

# Rosh Hashanah Evening 2015

Rabbi Dean Kertesz

Temple Beth Hillel

Richmond, CA

<http://tbhrichmond.org>

Welcome everyone.

One little piece of business before we begin. Please turn off your cell phones, so the time we spend together will not be disturbed by that nagging incessant ring. Give yourself a sanctuary in time, for the time we are together.

Again, welcome everyone We gather together, once again, at the beginning of the New Year, Rosh Hashanah 5776. For some of us this is the first time we have been to synagogue in a year, for some of us this is the first time we have been to synagogue in a long-time and for some of us this is a special day, but also part of the regular cycle of our Jewish lives week in and week out. Tonight none of that matters. We are all here together at the beginning of the New Year. Since it is a beginning, no one is more special, no one is more pious, no one is a “better” or “worse” Jew; a phrase I wish we could strike from our vocabulary. Whether you are a believer or not, one of the gifts of Rosh Hashanah is that we are all equal, in the eyes of God and in the eyes of the collective Jewish historical experience. Our presence here is what matters.

Every *Erev Rosh Hashanah* I welcome everyone who does not feel comfortable, or for whom the service is not familiar to relax and not worry. That if you get lost or don't know what's going on to turn to the person next to you and ask for some guidance. There is a talmudic dictum, קל ישראל בזה ארזים זה בזה, all Israel is responsible, each for the other. In that spirit, particularly on the High Holy Days, I feel that we are all responsible for each other's spiritual experience during these holy days. So if you feel lost turn to your neighbor and ask for help. Or if you think your neighbor seems lost, check-in with them, and offer assistance. And if someone asks you for help or offers assistance that you don't need, or if you feel your prayer is interrupted, be gracious none the less. Almost 100 years ago the Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan of Radom taught his disciples that their ecstatic prayer on the High Holy Days would not be received in heaven unless they showed as great care for their neighbors around them.

This year these instructions, to help one another, are more challenging because this year, we are using a new *Mahzor, Mishkan Tefillah*, the first new Mahzor for the Reform movement in 40 years. This seems appropriate for Rosh Hashanah: things should be both familiar and different. Familiar because it helps us get into the spirit of prayer. Different, because we need to be shaken up and not to be complacent. For those of you who have attended regularly there will be some differences. We hope these differences will for the most part be positive: some new readings and meditations to contemplate when your mind wanders, transliteration of the Hebrew that enables you to sing along with the choir or pray with the

reader. Some translations that are more true to the intentions of the prayer. This mahzor also has a look and layout that feels more contemporary, or at least will for the first 20 years. I am sure that there will also be some things you will miss from Gates of Prayer. That is a little like life. We change, we grow, we gain things and we lose things. I want to thank Sam Genirberg for making our acquisition of these new *mahzorim* possible, by his generous donation in memory of his beloved wife Rose. You will find a bookplate inside the front cover of your *mahzorim*. This gift to us is a testament to Rose and Sam's commitment to and love for each other for more than 60 years and their commitment to and love of this congregation. Commitment and love are what it takes to sustain a relationship and to sustain a community. Love without commitment will not last and commitment without love is a grim existence empty of joy. We need both to have healthy relationships and strengthening our relationships is one of the primary tasks of Rosh Hashanah. Three relationships in particular: our relationship to God, our relationship to each other, and our relationship with ourselves.

When I say our relationship to God, I mean that everyone has a relationship to something greater than themselves. For some of us, theists or believers, it is God. For others, who are not believers whether atheists, agnostics, or I never really gave it much thought people, this thing that is greater than you may be your highest ideals, or your moral calling, or your love of others, or your desire to do good in the world. But I believe that all of us have something that calls to us to be more than just concerned with ourselves and our own needs - but rather to care for and serve the needs

of others. However you wish to describe it, Judaism teaches that this drive: to do good, to be of service, to make the world a better place, is part of our nature... built into us, so to speak. But, in our day-to-day lives, in the values of self-aggrandizement and self-satisfaction that drive our consumer economy, we are drawn away from this deeply human need, to be of service and to serve. These high holidays are our annual opportunity to wipe away the grime, the distortions of value, and the compromises we make and return to a clearer understanding of our values, and cultivate a more open relationship with God - if you wish, or of our better selves. To reconcile ourselves to that essential relationship - between God, or something greater, and ourselves - that give life meaning. If we choose to, we can open our hearts and see where we have strayed from the path and realign ourselves with our highest ideals. We can reconcile ourselves with God or our values or our higher power. Choose the language that works for you.

