

## **Sermon: Refocusing on Our Vision**

*Rosh Hashanah 5774*

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Good Yontif....There is something that feels right about celebrating Rosh Hashanah just after Labor Day. Summer's end. The unofficial start to fall. A new school year. It only seems appropriate that we would begin a new year spiritually as well.

Recently, I heard about part of a conversation between a father and his adult daughter. They were talking about the importance of these days when the dad turned to his daughter and said: "Honey, I want you to know that if I have done anything to hurt you in the past year – by word or by deed – either deliberately or carelessly, I want you to know.....you're too sensitive."

Humorous as it is...the spirit behind it comes from a wise tradition which teaches that, when it comes to our relationships, we should take nothing for granted. That no matter how good things may seem – it is possible that in the past year we may have done something – inadvertently - to diminish an otherwise healthy relationship. Wanting to atone – we check in with each other. It is an acknowledgement that, without intending to do so, we may have lost sight of something important.

The High Holy Days come as our annual time for reflection and refocus. During this season when we wish each other sweetness....when we consider our personal Book of Life – the one that we pen with our words and our deeds --- we are called upon to consider where we are....and to renew our commitment to the vision of the selves that we aspire to be.

Our need for such a check in is not surprising. How easily in the course of our day-to-day is our attention drawn away from what is most important – as we tend to the urgent. Our schedules are beyond-full and our pace beyond-fast. The demands and pressures placed upon us – and that we place upon ourselves – weigh heavily. All of these take their toll. As well, it is impossible not to notice that the very same technology created to help us stay more connected, organized, and on-task, oftentimes has the opposite effect. We see people everywhere - friends and family members - who may be together physically, but who sit with their eyes focused on their own handheld screen – each busy in his or her own on-line world. We look around at drivers who hold the steering wheel in one hand, while not-so-smartly texting with their smartphones with the other. I was at a coffee shop recently and witnessed a father and his little girl sitting together over breakfast. What should have been nice together time was lost when the dad picked up his iPhone and began checking his e-mail....The little girl just looked around the restaurant. *Al Cheyt SheChatanu L'fanecha*..... For the transgression of turning our attention from where it belongs.....of failing to see.....we ask forgiveness.

In his book, Jewish with Feeling, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi writes how, when his daughter Shalvi was young, he would enjoy putting her to bed at night. Oftentimes, however, like many children, Shalvi wouldn't want to go to sleep and so she would try to stall by asking her dad all kinds of questions. On one particular night, she asked: "Dad....when you are asleep....you can wake up, right?" "Yes," Reb Zalman told her. "And," Shalvi continued, "when you are awake, can you wake up even more?"

Rosh Hashanah reminds us that we can. Maimonides, the great sage of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, likened the sounding of the shofar to the sounding of an “alarm clock” – a call intended to stir the soul. The very act of taking time out....to come here.....to not simply read the words of the prayer book, but to linger on their messages and meanings.....is our opportunity to regain focus....to consider anew the kind of people that we want to become. Noted Sociologist, Robert Bellah once wrote that the most fundamental question we pose (as human beings) is how to preserve or create a morally coherent life. Our liturgy poses it simply: “*Mah anachnu? Meh Chayeinu*” --- “What are we? What are our lives?”

Rabbi Pinchas Peli tells the story of Abraham Moshe Luntz. Luntz lived at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Palestine and “was one of the early experts in the modern study of Israel. His work is renowned and he specialized in the history and geography of the Land, particularly Jerusalem. Luntz was a noted scholar and edited close to fifty books on the subject, most of them still valuable today – a hundred years later. As well, Luntz was known for serving as a tour guide for distinguished visitors to Jerusalem - happily sharing with them the rich treasures of his knowledge and love of the city.”

What made Luntz’s career particularly noteworthy, however, was the fact that when he was twenty five, he was told by his doctors that he had been stricken with a serious eye ailment – a malady very common in Jerusalem in those days. Luntz was told that he would most certainly lose his eyesight and they advised him to go abroad for surgery.

Before embarking on his journey to Vienna where he would receive treatment, however, Luntz spent ten days on the rooftops of Jerusalem, absorbing all of the views of the city which he knew so well and loved so much. The procedure, though, was unsuccessful and six months later Luntz returned to Jerusalem completely blind. Yet, remarkably Luntz continued to write his books and to conduct tours of the city for visitors for another fifty years.

