

Discovering Why You Were Created/Rosh Hashanah Sermon

How many of you have ever attended your high school reunion? It can be fun, it can be unsettling. I attend mine in Springfield, Massachusetts, pretty religiously. Like many of you, I was a bit of a *macher* in high school. I was Vice-President of my class and sports editor of the paper so I recognize a fair number of people there. Such an event can really be disconcerting for the simple reason that they do remember you when! You may not believe this, but I've not always tipped the scales at my ideal weight. My eyewear wasn't always utterly fashionable. And when they bring those pictures out to show you, *oy* is all I can say.

Not every reunion attendee sets the highest marks for tact either. *You're Susan Johnson?* one might exclaim! Their whole facial expression conveys the question, what the heck happened to you? You know that devastating look.

But it's also fascinating to discover who your classmates have become, the growth that accompanies the cycle of life with its inevitable blessings and traumas. It was a sobering moment when I was asked to lead a memorial tribute to classmates no longer alive and it shocked me to have to read a pretty long list. With the sadness I also experienced a surge of gratitude for my blessings at that moment.

What very much interests me is that through their eyes we can assess how much we have changed. In

that spirit I want to pose this question on this most holy of days:

*If change is really possible, and this is the moment we are focused on this, why is it so daunting? Why can't we decide who we want to be and simply assume the pose?*

Rosh Hashanah comes to tell us that you are not imprisoned by your current self-image or even the public image that you have established. We New Yorkers are incredibly good at plastering that almost impenetrable mask upon our faces. I'm just great and my kids are extraordinary! But beneath the façade, how are you doing? How do you feel about yourself and what are you going to do about it? Judaism tells us that we are not condemned by genetic wiring. Seriously, you don't have to become your mother, not that there is anything wrong with that.

And if you were attending your own reunion, who would you want to be if people saw you again for the first time in many years?

That's the very first question a human being was ever asked. In the Torah God asks Adam,

*"Ayeka, where are you?"* God was not posing a question of geography, but an existential one, where are you? How is your life going? What is your plan? This is a crucial question for us as it was for God. Since I don't want to speak for you, allow me the *chutzpah* to speak for God. On this first day of the year let me make some observations about the God with whom I have had a relationship for a number of years:

First, despite the fact that the Torah's most common phrase is, "God spoke to Moses saying," God never did speak in human language. In fact, God spoke to Moses precisely as God speaks to us.

Moving on, God never claimed to be omnipotent. Quite the contrary. As soon as human beings were created, we were given power over all the species of the world. God can't be omnipotent if we are so potent.

God cares about who we are and what we do but does not care a whole lot about how we conceive of God.

You think God is the warrior king depicted in the Torah? Great.

God is a spirit? Also fine.

God is a force within you compelling you to be the best person you can be? Vy not.

You're not even sure that you believe in God?

God can handle it.

But here is what really matters in our faith: God entered into a covenant at Mount Sinai not only with Moses, Aaron, Miriam and the bedraggled group of recently released slaves. God entered into a covenant with Israelites for all time. With you and me in fact. God entered into a covenant not so we would obey God throughout human history but that we would understand that all life is contingent. What is given must be reciprocated.

We are not put on this earth to live on an island of self-centered pursuits. The covenant—Judaism's most important idea—posits that we ought not believe in a God who gives us everything we want, nor a God who takes away all pain, a God who validates us with unconditional love. The covenant teaches that we have a caring God who needs us, who created us precisely because we are needed, so that we can do together what neither can do alone, to make sure that as many human beings as possible will enjoy God's blessings. The most important truth every one of us needs to discover is that we were put on this earth for a reason. You may not yet know why you were created, but if you deepen your awareness, if you are mindful, you will find out how and why you have earned the phenomenal gift of life and what you can do to pay God back.

