

## **Rosh Hashanah Morning 5770**

I'm happy to welcome you today as we dive into another High Holy Day season together. It is a strange thing we do. We join together quite publicly and spend much more time in each other's company than at any other time of the year. At the same time, we strive to enter into our own private reflections on the year that has gone by. I hope that these ten days will give you an opportunity to do both. May we all feel more closely connected to each other at the end of this time, and may we all feel more closely connected to our own souls. Most of all, may each of us be blessed with at least a brief moment when we feel ourselves connected to that which is beyond our own selves.

I approach the task of writing High Holy Day sermons with both joy and trepidation. I am presented with an opportunity that is open to very few: to speak on issues which are truly important to me to a significant audience. When an idea sweeps me off my feet over the course of the year, I carefully file it away and bring it out for these Days of Awe.

My parents like to reminisce about their rabbi's sermons in 1976, the year the United States celebrated its bicentennial. Rabbi Lipman z"l launched into his series on life in America with a rousing erev Rosh Hashanah sermon which began: "America—what's good about it? Absolutely nothing!" And it was all downhill after that. At the time of his retirement, the board of Temple Sinai published a collection of his High Holy Day sermons which was widely distributed among Reform synagogues in the United States. Not for light reading. Rabbi Lipman used his bully pulpit to rail against everything that frustrated him, whether it was U.S. policy abroad, or congregants who only showed up two days of the year.

In writing my sermons, I'm aware that I need to find a balance between the world beyond us and the world that is within us. Ideally, the *Yamim Nora'im* should draw our attention to those areas of the globe that are in need of repair, whether close by or far away. But we should also give attention to those parts of

our souls which are in need of care and attention. We have so few chances over the course of the year just to sit and be. Now is that time. This year, I have chosen to focus in on our inner work for Rosh Hashanah. On Yom Kippur, I will open up our perspectives on some of the troubled areas of our world.

For many of us, Rosh Hashanah serves as a rehearsal for Yom Kippur. Even the Torah pays scant attention to this day. Here is all that Leviticus has to say about what it calls *Yom Teruah*—a day for sounding the horn: “In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts. You shall not work at your occupations; and you shall bring an offering by fire to the Lord.” Numbers 29 elaborates a bit more, but mostly in relation to what sacrifices to bring. Here is what it says: “In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded.” The text then lays out the required sacrifices, which happen to be identical to those offered on Rosh Hodesh—the festival welcoming the new moon. Not much to hang a holiday on.

We think of Rosh Hashanah as the second holiest day of the year, but it is not. The rabbis who laid out the specific laws governing the day were very clear that Rosh Hashanah’s level of sanctity is beneath that of Shabbat. Shabbat may fall each week, but only Yom Kippur, which the Torah identifies as *Shabbat shabbaton* the Sabbath of Sabbaths, is holier than Shabbat itself.

What this means in practise is that many synagogues modify their observance of Rosh Hashanah when it falls out on Shabbat. The shofar is not sounded. A very palpable silence replaces the searing sound of the ram’s horn. These synagogues observe a second day of Rosh Hashanah, and there is a great sense of breaking through as the sound of the shofar is heard at last on Sunday.

Another significant change in more traditional synagogues is that Avinu Malkeinu is omitted on Shabbat. This is because this prayer at its essence is one of petition: asking God to forgive our sins and inscribe us for a good new year.

Shabbat is God's day off, so from that perspective it makes sense to omit this prayer. But can you imagine Rosh Hashanah without it? Many of us will feel we've reached the heart of the Rosh Hashanah service when we arrive at *U'netaneh Tokef* which states that our fates are written out on this day and sealed on Yom Kippur. But if *U'netaneh Tokef* is the heart, Avinu Malkeinu is the soul of the service. I have stood in synagogues many times as this prayer was omitted, and I recall the starkness of that moment as the page was turned and the words left unsaid.