He, the blind man, would show and explain every street and alley...every nook and cranny which he would see constantly, not with the eyes of the body but of the spirit.” Rabbi Peli concludes: “People would marvel at this “John Milton” of Jerusalem, carrying around the ‘paradise’ he never lost even after losing his sight. Only then would people come to understand the Hebrew-Aramaic euphemism for one who is blind: “*sagi nahor*,” meaning “full of light.” Luntz had lost sight, but not his vision.”

The ten days that Luntz is said to have spent on the rooftops of Jerusalem is not dissimilar from these Ten Days of Holiness. During this season, we too are called upon to fully claim a higher vision that is before us – to make it our own – and to enable its light to illumine our life’s path ahead.

For me, personally, this Rosh Hashanah marks a special milestone. Ten years ago, Emily and I happily arrived in Needham as our family joined the Beth Shalom community....and I began to serve this community as rabbi. It was the summer of 2003. Liana was just two. Jonah was a dream. And the Red Sox had yet to win a World Series in 86 years. Now.....Liana is about to become a Bat Mitzvah. (And, by the way, Emily asked me to remind you not to forget to RSVP.) Jonah is a proud 3<sup>rd</sup> grader. And the Red Sox....well, happily - we know what

happened with them. It has been a blessed time for me – and for our entire family – and I cannot express how grateful I am....how privileged I feel.....that you have invited me into your lives.

As well, this year, I am beginning my 18<sup>th</sup> year as a rabbi. I chose to become a rabbi because I believe that Judaism is transformational. And that when it is lived out by a community that takes it to heart we have the ability to bring untold goodness to each other....and to those around us. Our tradition is rich with stories, poetry, rituals, music, literature, values, and, of course, food. It invites us to experience the texture of life by slowing us down.....helping us to open our eyes and our hearts.....linking us to something greater than ourselves.

There is a rabbinic teaching that says that whenever we create something, we should leave it somewhat incomplete. When a house is finished being built, traditionally, a small corner is left unpainted or undone. Before braided challah dough is placed into the oven for baking, a small piece removed. And at a wedding – at this high point of happiness – a couple breaks a glass. All of these are symbolic reminders that regardless of how full our lives – our world is incomplete and that we must therefore look beyond the horizon of the moment and of the self to bring healing.

This last teaching is one that I share with every wedding couple with whom I journey to the chuppah. And each time I do, there is beautiful moment in the conversation that is one part realization....and another part affirmation as they acknowledge that while their love should fill them with joy and a sense of “being whole”....their love is not for them alone.....it must radiate outward as well - to help mend the brokenness all around.

Our traditions reach out....meeting us where we are in life....and lift us up: We hold our newborn child or grandchild and offer blessing....We share in the joy of Shabbat or a holiday with close friends or family.....we pass the Torah to our daughter or to our son ....we see in the eyes of another our soul mate...we experience illness....or loss. Throughout all of these moments...and countless others....we are held and helped as we link our life journeys to a **heritage** and to a **community of people** dedicated to soulful purpose.

Scholars are uncertain as to where and when the very first synagogue was established. However, as Rabbi Harold Schulweis reminds us, it is known that some ancient peoples believed that there are certain places on earth that are inherently more sacred than others. The Ziggurats of Mesopotamia, for example, were created as cosmic structures with seven levels that represented the seven known planets. When the Babylonian priest would ascend, it was believed that he was making his way to the summit of the universe. The late religious anthropologist, Mircea Eliade taught that places such as this were considered “*axis mundi*” – a physical meeting point between linking heaven and earth.

In Judaism, however, historically and theologically – no specific place has ever been considered holy - in and of itself. According to the First Book of Kings, even when Solomon constructed the First Temple, he is said to have expressed uncertainty about his building a House for Gd: “*Ki HaUm’na Yei’sheiv Elohim Al Ha’Aretz?*” – he declared: “Will Gd indeed, dwell on earth? Behold....not even the Heavens can contain You – how much less the house that I have built.”

A deeper understanding of the nature of sacred space – of a temple - comes from Gd's call to Moses in the Book of Exodus. Gd says: "*Asu Li Mikdash v'Shachanti B'Tocham.*" ---- "Build for me a sanctuary so that I may dwell" – NOT within it, but rather "amongst them." Here, the command points to a profound recognition in Torah that Gd does not live in a place itself....but rather....Gd dwells AMONGST the people. The structure's purpose was to not to hold Gd, but rather it was to enable the kind of interactions - the creation of the quality of life - that would enable Gd to dwell amongst....and within THEM. As Schulweis notes: "The place of Gd is within, between, and among us. Gd is in relationship, not in Row A. Gd is in morality, not geography."

