

## October 7<sup>th</sup> Speech – Rodeph Sholom

Shabbat Sholom.

When Rabbi Levine asked me to speak to you tonight about my Jewish journey and how it relates to Shabbat Shuvah – the Sabbath of Return –I asked him how I could return to somewhere I had never been. Let me explain:

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Both of my parents were Jewish and, therefore, I was born Jewish. But we did not observe any of our Jewish rituals. Neither my

father nor my brother became a Bar Mitzvah.

And so, I never went to services for Rosh

Hashanah and Yom Kippur until I met by

husband, Steven Schwinder in 1987.

Unlike me, Steve was raised in a Conservative home and insisted we attend services together every year. And so we began going to the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y every fall for the High Holidays. What a strange feeling to sit through those hours not understanding anything that was going on around me. As the years passed, the music and rituals sounded more familiar, but I

still lacked any real understanding of the significance of what was transpiring.

When our son, Zachary, was three we began thinking of nursery schools for him and I heard there was a brand new school opening at an east side temple named Sharaay Tefila. We joined the Temple and, though Zachary ultimately didn't wind up at their nursery school, we attended High Holiday services there. Zachary eventually began Hebrew School there.

But I wasn't happy. I still didn't have a firm grasp of what was going on at services and

knowing that some day my son would become a Bar Mitzvah, I decided to take an eight-hour marathon Hebrew reading class at the temple.

There, I learned there was such a thing as an adult Bnei Mitzvah, but that one had to first

know how to read Hebrew in order to

participate in the program. And so, over the

next two years, I taught myself how to read

Hebrew. In 1997, I began my Bat Mitzvah

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studies and became a Bat Mitzvah in June of

1998. Next to giving birth to my two children,

it was the most fulfilling thing I have ever done

in my life.

At almost the same time, Rabbi Levine came to talk to me about a book he wanted to write, and I remember him telling me about the Day School here at Rodeph. We visited and Zachary entered in the Second Grade in 1999. Steve and I became members of this congregation, and during the first service we attended I remember feeling I had “come home.”

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Most Jewish holidays celebrate national

events in Jewish History. Passover, for example, commemorates the Exodus, Shavuot, the giving of the Torah and Purim, the deliverance from Haman. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are much more personal in nature.

In Hebrew they are known as *Yamim Nora'im* (Days of Awe); in English, of course, they are referred to as the High Holy Days. On these two holidays, and during the weeks preceding

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them, Jews are instructed to scrupulously examine their deeds, and more significantly, their misdeeds during the previous year. Rosh

Hashanah and Yom Kippur's goal is nothing less than an ethical assessment of one's life.

Yom Kippur serves an important purpose within the total context of the Jewish year. It is a chance for a final reflection on the wrongs which one may have committed against one's friends, relatives or neighbors, intentionally or not, during the past year.

For that reason, the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur assume tremendous significance: how one acts during these days may well influence God's decree on what will

happen to each of us during the coming year.

This ten-day period is known as the Ten Days of Repentance and during this time, religious Jews take special care to give to charity, to avoid gossiping and to be helpful to others.

So, now I do understand what these holidays mean and I take them very very seriously and I attend services before and during them with special thoughtfulness. What a meaningful

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experience it is to review one's actions during the past year and have the opportunity to think about those I have wronged and make amends.

And through all of this, I have discovered the answer to the question of where am I returning to. It seems I am returning to a piece of myself that has always been deep within me-- to my Jewish heritage and soul.

This has been a wonderful journey for me, one that will continue to enrich my life. My family and I want to wish each and every one of you a joyous, healthy and sweet New Year.

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Shanah Tova.