

Erev Rosh Hashanah 2019/5780 - The Time Is Short

I want to begin, as I always do, with a word of welcome. It is good to see you here. It is humbling to worship with you. I see many familiar faces and I see some new faces as well. Welcome, ברוכים הבאים, blessings to those who have come, and שנה טובה ומתוקה, I wish you a good and sweet new year. Just a few words of logistical instruction before I launch into my drash. First I just want to remind you to turn off your cell phones or put them in airplane mode. Our spiritual guidance systems are very delicate and just one cell phone ringing can cause our prayers to crash down to earth, rather than ascend to the heavenly heights. So please, silence your cell phones now.

I want to welcome our new chazanit, our new cantor, Shayndel Adler, to our community. I trust you will find her lovely voice and her even more lovely spirit a welcome guide as we work our way through these holy days together. And we must work our way through these days together. Despite appearances, us up here, and you there, we are all in this together. These services cannot be done for us, but must be done by us. As they say in Twelve Step, it only works if you work it. So please, join in, sing along, read the words, pray the prayers. That is what the mahzor is for. This gold book is your spiritual guide book. Unless you don't want to use it. That's ok too. Just join in, that's all.

Prayer is hard. It does not come naturally to us, as perhaps it did to our grandparents. I like to think their faith was simpler and came easier. Perhaps that is an illusion. The only memory I have of my grandfather, my father's father is as a little boy when he wrapped me in his tallit, with his hand around my tiny shoulders as he prayed *shacharit* the morning service when he came to visit us when I was about four years old. Perhaps my belief in the purity of his religious commitment is just the memory of a little boy, but I know that my faith comes with difficulty and my prayer takes work to come forward, to flow. I'm guessing it is the same for all of us. I am guessing that for some of us here tonight, prayer seems alien, God seems alien or perhaps an illusion, or perhaps a delusion. Tonight, none of that matters. Tonight is *erev Rosh Hashanah* and we are

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here together, as Jews have always been, since long, long ago, saying the ancient words, holding the same hopes and questions... am I good enough, am I strong enough to change, can I continue to grow and be a better person. It doesn't matter why we come. It matters that you are here. That we are all drawn here, to be here again, with Jews, grappling with the ancient challenge of the Days of Awe. How have you been in the world? Can you be better than you were. Each year Rosh Hashanah calls us back and it reminds us of this too, that we are mortal and that the time is short.

This past month we lost two members of our congregation, Allan Sagle and Jay Weidenfeld. They died about a week apart and I was lucky enough to spend some time with both of them before their deaths. And even though I knew both of them were sick, I just assumed they would still be around, so I could enjoy their company, their essence, their goodness, their being-ness. Then they were gone. The world is a little more quiet without the sound of their voices in it. Their deaths were a shock. But they reminded me that the time we have is short. Life is so overwhelming, so all encompassing, this flood of sensory experiences, of thoughts, of emotions. We are so enmeshed in it, that it is easy to imagine that life is eternal, that we will live forever. It is how we get through the days, by ignoring our mortality. But the death of someone we care about, someone important to us, someone we love, reminds us that we are mortal. That our time is limited.

Pema Chodrin the Buddhist teacher asks, "Since death is certain, and the time of death is uncertain, what is the most important thing?" This is the same question that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur ask of us: what is the most important thing? They come each year to remind us that life is not guaranteed. It is a gift. One that can be taken at any time. What will we do with that gift?

The central image of Rosh Hashanah is of a courtroom. God is seated on the Divine Throne, acting as a judge. There is book, open before God that lists all our actions, both

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good, bad, and indifferent, and the Divine voice asks, is this your name, are these your actions in the past year, are these the things you did that hurt others, that caused harm, is this how you harmed yourself. God also asks, are these your good deeds, the things you did that helped others, that made the world a little bit better, that healed you? In this metaphor, sadly, the bad deeds usually outweigh the good and so we must recognize our shortcomings. What can we answer, but yes. It is all true. I don't want to admit it. I would rather avoid it. I would rather sleep walk through my life, in pleasant ignorance, distracted by the business of my daily life. But the central message of Rosh Hashanah is that we cannot avoid our annual accounting.

This is the theme of Unetaneh Tokef, which we will sing together tomorrow morning and again on Yom Kippur. The words mean something like, let us recognize the holiness of this day. It recognizes that God is our Judge, our Shepherd, and all beings pass before God and God decides our destiny, who will live and who will die, and how we will die (by fire, by water) and how we will live (exalted or driven). If God is the awesome and exalted judge, we mortals are “ like broken vessels, like withered grass, like a flower that must fade, a shadow moving on... a dream that flies away.”