This ideal of creating a community of blessing is one that originally inspired 18 Jewish families in 1945 to come together as the "Needham Jewish Community Group." Their vision was to work together to craft a rich and meaningful Jewish life for themselves, their children, and perhaps even their grandchildren. It would be, they said, a community where learning would be at the center.....where Jewish culture would be lived and celebrated (Their very first program, by the way, was a Chanukah party!).....and where they would organize philanthropically to help the broader community. With love and dedication, they brought their vision to life.

Vera Alperin – one of our founding members – shared with me that community leaders used to go door-to-door to invite Jewish residents to come and participate.

In fact, it was sixty years ago this month – September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1953 – that this small circle of families held the very first High Holy Day services in Needham. Not yet having built a building, they gathered at Needham's First Parish Congregation to celebrate Rosh Hashanah. In heart and soul it was a homespun affair. The "Scroll" – a community's newsletter started two years before – described it this way:

"During the weeks preceding the High Holy Days, many contributions of merit were offered to the group. The Shufro family contributed the prayer books ... Mrs. Maurice Bennett contributed the floral decorations; Mr and Mrs. Kalman Kampf loaned the group a beautiful pair of silver candlesticks as well as the silver kiddush cup. Mr. Morris Goodwin contributed the yamikas. Harold Shufro and Joe Rosenberg made the ark and the altar cloths. Mrs. Rose Feigelbaum contributed a beautiful cover for the Torah. Temple Shalom of Newton loaned the group a Torah. (And) the First Parish Church of Needham was most generous in donating the use of its building for the Holydays. The high point of the morning service was the blowing of the shofar by Dr. Seymour Sacks."

Over the years, the light....warm spirit.....and engaging nature of the yet-to-be named "Temple Beth Shalom" grew.... as did the community. The vision and quality of community life touched people – added joy and meaning to their lives - and so, understandably, they wanted to be a part of it.

Many years later, when Emily, Liana, and I were first introduced to the congregation - it was this very same caring and inclusive spirit – one that had clearly been passed *m'dor l'dor* – from "one generation to the next" - that inspired us to want to make Temple Beth Shalom OUR community.

Over the past ten years, we have done a great deal to carry the “difference making” vision of our founders forward – and make it our own.

While always striving to be ‘moreso’ – we can be proud that ours is a community where meaning and purpose are brought into focus and made real. Here, we bear witness to each other – as we share our stories – hold each other up when we are in need - and work to deepen our capacity for compassion, grace, generosity, and humility.

Our Temple Beth Shalom community is crafted each and every day by the souls and aspirations of our members....by US. Here, in our home, we have created a hub of activity that fills the heart.....challenges the mind....and stirs the spirit. All the while, drawing us closer to one another.

Through our life together we encounter what is most real in our lives: belonging.... memory.....the need to express gratitude....responsibility....and hope.

When we teach our children – we support entire families – as we pursue creative and innovative approaches that inspire resilience and kindle a special spark within.

When someone expresses a desire to be part of our community --- or to provide their children a Jewish education ---- or send their kids to camp or to send their kids to Israel – we do all that we can to make it happen.

When someone is in need of counsel or care – a hand to hold – a prayer...a blessing...a hug.....we are here.

And when the need for more.....and improved space for our GROWN and growing community is identified as a priority by community leadership – we respond by creating a “Mikdash” initiative that reflects the values of openness and inclusivity upon which our congregation was founded.

Author Chet Raymo has written that “Faith communities at their best add immeasurably to the storehouse of human well-being.” This is what we strive to do – together – everyday. Inspired by a vision kindled by our congregation’s founders – one kindled by a generations-old Jewish vision - we are more than simply **members** of Temple Beth Shalom. We are **stewards** of her vision....guardians of a sacred light that shines both amongst us all and beyond us all.

As we look towards the year and years ahead....we pray that the radiance of our community will continue to infuse our lives with meaning, depth, and beauty.

May we discover new opportunities to receive....and offer blessing.

And may our journey together as a congregation take us farther along a path towards Promise – as we make our way from strength to even greater strength.

Amen.