

EREV ROSH HASHANAH – 5776/2015

Shanah Tovah.

Here we are, greeting once again, a Jewish new year.
5776.

Gathering in our finery, familiar liturgy and melody, anticipation for tomorrow's sounding of the shofar...all generate chemical and electric responses in our minds that tickle reflective neurons.

A new year. A new chapter in the Book of Life. A new slate.

For many of our families school has begun.

Another variable in the rhythm of living that enriches our new start optimism and our embrace of old ideals and values.

This year I will lose that 10 pounds. I will spend more time outside. I will learn something new. I will meditate every day. I will only say what I mean, and with compassion...

I wonder how many of us entering this season of return, of fresh starts, have in our hearts a yearning to get closer to God or get right by God. Some of us are comfortable with this language and I see their nods and sweet smiles.

I am also willing to bet that most of us don't really think about God except when we come here on a night like this one. Erev Rosh Hashanah. The High Holy Days.

It might be that we simply don't believe in God. It might be that we believe in God but not the one that acts or fails to act on the universe at will: rewarding, rescuing, punishing.

At any rate, we keep coming back... Why? Guilt? An irrational, nonetheless palpable longing to connect with tradition? For our children? Really?

Some fifty years ago, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel addressing rabbinical students, asked the question, this way:

What does a person expect to attain when entering the synagogue?

*In pursuit of learning one goes to a library;
for aesthetic enrichment, one goes to the art museum;
for pure music, to the concert hall.*

What then, is the purpose of going to the synagogue?

I asked this question just last Rosh Hashanah, Why do we non-believers feel so compelled to gather on Holy Days? Feel so compelled to keep the synagogue alive? I felt so rebellious and clever...only to discover that one of the old guys with a beard and accent already asked the question, and decades ago.

In this particular talk, Heschel continues:

*Many are the facilities which help us to acquire the important worldly virtues, skills, and techniques. But where should one learn about the insights of the spirit?
Many are the opportunities for public speech; where are the occasions for inner silence?
It is easy to find people who will teach us to be eloquent; but who will teach us how to be still?
It is surely important to have a sense of reverence.*

Insights of the spirit.
Inner silence.
Stillness.
Reverence. Awe. Amazement.

Where should one learn the general wisdom of compassion? The fear of being cruel? Then danger of being callous? Where should one learn that the greatest truth is found in contrition?

Compassion.
Contrition. Remorse. Release.

*Important and precious as the development of our intellectual faculties is, the cultivation of a sensitive conscience is indispensable.
We are all in danger of sinking into the darkness of vanity; we are all involved in worshipping our own egos.
Where should we become sensitive to the pitfalls of cleverness, or to the realization that expedience is not the acme of wisdom?*

Conscience.
Consciousness.
Self-awareness and the possibility of improvement.

Notice Heschel's genius to have noticed in the 1960's and 1970's,

Heschel who modeled stepping out of the synagogue to march in the streets alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, when justice demanded difficult change and difficult change demanded exemplary leadership,

Conservative Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel reveals, by omission, that Jews go to synagogue to develop what I will call spiritual competencies. He doesn't mention God.

We go to synagogue hoping for a fleeting moment of:

Insight.
Intuitive imaginative expansive pondering.
Inner silence.
Stillness.
Reverence. Awe. Amazement.
Compassion.
Contrition. Remorse. Release.
Conscience.
Consciousness.
Self-awareness and the possibility of improvement.

But Rabbi, do you believe in God? Are you saying you're an atheist?

Here's what I think about God.

The Hebrew name for God (that we pronounce Adonai) is comprised of four letters, yod hay vav hay - YHWH. Grammatically speaking the first yod, the initial letter Y, denotes the imperfect tense of a verb. The hay vav hay, HWH, are the root letters of the Hebrew verb to be. The tetragrammaton, the four lettered name of God, examined etymologically indicates that our God is an infinite source of being...

An infinite source of being is an awfully abstract concept. It is difficult to grasp and terribly unsatisfying when we cry out from the depths of crisis, tragedy, and self-delusion.

As Jews, we are the recipients of Torah. Not simply the scrolls resting luxuriously in the ark on this bima, we are the recipients of thousands of years of literature in which one can clearly track an ever changing understanding of God from one generation to the next.

Thousands of years of distinctly Jewish ideas influenced by human interaction with ancient, medieval, and modern neighbors:

From whose God is mightier to maanderings in theology, philosophy, and ultimately science deeply affect our understanding of the nature of God.

