

ROSH HASHANA EVE SERMON  
Wednesday evening, September 3, 2013

Let me begin with the obvious. The High Holy Days are very early this year. Much too early. It still feels like summer. School has barely begun. For New York City kids, school does not start till next week.

If it is any consolation, Rosh Hashana is at the end of September next year. The Hebrew calendar is basically a lunar calendar, with adjustments for the solar year. This is so Chanuka does not fall in May and Pesach does not come in September. If you are interested, the calendar is on a 19 year cycle, with leap years (with the interjection of an entire month) coming seven times in the 19-year cycle.

But whenever these holidays fall, they seem to have a huge impact on Jews everywhere.

I will never forget my first time in Israel, and the only time I was there during the High Holy Days. There is a hush that came over Jerusalem. Yes, it grows very quiet on Shabbat, but not the utter silence that seems to overtake the city. People do dress in their finery to attend services. Yes, even in a city not known for its attention to couture. Crowds assemble inside and outside synagogues. Inside to pray. Outside to be seen, and to see others. Israelis have picked up some of the least charming customs of the Diaspora!

We do know and understand that Jews come to services on these High Holy Days for a multitude of reasons.

## I. JUST TO BE TOGETHER

We know that people like to be with each other at times of joy and at time of sorrow.

What immediately comes to mind are the huge crowds that gathered in churches and synagogues in all parts of the city on the weekend following the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attack on New York.

Every seat was taken in this church on that first Sunday morning. Nothing special was happening, but people wanted to be together with their friends and neighbors. That was a strange time, if you will remember. Traffic was very slight. There were severe restrictions on the bridges and tunnels coming into Manhattan. There were police everywhere.

The acrid smell of burning buildings wafted north from downtown. Even though there was no physical damage in midtown and north, the black cloud took days to dissipate.

Central Synagogue, around the corner on 55<sup>th</sup> Street, was packed that Friday evening. Nothing special was announced. Jews just wanted to be together.

A older Jewish colleague of my daughter's, who had probably not been in a synagogue since his bar mitzvah 50 years earlier, asked sheepishly whether he could accompany our family at Central Synagogue that night. He came with us. I suspect he did not get much from the liturgy, but he got what he wanted: being with other Jews at a time of perceived danger and upset.

Like our Israeli brethren, Jews come to the synagogue on the High Holy Days. We know that some American Jews live very remotely from the organized Jewish community. Their contact with Judaism is sparse, and it may even be as minimal as bagels on Sunday morning.

But Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are touch points. Personal affirmations that we know who we are and where we came from.

## II. MEMORIES

Many years ago, when I was involved on a daily basis in Jewish education for children, one of the primary tenets was “creating Jewish memories.”

What Jewish educators meant by that was creating happy experiences for Jewish kids, which would enhance their Jewish identity. These experiences would remain with them throughout their lives.

To a very large extent, this is what Jewish camping does. The goal is to create a mountain of memories that can be summoned throughout the rest of the child’s life.

The High Holy Days are times for memories. Perhaps these are memories of family gatherings at Chanukah, or Passover or at the High Holy Days themselves.

Tuna fish salad, for my wife, always conjures up memories of Chanukah. Tuna fish and Chanukah! What is that all about?? Every year, my wife’s family gathered together for a huge Chanukah party. There were 12 grandchildren all about the same age. And the appropriate number of parents for these children. What a huge crowd! The aunts in charge came up with a solution to the problem of what to feed this huge gang. Tuna salad! Of course there were latkes. But everyone has latkes!

Throughout the years that Diana and I were parenting our children, we were always aware of the memories that we were creating. Happy memories, we hoped.

These High Holy Days are a time for recalling happy events in our growing up. Times when we were small, and protected . Times when we were surrounded by love, and those who loved us very much.

So, for many of us, these High Holy Days are times for memories, of families, of happy times, of parents and siblings. And even memories that are painful to remember.

### III. ACCOUNTING

Being with other Jews, and remembering our part in the larger Jewish family is a good reason to be in the synagogue on the High Holy Days.

Remembering parents and grand parents, and other happy memories from growing up, is a worthy reason to be at services on these High Holy Days.

But there are other reasons. For some of us, these holy days are a time to take stock of our lives. For everyone this is painful. I fully understand why some people choose to omit this aspect from their Holy Day observances.

The Hebrew phrase is “Cheshbon haNefesh.” Accounting of the Soul.

The rabbis of ancient day recognized that this was the most difficult part of the High Holy Days. They felt they had to prepare people for the arduous task.

They began 30 days in advance of Rosh Hashana. They began blowing the shofar in the synagogue. This was a reminder that it's time to begin evaluating your year, your relationships, your life.

And then on the Saturday night prior to Rosh Hashana, they created a penitential service to begin at midnight, called Selichot – penitential prayers.

And of course, the entire ten day period between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur was to be dedicated to evaluating and reconsideration.

The final encouragement was fasting on Yom Kippur. This is high point of our evaluation time.

The rabbis then and today realize that self-evaluation is tough. We don't have confession, the way other religions do. That was too easy. The rabbis knew that we were the hardest on ourselves.

## CONCLUSION

So, if you are here to be with other Jews on these High Holy Days, that is okay. The Holy Days are a time for being with others, for remembering our roots and our larger Jewish family.

And if you are here to remember – remember Jewish memories of your growing up – that is fine too. We hope that we can create Jewish memories for our children and grandchildren.

And if you are here to evaluate and re-consider, that is wonderful. We hope – and pray – that the prayers, the music, the teaching on the High Holy Days will all aid you in that most difficult endeavor. Cheshbon haNefesh. Accounting of the Soul.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. May you succeed fully and completely.  
Shana Tova, Happy New Year.

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