The same is true of our relationships with others. Love begins with high ideals and dreams, which become eroded by the day-to-day reality of living. So at times it seems that we can hardly stand our most intimate partners, our spouses, our children. Yet, I have heard people tell me, after the death of a spouse, "Some of his habits used to drive me crazy, and now I miss him so much." These high holy days are our annual opportunity to reconcile with those with love. To clean away the day-to-day and week-to-week frustrations of life and begin again. To see the essence of those we love

anew and to reaffirm our love for them and to reconcile ourselves with them.

Finally, perhaps the hardest, is to reconcile ourselves with ourselves. We are often our hardest critics, filled with anger, regret, self-loathing and guilt. Can we find a way to forgive ourselves our faults and shortcomings so that we can be our authentic selves, kind, open, empathetic, and caring? In *The Essence of Judaism*, Leo Baeck, the great German Reform Rabbi of the mid-Twentieth Century, wrote, "The goal is teshuvah, the return to the origin, the pure and creative within ourselves."

The High Holy Days are about the most basic issues we face: life, death, meaning, purpose, who we want to be, and how we want to live. These are the questions we face when we are alone at night, or on days like Rosh Hashanah when all the noise is shut off and the distractions are shut out.

I have used this word, reconcile, repeatedly and consciously. To reconcile is different than to forgive. To reconcile is defined as restoring friendly relations between people, as in, "she wanted to be **reconciled with** her father." Or to settle one's differences, make peace, to make up, to coexist in harmony. In this sense reconciliation is much harder than forgiveness. We can see this is our confessional prayer where we read, *selach lanu, mahal lanu, kaper lanu*. As Rabbi Simon Jacobson has written in *60 Days: A Spiritual Guide to the High Holy Days*, *Selach lanu* comes from *selichah* meaning "pardon." To ask for pardon is to say to the one we have injured:

"I am sorry for what I did; I sincerely regret having done it, and I will never do it again." According to Jewish law, the appropriate response to this request is for the one we've injured to believe we are sincere and to respond positively. *Mechal lanu* comes from *mechilah*, meaning "wiping away." Here, we are asking the one we've injured to restore the relationship to the former level of warmth and intimacy. For the one who has been injured a positive response to this is naturally difficult. But it is within each person's God-given powers to forgive to this extent." Mechila is reconciliation. This is much harder than accepting someone's apology. This summer during a visit with a close friend, he said that his wife had forgiven his sister, but couldn't be in a relationship with her. What does it mean to forgive but not be in a relationship? How can there be forgiveness if there is not relationship? Reconciliation is the hardest and highest step of the process of teshuvah because both parties, the wronged and the one who caused the wrong, must risk reaching out to each other and find a new way to be together, to live together, to grow together. Leo Baeck also wrote, in *The Essence of Judaism* (page 230) "All reconciliation involves the way to the future; for in all return there is a progression. Mankind has the capacity of continual self renewal, of continual rebirth, of breaking obstruction, of turning ever again to atonement and reconciliation. For the path of history, the good remains mankind's task despite all the bypaths of its errors. As an old saying has it: 'A sin may extinguish a commandment, but it cannot extinguish the Torah' (Sotah 21A) - The 'light' remains and in its radiance mankind finds its future. As another saying of the Talmud has it, the 'day of

atonement is the day which never ends.” The possibility for reconciliation is always open to us. But tonight we are reminded of their importance.

Here is a practical suggestion. It is traditional practice to ask others for generic forgiveness tonight and through Rosh Hashanah. Something like, please forgive me for anything I did in the past year that hurt you. It is also traditional to give blanket forgiveness to everyone. Last year, I suggested that we change this practice and its boilerplate nature and to apologize to someone for the specific hurts we had caused in the past year.

This year, in the spirit of reconciliation, let me suggest something else. In addition to forgiving someone who has harmed you in the past, bless them. Express your love for them by wishing the best for them - and you - in the coming year.

Rosh HaShanah is not just a new year. It is an invitation to new beginnings: in your relationship with God, in your relationship with Judaism, in your relationship with those you love most, in your relationship with yourself.

Put aside the noise and distraction and return again, “return to who you are, born and reborn again, חדש ימינו כקדם, אליך ונשובה, - Turn to us, as we return to you, renew our days as of old. Let us be reconciled. Let us begin anew.