I personally find that the more I learn from science about the origins of the universe and human evolution, I am more (in Heschel's words) radically amazed by natural beauty and devastation and I feel more deeply compassionate towards my loved ones and strangers.

For me, it is not about defining what God is. It's about being present in profound and subtle moments, noticing and appreciating beauty, witnessing grief and pain and accepting it compassionately...

A contemporary Jewish thinker and scholar, one close to my heart, writes the following about his own theological journey:

I had no basis for believing in a God who had commanded specific forms of religious behavior. The pillars of naïve faith had given way, and its edifice lay in ruins. I had no answers to the great questions. I was no longer a believer, in the usual sense of that term...

OK Been there. Done that. Now what? Right?

...but I learned rather quickly that I was still a religious person...

Some of us need to ponder the nature of God. Many of us don't. Yet we still value aha! moments. We want to practice more compassionate gestures towards ourselves and others. We want to mark the seasons and milestones of our journeys and learning in life.

The contemporary Jewish thinker and scholar is Rabbi Arthur Green. He has served as the president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. He was a professor of Jewish Thought at Brandeis University. Currently he is the rector of our country's youngest rabbinical program at Boston Hebrew College, a multi-denominational seminary.

He describes encounters with the sacred in his book, **RADICAL JUDAISM**, this way:

I consider the sacred to be the most important and meaningful dimension of human life. The sacred refers to an inward, mysterious sense of awesome presence, a reality deeper than the kind we ordinarily experience.

Life bears within the possibility of inner transcendence; the moments when we glimpse it are so rare and powerful that they call upon us to transform the rest of our lives in their wake.

These moments can come without warning, though they may be evoked by great beauty, by joy, by terror, or by anything else that causes us to stop and interrupt our ordinary all-encompassing and yet essentially superficial perception of reality.

When that mask of ordinariness falls away, our consciousness is left with amount of nakedness, a confrontation with reality that we do not know how to put into language...I believe, in other words, in the possibility and irreducible reality of religious experience.

Insight.

Intuitive imaginative expansive pondering.

Inner silence.

Stillness.

Reverence. Awe. Amazement.

Compassion.

Contrition. Remorse. Release.

Conscience.

Consciousness.

Self-awareness and the possibility of improvement.

Did you know that we, Temple Beth Tikvah, have a mission statement? Take a look at our website:

Temple Beth Tikvah is a Reform Jewish congregation that is warm, welcoming, and built on a foundation of trust. We strive to be a beacon for the diverse Jewish community of Central Oregon that honors and respects the values and traditions of Judaism:

- Community

We are especially supportive of our Jewish community; we value our friendships, our diversity and the social enrichment of Jewish life.

- Education

We greatly value life-long learning of Judaism, Torah, Jewish holidays, our Jewish heritage and culture, and the Jewish experience.

- Religion

We provide uplifting religious experiences in Jewish observances and events, enriched by musical participation.

- Social Action

We provide support for a diversity of non-profit organizations through social action. Our care for the well-being of our broader local community helps to heal the world.

**We are on the right track...
But I also think we are at a crossroads.**

In our eighth year as a synagogue we can feel that we've grown past the new, emerging community stage. Our maturation, just like growing up, is bittersweet.

The excitement and sense of accomplishment of starting a new community is invigorating. The pioneer spirit is one of inclusion and welcoming, can-do optimism, and satisfaction.

Think about the beautiful babies and toddlers and young children in our congregational family. They are so cute. Their curiosity and playfulness are contagious. So many hugs and I love you's.

Then there's puberty. The same cute kids are no longer so cute. They mean well but developmentally have no respect for adults. They only see what is wrong and what they'll never do when they grow up. You still love them. But you find them tiring, unnecessarily argumentative, and you look forward to getting past this stage.

We are an established Jewish organization in town. We are growing in numbers. We have board meetings and committees. We have services and Sunday school, adult learning opportunities, social gatherings, and this year, a youth group!

Everything we wanted that first gathering in the home of Ann and Michael Rosenfeld is taking shape.

Take a peek at the person sitting next to you, left and right. Now in front of you and behind you. Family. Friends. AND people you don't know, right?

New members mean new friends... But we have to remember, to those visiting us and just recently joining us we do not come off like the ragtag start up we so affectionately remember. We are now an institution. Our new friends wonder how to get in on all the fun. Events are a great way to create opportunities for getting to know one another, right?

So we offer our services and programs. In order to do so, we have meetings, we ask people to volunteer homes, food, resources, time, and energy to plan, prepare, facilitate, and clean up.

