majesty and meeting. Memory is the prayers and the tunes you know. They open the gate to your heart. Majesty, is the power of the music and the sometimes the words - if they work - to transport you to a place where you have the opportunity to touch the mystery of existence.

And meeting is everyone in this room, those you know and those you don't yet know, who accompany you through this experience.

There is another change this year... tonight we are using the Reform Movement's new *mahzor*. The *mahzor* is our guide book. *Mahzor*, (מחזור) means cycle. It comes from the Hebrew root ח-ז-ר (chet-zayin-resh) and is connected to the Hebrew word חוזר (chozer), to return, as we return to these holy days each year in an annual cycle. We've been using "The Gates of Repentance," for almost 40 years. It has its limitations and at times feels dated. But it also has the comfort of familiarity, of memory. We know it. Familiarity is a way to enter prayer. This too is memory. We like what we know. Using the new mahzor, however, may provide moments of discomfort. There are new prayers and readings. Though some of these "new" prayers are actually old prayers that have been reintroduced after 140 years. As always I will try to the best of my ability to be a guide, to let you know what page we are on, to explain a little, without interfering with the service, what is going on, particularly at some of the more perplexing parts of the service. The service, after all, is an amalgamation of almost 2,000 years of continuous Jewish worship. Some of it is easily understandable and some of it is incomprehensible. Some of it speaks to us and some of it is alienating and offensive. Tonight, I urge you to pay particular attention to the parts of the service you don't understand or that bother you or that alienate you. The things that bother us often speak to a particular part of our soul that needs attention. Services are supposed to trouble us. If they just made us feel good we could not engage in the task that faces us over these holy days: self examination and change. Be open to your discomfort. Not just the discomfort of the new in the services tonight, but the discomfort of self-evaluation.

Feel free to engage your neighbor in conversation, if something is confusing or troublesome. Ask them what they think, get their opinion, work together to gain understanding. Or if you get lost, ask the person next to you what page we are on. When all else fails sing, or meditate and see what answers come. The most important thing is to be engaged. This is meeting. Engaging with others. Do not sit back and be passive. Do not

wait for the service to work on you. It will not happen. Tonight, and tomorrow are times to throw away your skepticism, your modern sensibilities, your worldliness and your world-weariness. Tonight be open and yield to the wisdom of Jewish prayer. Take a leap of faith and see where it leads you. You already know where your intellect and reason can take you. You go there all the time. So tonight take the road you rarely travel and see if it leads you to a different destination, a destination of change and growth.

To help with our task at hand I will try to provide a way to think about these Days of Awe, these 10 days that begin tonight and climax at the end of Yom Kippur, a guide and a path for our teshuvah. A few weeks ago in the middle of August, the Torah portion was *Eikev* where Moses tells how he smashed the first set of tablets in his rage when he came down from Sinai and saw the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf. Later he went back up the mountain and carved a second set of tablets, as we read in Deuteronomy 10:1, "Thereupon Adonai said to me, "Carve out two tablets of stone like the first... I will inscribe on the tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed, and you shall deposit them in the ark." Now our rabbis, always eager to wring every drop of meaning out of the Torah asked, which set of tablets is God talking about: the new, complete set or the set Moses broke?

In the Talmud, in Bava Batra 14A and B they answer: both sets. The broken tablets were carried in the Ark along with the whole tablets, throughout Israel's wanderings and finally placed in the Holy of Holies, קודש קדושים, in the Temple after its construction. I would like to offer this as our our metaphor for our work over these next 10 Days of Awe. That each of us is an ערון קודש (*Aron Kodesh*) a Holy Ark and we each carry inside of ourselves a set of broken tablets and a set of whole tablets. These two together are our complete self. To heal we must acknowledge and to accept the broken pieces of ourselves.

There is a view in our society, that we can reinvent or remake ourselves. This is the goal of much popular self-help literature. But this is not the Jewish perspective. According to our

tradition we cannot reinvent ourselves, because the broken places inside us never completely heal, they remain broken. Here is an example. This year, in adult education, we studied the laws of speech in the Talmud and the prohibition against gossip or using words that hurt. Everyone in the class - everyone, without exception - could remember a time they had been hurt or embarrassed by something someone had said to them, or said about them, sometimes in public, sometimes in private. Not only could they remember it, they could still feel the embarrassment and the shame those words caused, two, 10, 30, even 50 years later. They could still touch that broken place because the hurt never goes away completely. It seems that it is much easier to remember past hurts and embarrassments than it is to remember former successes.

So, like the Ark, we carry our broken pieces with us throughout our lives just as we also carry the whole parts, the good parts. Tomorrow we will read about Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. There is no more human, or more flawed, hero than Abraham. The first patriarch, the founder of our religion could speak directly to God... but he could not talk to his wife or his son. We are proud of Abraham's flaws, we love to brag that Jewish religious figures are flawed because in their humanity we recognize our own imperfections and shortcomings. They are anything but whole, none of them are complete. Abraham can never overcome his flaws. Jacob tries but his process is incomplete. Probably Joseph and Judah come the closest to overcoming their core wounds and becoming as healed as can be. Joseph grows from becoming the spoiled, favored son of Jacob, hated by his brothers, sold into slavery and abandoned. Nonetheless, through his suffering he finds a new humility that enables him to ultimately forgive his brothers. And Judah, his brother, is taught by his daughter-in-law Tamar, that empathy and commitment are more important than power and position. He too finds a way toward reconciliation. From jealousy, selfishness, and betrayal Joseph and Judah find their way back to reconciliation and love.

We learn the most about ourselves from our mistakes, our failures, and our wounds. For me the process is never easy. I have had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, to even

begin. Many Rosh Hashanas and Yom Kippurs have passed and I have said the words but avoided the work. For one simple reason, it is painful to touch one's broken places. But, I can say with absolute certainty that whatever wisdom I have acquired, I have gained from my mistakes, not my successes. To the extent that I am generous now, it is because I have had to confront my fundamentally selfish nature. Whatever empathy I have, has been gained by confronting my narcissism and my terror at not having my own needs met. To the extent that I can hold the needs of others, I have had to accept my own anxiety and my fear of rejection and not have those feelings overwhelm me. These are just a sample of my broken pieces. I share them, not because they are special, but to demonstrate that each of us has our own unique wound and suffering. If we are willing to touch them and feel that pain we can become more whole. This is the opportunity of these High Holy Days. This is function of teshuvah. To find a way to grow, to heal, to integrate our broken parts with our whole parts, To become more whole.

Wholeness, or שלמות (*shlemut*) in Hebrew, has the same root as peace שלום (*shalom*), ם-ל-ש (shin-lamed-mem). We cannot find peace, not inner-peace nor peace among people unless we know our own interior landscape, all of it. Not just the parts we like, but the parts we hate or fear. Until then we can never know ourselves or understand our loved ones, our friends, or the wider world. The world is confusing and seemingly growing more dangerous. Frequently, as individuals, as a community or as a nation, we face difficult choices. We cannot make good choices if we are ruled by our fears, by our anger, or our prejudicess. These are the emotional expressions of the broken places inside of us that we refuse to recognize. When we disown them we become their slaves and they become our masters, and we make choices that can ruin our lives.

We carry the broken tablets with us, all our lives, wherever we go. These High Holy Days, beginning tonight, let us touch them and be healed by them. This is what the Psalmist meant when he wrote, "God desires the broken heart, the shattered heart." (Psalm 51:17) Because the broken heart is vulnerable. It is open to change. It is the necessary

precondition to heal and to become whole. This is the goal of these Holy Days. It is not an easy path. But it is the only path we have. Shannah tovah.