Rosh Hashanah would seem to be relatively minor when it is compared with Yom Kippur or even a regular Shabbat. But this is actually not the case. At the same time that they demoted the holiness of Rosh Hashanah, the rabbis imprinted it with enormous meaning and significance. When the prayer *U'netaneh Tokef* announces "Behold the day of judgement!" it is speaking of Rosh Hashanah, not Yom Kippur. The rabbis understood God's personality to have two primary facets: justice and mercy. At those times when God beheld the world from the perspective of harsh justice, none of us looked good. But when God shifted and instead looked at us through a filter of mercy, we might still have hope for the year to come. The rabbis wrote explicitly that Rosh Hashanah was the day on which God judged the world, the day on which God sat on a throne of judgment. But on Yom Kippur, God arises from the throne of judgment and instead sits on the throne of mercy.

This day is full of contradictions for progressive rabbis and also, I imagine, for progressive congregants. As teachers and theologians, we hold onto a carefully-crafted and nuanced image of God. In general, we cannot imagine blaming God for the disasters, both man-made and natural, which have befallen the Jewish people and others over the course of our history. We embrace scientific principles and understand that there are natural laws which cause some events to unfold as they do. We know that fate is capricious, and it is possible for people to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But Rosh Hashanah is different. Our liturgy for this day speaks of God's transcendent power, not only in the past, but right now and for all time. Traditionally, the prayer leader sings Aleynu and literally prostrates herself before the open ark both to show faith in God but also to demonstrate submission to God's will. We recite the words "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed—who shall live and who shall die" and there may be a part of us that believes that our lives really do hang in the balance.

So, to quote from a rabbinics teacher of mine, *Ma hanachon*—which is correct? Surely we can't have it both ways: either we believe God is all-powerful and has absolute control over our lives, or we don't.

I believe that what is at work within us at this time of year is a heightened awareness of the fragility of life and of our own mortality. Without as many outside distractions, we have the ability to focus on the least comfortable aspects of life—most particularly the fact that it can come to an end at any time. We may or may not be swayed by the majesty of the Rosh Hashanah prayers, but certainly its central message should resonate for us: compared to the grandeur of creation, we are essentially nothing. And yet, we have the *chutzpah* to step forward and call upon God to have compassion upon us. As the conclusion of *Avinu Malkeinu* states, "Be gracious and answer us, although we have no worthy deeds."

Rosh Hashanah reminds us of our puny status. Yom Kippur reminds us of the power we have in the world and particularly over our own lives. You may be familiar with the tale of Rabbi Bunim who instructed us to carry two slips of paper in our pockets at all time: on one slip, we were to write the words "I am but dust and ashes." On the other slip, we were to write the words, "For my sake the world was created." Both are true. We have no power, and we have tremendous power. Our lives are brief shadows upon the earth, but they are also years worth of opportunities to make a difference. At this season, we awaken to the awareness of our own mortality and the briefness of our lives. At the same

time, we declare that we have the power to make something of our puny lives, to set right what is wrong, to repair what is broken, perhaps even to sow peace where there is strife.

There is much that is broken in our world. Every year as I prepare for the High Holy Days, I am aware of something new that threatens the world I love. How terrifying and awesome is this day, this year, this era in which we live. How fortunate that God has blessed us with the inner resources and the courage to make a difference. How lucky that we are essentially optimistic creatures, that we believe in the possibility of a brighter future. But in order to shape the future we envision, we must begin by re-shaping ourselves, by opening ourselves to the possibility for change and transformation.

I pray that this day and the days to come may be times of transformation: may we rediscover within ourselves resources and strengths we had forgotten, and may we find gifts we never knew we had. May we find the courage to reconcile with all those we love and even those we don't. May we enter this new year made new and ready for the challenges that we know we will face. Then this will truly be a year of blessing for us. May we, our loved ones, the Jewish people, and all throughout the world be inscribed and sealed in the book of life, joy, and peace. Amen.