

Before the Beginning

Each year like salmon swimming upstream we return to this place. I don't just mean to the Wilton High School auditorium, I mean at some primal level we are drawn together to be present at the start of the Jewish new year. For many, this is no small feat. We had to resist the forces in our lives that keep us busy all the time just to reach our seats tonight. We overcame our dread that we might be bored or disappointed in how the evening unfolds. We had to swim past those nagging voices in our heads. You know the ones, "I'm new I don't really know anyone here." Or, "I'm old- I hardly recognize anyone anymore."; "I don't understand what's going on. I don't even know if I belong here." Or "I feel uncomfortable here, I don't come enough, do enough, give enough, I don't even know if I believe in any of this stuff." For others their discomfort might be, "What if my kid starts crying, what if my husband goes to the bathroom and never returns. How long is the rabbi going to talk anyway?"

Well, it's ok. It's all ok, because you already did the one thing, the only thing you had to do. You remembered to come. Welcome then, welcome everyone to this sacred gathering. You made it and now we can begin this new year, all together.

Except that the truth is that this holiday, *Rosh HaShanah* is not mentioned in the Torah. *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement is but not the holiday we call *Rosh HaShanah*. Instead there is a day that is briefly described as occurring ten days before *Yom Kippur* which is called *Yom HaZikaron*, the Day of Remembrance or *Yom Zikaron Teruah*, the Day of Blowing the Horn for Remembrance.

Later in history, this day would become known as *Rosh HaShanah*, the beginning of the new year. But its origin is a day to remember. The Torah, however, does not tell us who is supposed to remember what on this day? Is God supposed to remember us? Are we supposed to remember God?

Yes and yes. But tonight we begin by remembering something vital about ourselves, that there is something better that each of us could be or could do. We recall that we have been given a chance to start anew and now is the time for us to address the need to do so. We soberly confront the fact that we cannot undo the past, but we can transcend it.

This process, called *teshuvah*, starts by recognizing where we have gone astray, admitting our mistakes, asking for forgiveness, making amends and vowing to not repeat the same mistake again. *Teshuvah* means that each of us gets another chance to return to the person we want to be and to living the life we most deeply desire.

This process is not easy. Gathered here tonight, we remember that we do not have to go through this alone. We cannot, we are too weak, too likely to get distracted or give up. Because we all remembered to come tonight, our very presence encourages each other on this journey of transformation.

To each person you greet with, *Shanah tovah umetukah*, have a good and sweet new year, you are reminding them and yourself of the direction life can take in the year ahead. Against an overwhelming sense of malaise in our society, tonight, we recall that we can make this a good

year and a much sweeter one for all. Though each of us has some area we wish to improve upon personally, we are optimistic when we look around and see a roomful of people who are also trying to do the same thing.

During these Days of Awe we remember that our behavior has consequences, intended and unintended, and sometimes we miss the mark. We realize that all of our strivings are in vain against this undeniable truth. And we recognize that our days are numbered to get it right. But even if we earnestly want to be better, what are we supposed to do?

The worship services during the Holy Days are full of spiritual resources to help us. Hear the sound of the shofar blasting us out of our contented slumber. Listen to the cantor's music pleading on our behalf for a fresh start. Harken to the words of the prayer book printed for thousands to read, but only understood by those who take them to heart. Soak up the ancient words of the Torah at this season that teaches us through stories and commandments. All these messages rouse us towards *teshuvah*.

But over the next ten days, if we listen very deeply, there are instructions that go beyond the sounds coming from the outside. These are the lessons etched upon each stage of our own lives. They guide our every step towards our highest aspirations or our lowest impulses. Each of us then is both the student and the teacher on this journey of life.

For example, as little children we are taught to put things into categories, how can we transcend these boxes? As young adults we strive to succeed, what do we learn on the other side of success? As we mature we become keenly aware of the flaws in the world and ourselves, what prevents these imperfections from defining our reality? As the end of our life looms ahead, what enduring lessons do we have to share? This season, I would like to point out some of these mileposts in my sermons to help us on our journey of return.

But on this *Yom Ha-zikaron*, this day of remembrance, let us begin, with a few words of remembering to turn us back to the life we want to live. Let us remember that there is good in the world and we can add to it by our actions. Let us remember that the evil that exists is largely human made and by human efforts can be changed. Let us remember that we can rarely control what happens in life, but we can control how we respond to it. Let us remember that though we come into the world alone, and alone we shall leave, along the way those we meet have the same basic needs we do and they are searching for the same kindness and security, love and understanding that we seek. Let us remember that human diversity is part of the unfathomable divine plan of creation, and not a cause for hatred or fear. Let us remember that other people are not failed versions of our selves, they too are created *betzelem elohim* in the image of God.

There is a teaching in the mystical stream of Judaism that even before we are born, our souls existed, in the care of God. Once we are born into this world, we become less certain of this relationship, perhaps not even remembering it at all. Sometimes however, we catch glimmers of it when we least expect it.

In Krista Tillet's book, [Einstein's God](#), she questions the educator and activist, Parker Palmer, about a particularly difficult time in his life. Palmer replies:

“And yet, as I worked my way through that darkness, I sometimes became aware that way back there in the woods somewhere was this sort of primitive piece of animal life. Some

kind of existential reality, some kind of core of being, of my own being – I don't know, maybe of the life force generally- that was somehow holding out the hope of life to me. And so I now see the soul as that wild creature way back there in the woods that knows how to survive in very hard places, knows how to survive in places where the intellect doesn't, where the feelings don't and where the will cannot.”

Tonight we remember our souls, that wild creature of hope. We remember that we can start again, that there are things we can do over, or finish differently. We remember that we are worthy of this second chance and we can offer it to others, for every soul yearns to bask in the goodness it once knew. Let us remember the way back or, at least, let us remember the yearning itself.

Swimming against strong currents, tonight we returned to the place our soul remembers, to begin anew. Here, let us remember what we believe in, let us remember our purpose, let us remember the highest ideals that we have witnessed in ourselves and others. At the start of 5773 in the midst of this *kehillah kedosha*, this sacred congregation, may we find the acceptance and support, the wisdom and faith to enter this new year with hope and a renewed sense of life. *Shanah tovah umetukah.*