This is a hard image to take in. These prayers, these Days of Awe are difficult for us. We are perhaps too modern, too sophisticated, to appreciate the power of these days. I know that many of us do not believe in God and many of us do not know our rituals or our sacred texts and it is hard to inhabit these prayers in a way that speaks to us. I say this without judgement, but as a fact. So let me share a story about Unetaneh Tokef, that may provide us with a way to enter more deeply into these Days of Awe.

Forty six years ago, the Yom Kippur War began. It was the most difficult war since the 1948 War of Independence. There was a time at the beginning when some Israelis, including Moshe Dayan, lost their nerve and thought the country might be destroyed. It was a national trauma and over 2,500 young men were killed and thousands more

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wounded, scarred physically and mentally for life. And no community was hit harder than a small kibbutz in the Jordan Valley, Beit Ha Shita, where 11 members were killed, sons, husbands, fathers and brothers. The Israeli journalist Matti Freidman wrote, "For a small and tightly knit community, it was a nearly incomprehensible loss." Israelis understood that their pain was distilled into the heart of this small kibbutz that had lost so many. The kibbutz carried the pain of that loss in its heart for years. In 1990, the Israeli musician Yair Rosenblum was invited to perform at the kibbutz and wanted to compose something for them, to memorialize their dead, perhaps to ease their pain. He was a pop music composer, not a religious one, not even a religious person. He sought an appropriate piece and in the end, he composed a new musical setting for Unetaneh Tokef, combining traditional Ashkenazi, Sephardi and modern melodies.

Now, why am I telling you this story? Let me explain. You must understand that Beit Hashita, like most kibbutzim in Israel, is completely secular, atheist in fact; as far from religion as possible. But, nonetheless, Rosenblum premiered his setting of Unetaneh Tokef on Erev Yom Kippur at the 17th anniversary for the fallen of Beit Hashita. Friedman continues, "Rosenblum had introduced an unapologetically religious text into a stronghold of secularism and touched the rawest nerve of the community, that of the Yom Kippur war. The result appears to have been overpowering. Michal Shalev, a kibbutz member wrote that "When Hanoch began to sing it broke open the gates of heaven, the audience was struck dumb,... It was like a shared religious experience that linked the experience of loss (which was especially present since the war), with the words of the Jewish prayer"

Think about that language, "it broke open the gates of heaven." This is not the usual language of a kibbutznik of a non-believer. So why did Unetaneh Tokef speak to them, despite their atheism? Perhaps because their hearts were cracked open by loss. Perhaps, because their loss made them understand that the preciousness of life as real, not a theory, not something far off, but right there with them, in every moment, as I feel

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it present with me since those two funerals a few weeks ago. They understood that the veil between this reality and the next world is so thin it almost isn't there. When one's heart is cracked open we can reach out almost touch heaven and love and loss remind us that there is more to life than what we know and understand through our intellect. In those moments, with our perception heightened the gates of heaven do break open.

Another personal anecdote: every day on my way home from work I drive by mother's apartment, where she used to live, and even though she died almost two years ago, every time I drive by her apartment, for a second, for just a second, I think, "Oh, I'll drop in and see my mom," as I did so many times when she was alive... but of course, it was never often enough. And then, with that finality we all know so well I go, "Nope. Not anymore." All of us who have lost someone we love wish we could have just one more moment with them. They come to us in our dreams and in our thoughts now, but never again in physical form. And when they are gone all the petty habits they had that drove us crazy when they were alive remind us how much we miss them and how petty we were.

Death is certain and the time of death is uncertain, so what is the most important thing? This is the question of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. So what is the most important thing? It is different for each of us. Do we take the time to give our partners the attention they need and desire? Do we spend enough time with our children, or our parents, because we know that time is finite? Do we hold onto grudges? If we do, We must ask ourselves why? What do our grudges do for us? Is this how we want to go through whatever time we have left, nursing resentment? Or do we want to be a force for good. To bring light and joy to those around us? Each of us has our own answer. Each of us has our most important thing. Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the Days of Awe that link them are our attempt to crack open the Gates of Heaven. If one central metaphor is a book that records all our deeds, the other is of a great gate - the Gates of Heaven -

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being opened up, to allow our prayers and petitions and confessions to enter. And for the gates of our hearts to crack open, to answer the question: what is the most important thing? What a gift, this opportunity to rest in the stillness of these Days of Awe, to swim in the words of our ancient prayers and explore our own deepest longings. It is so easy to become deadened, hard hearted, divorced from who we really are, what we truly long for, that most important thing. But we do not have to be. The Unitaneh Tokef, this profound meditation on life, death and meaning, ends with these words, "You do not wish the death of sinners, but to return from their ways and live." Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is our opportunity to return and live in the knowledge that life is precious, time is short, and we are capable of fanning the flames of holiness within us and lighting the world... if we choose to take the opportunity. Shannah tovah.