It becomes work. Some of us flee because life already provides us with ample opportunities to negotiate and labor. Others among us fill voids in order to get stuff done.

Our new, start up synagogue is all of a sudden just like the synagogues we left in suburbs and big cities, filled with joys and annoyances.

**Growing up is bittersweet for people and organizations.
In pondering why Jews go to synagogue, I think Rabbi Heschel presents us with an opportunity to own up to our own reasons for being here.**

Insight.
Intuitive imaginative expansive pondering.
Inner silence.
Stillness.
Reverence. Awe. Amazement.
Compassion.
Contrition. Remorse. Release.
Conscience.
Consciousness.
Self-awareness and the possibility of improvement.

I think developing excellence in our programming is important and will always be a driving principle in my work with Temple Beth Tikvah.

But I don't think meaningful worship, thoughtful discourse, community service projects, and fun social gatherings in and of themselves move us to:

Insight.
Intuitive imaginative expansive pondering.
Inner silence.
Stillness.
Reverence. Awe. Amazement.
Compassion.
Contrition. Remorse. Release.
Conscience.
Consciousness.
Self-awareness and the possibility of improvement.

Programs are like vessels. Some are utilitarian. Some are decoration. What we are beginning to understand in the Jewish world of organizations is that the quality of our engagement during those programs matters.

The quality of our engagement matters. Knowing one another, accepting one another's strengths and foibles, truly caring for each other changes the quality of our experiences together.

Relationship is everything.

We really need to spend more time getting to know each other, developing relationships akin to extended family – more forgiving and intimate than friendship, without the baggage of family.

Temple Beth Tikvah will help. Beginning Friday night, October 16, we transform our less formal second Friday of the month Kabbalat Shabbat gatherings into smaller more intimate dinners so congregants can get to know each other. We are calling the program shabbat@home. Each month, every member of the congregation will be invited to another member's home for a Shabbat dinner. Dinner hosts will receive a shabbat@home kit containing Shabbat table blessings, discussion topics and activities.

Our Jewish Community school will help. This year Temple Beth Tikvah, Shalom Bayit, and Chabad will each host two events around Jewish holidays for Jewish families in Central

Oregon. That's six family friendly events over the course of this year. Come out and celebrate Erev Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Chanukah, Tu B'shevat, Purim, Passover, and Shavuot with the Jewish Community School Friends and Family Events. Friends and family refer to families with preschoolers, grandparents, and anybody who is curious about who our young families are and what it is we could be doing to serve them. All are welcome.

You might remember that I asked you last year about what you enjoy doing and might like to try doing with other TBT folks. We've collected data about special interests. A bunch of women play mah jongg regularly. The men like pubs and the occasional poker game. There are a couple book clubs represented among us. We've hiked and snowshoed and enjoyed it. We like picnics. We like to eat, and drink.

Let's do more. Let's meet up on the mountain for apres ski food and drink. Let's watch movies, go to restaurants, cook together.

How do we cultivate fertile ground for sharing our thoughts and our concerns so we can discover mutual ground for exploring quality of life issues, companionship, and meaningful community service.

Again Temple Beth Tikvah will help. I will use social media to launch meaningful conversations. I ask everyone to join Facebook and become my Facebook Friend. If you need help, email me. We have teenagers who are willing to sit with you and walk you through the process of signing up and accessing your news feed.

Just following Simchat Torah, when we begin our annual Torah reading cycle again, I will begin posting conversation starters. Join in the discourse. If it's interesting enough, share it with your own network of friends.

Once you become my friend, look for our Temple Beth Tikvah page. Evie Lerner posts event reminders and lovely birthday wishes there. Every so often members post articles, jokes, and requests for favors or crowdsource advice.

When you want to take a hike or a bike ride, go fishing or to the movies, a local festival or event...Post it, invite anyone who is up for it to join you or look for you there.

The more connection we cultivate among ourselves, the more we get to know each other, the more meaningful our experience with Temple Beth Tikvah will be. Our programs will eventually be extensions of our intellectual and cultural interests. Our community service will be an extension of our shared concerns about the world.

Why do Jews continue to come to synagogue?

Insight.

Intuitive imaginative expansive pondering.

Inner silence.

Stillness.

Reverence. Awe. Amazement.

Compassion.

Contrition. Remorse. Release.

Conscience.

Consciousness.

Self-awareness and the possibility of improvement.

Ken y'hi ratzon, may our journey together manifest such fleeting moments...