This is an important perspective at any age but crucial as the aging process takes its toll on our physical and mental faculties. We can't think of the name of the person standing before us, we never know where our keys are, on and on. Some of us, therefore, can relate to this couple:

The two of them, close to ninety years old, go to the doctor. Both concerned about their memory loss.

“You’re in great shape,” the doctor says. “You’re just a little forgetful which is common for the age. My advice? Write everything down so you don’t forget it?”

One night, the wife looks up and says, “Dear, I would like a scoop of chocolate ice cream. The doctor told you to write it down, so write it down.”

“I don’t need to write it down. I’ve got it. You want chocolate ice cream.”

“I also want some whip cream on it.”

“Okay, chocolate ice cream with whip cream on it. I got it.”

“Could you put some sprinkles on top of the whip cream?”

“Okay. So you want chocolate ice cream with whip cream on it and sprinkles. Got it.”

He goes in the kitchen and twenty minutes later he emerges and on a tray is a plate of scrambled eggs, nova and cream cheese.

The wife looks and says, “Great honey, where’s my toast?”

We may not remain quite as sharp as we were, but if you’re blessed and fortunate you reach this stage understanding and remembering the reason you were created.

Life is much too brief. But because you are here for a reason there is always something you can do.

Perhaps, even, you can save a life.

The story is told of a man who twenty years ago drove a cab for a living. "Would you carry my bag out to the car?" the woman asked. "Please drive me through downtown," she pleaded.

"That's not the shortest way" he answered quickly.

"I don't mind, I'm in no hurry. I'm on my way to a hospice."

He looked in the rearview mirror, her eyes began to glisten.

"I don't have any family left," she continued. "The doctor says I don't have very long.

He quietly reached over and shut off the meter.

For the two hours they drove through the city. She showed him the building where she once worked as an elevator operator. They drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband lived when they were newlyweds. She had him pull in front of the furniture warehouse that once had been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl.

As the first hint of sun was creasing the horizon she suddenly said, "I'm tired. Let's go now."

He opened the trunk and took the small suitcase to the door. "How much do I owe you?" she asked, reaching into her purse.

"Nothing," he said.

“You have to make a living,” she answered.

“There are other passengers,” he responded.

Almost without thinking, he bent over and gave her a hug. She held onto him tightly.

“You gave an old woman an evening of joy. Thank you.”

Behind him a door shut. It was the sound of the closing of a life.

He drove aimlessly lost in thought not picking up any more passengers that shift. He came to believe that he has never done anything more important in his life.

Conversely, most of us have done something in our lives, that we regret, that still gnaws at us, fills us with guilt. Some of you have discussed these matters with me.

We could pick up the phone, write an email, do something about it, but a lot of us won't. Perhaps we rationalize it's all their fault. It's not for me to clean up the mess, to attempt to reconcile. And they wouldn't respond properly even if I did. I know. But today, of all days, strip away your defensiveness, your smug rationalization. Is there nothing you can do to bring your family together? Nothing? Really? Remember that the *Al Chet* puts the word *aval*, but, but you have sinned. Today is the day to take some responsibility and find a way back.

Today, let's admit that we can be self-righteous.

Today, let's admit we can be overly intense in our pursuit of personal or familial goals.

As you doubtless have read, NY Times columnist Frank Bruni took us all to task for how much many of us have invested in the college admissions mania. I was very moved by the letter a Levin family wrote to their son on the night before he received acceptances or rejections:

*Dear Matt,*

*On the night before you receive your first college response we want to let you know that we could not be any prouder of you than we are today. Whether or not you get accepted does not determine how proud we are of everything you have accomplished and the wonderful person you have become. We'll celebrate with joy wherever you get accepted—and the happier you are with those responses the happier we will be. But your worth as a person, as student and son, is not diminished or influenced at the least by what these colleges have decided. There is not a single college in this country that would not be lucky to have you and you're capable of succeeding at any one of them.*

*We love you as deep as the ocean, as high as the sky.*

*Mom and Dad.*

Non-judgmental love—it's tougher than it sounds. You and I believe that the years have taught us wisdom that we must impart strongly to our kids. But, didn't we get a heavy dose of expectations from our own parents? How did we like it? Did we not heed their wise advice or did we know better?



Our kids want to live the dream too, but alas their dreams many not be ours. They may want to do things that suit their passions that we could never imagine. In fact, they may want to do good and do well. Studies show millennials care less about stuff than of being of service to others. Wow! Should we not find a way to praise our kids for living the values our faith, the values we preach? Even when success doesn't always mean a paycheck which allows them to live independently of us—at least for now—or even allow them to live on the Upper West Side or Upper East Side.

Because our kids are stumbling towards the path they need to pursue. Hopefully, they live with passion, but many will also live with great anxiety. Some struggle with mental health issues that are absolutely debilitating. Many sense that their peers are racing ahead as the struggle simply to get out of bed. They need our embrace as they try to find their equilibrium and strive to be able to believe in themselves again.

Because too many of those we love harbor a genuine fear of failing.

A headline in this summer's *New York Times Education Life* really stunned me:

She had put on her Penn face.

But living up to expectations was just too much.

Was dying the only way out?

Of course, this is every parent's nightmare. Our kids fear it too to be sure. That is why we all need to be a constant presence in their lives, to communicate what is really important, to reiterate that showing vulnerability is a good thing, finding help, seeking lifeline, all are imperative. Tragically sometimes there is little we can do to really help, but we must convey this: you don't have to earn our respect with 4.0s or trophies. You can earn our respect with the courage to get up in the morning and persevere, with the desire not just to pursue individuated goals, but to be there for someone else.

It is no accident that so many of you play major roles in organizations, here, around town, in Israel that work for personal dignity, human rights. You do so as proud Jews and as caring *mentschen*. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "Religion begins with a consciousness that something is asked of us."

There is nothing that makes you prouder than when you are making a difference in the lives of others.

Our kids need to know that.

Because what you do is sacred work and many of you can be proud of the mitzvah acts in which you are involved. But, if you are that person who needs to reorient your goals, to make the kind of changes they would even notice at your high school reunion, if you really want to live the values you preach your kids, if you seek to understand what the people closest to you treasure, listen carefully the next time you go to a funeral.

I know this is an unsettling topic but listen! *Sh'ma Yisrael!* Listen, yes, to my poignant eulogy, but listen to what close family members emphasize. They will speak about all the experiences you had together, the love that was bestowed, they will speak about the good deeds done in this world, the way your life had impact upon others.

Now think of all the time you spend, think of all the things you obsess about that don't even make the cut at a eulogy, then, return to the process of figuring out what your life should be about and adapt while there is still time.

As we seek repentance on this day, remember that God really does want us to make life sweeter for those whose bite of the apple is often bitter or insubstantial.

Because you see God doesn't care that much about what our beliefs are. God doesn't particularly care about our motive. Through our learned texts God teaches us that you are not what you say, you are not even what you believe.

You are what you do.

To be a Jew is to live in a world as it is, but to dream of the world as it could be.

That is why God put you here. You can dream that things can be better than they are, but you must work to make sure that you can be better than you are. Judaism presents a road map for a life that is rich in purpose, that can be a true partnership with God in helping both of you fulfill your potential.

Once, Justice Louis Brandeis was asked to join a gentleman's club that was so exclusive they didn't accept Jews. Brandeis, because of his stature, would be the very first. On the evening of installation he stood to accept his membership with the following words, "I am sorry I was born a Jew." There was shocked silence in the room.

"I'm sorry I was born a Jew, I wish I had discovered Judaism on my own."

Whether you were born a Jew, became a Jew, or are part of a Jewish family and community, you can discover or rediscover Judaism's brilliant wisdom and can choose to embrace the sage Hillel's crucial dictum:

*If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*

*If I am only for myself, what am I?*

*If not now, when?*

Amen.

