

*This Matters – Erev Rosh Hashanah
September 6, 2021 – 1 Tishrei 5782
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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In light of forest fires, floods, the mess in Afghanistan, continuing COVID, hyper-partisanship and your standard run of mill problems in our world, it seems pretty audacious to stop everything for a day of worship. And, on top of the problems, I know that many of us are experiencing a sort of extreme apathy from feeling too much empathy over the last 18 months. But there must be something to this day because it has stood the test of time. We've celebrated Rosh Hashanah for about 3,000 years. We've celebrated it amid fire and flood, war and disease, political upheaval and personal problems. And so, it is safe to assume that this holiday, well, this holy day MATTERS.

This getting dressed up matters. This coming to the synagogue matters. This logging in from home to watch services on your screen matters. This gathering with family or friends or congregants matters. This opening the prayer book and reciting Shema matters. This grasping for half remembered words – words that we do not always understand, it matters. This temple, this community, this tradition, this Torah, this Holy Day, all of it matters.

Rosh Hashanah matters. With Rosh Hashanah we mark time. Our summer ends. Our fall begins. We leave work early for dinner with family, dinner of recipes that span generations, that span continents, recipes that bring one year into the last and into the next. Brisket, roast potatoes, tzimmi, herring, round challahs, soup – even matzah balls in September. They are the foods and the smells that make this so visceral. And synagogue, too. Picture the synagogue of your youth. Pews or chairs, high ceilinged or stained glass. Feel that prayer book of your youth in your hands, see its pages with Hebrew and English and cues to sit and stand. Did you sit in the same place each year? How early did you arrive to get “your” seats? Was it always too hot or too cold? How were the sermons? These memories are imprinted on us, shape us. Memories – old and new – serve as the starting place for each New Year, memories ground us in the past so that we may look to the future.

This day matters because on this day we look back. We look back long ago to remember our youthful idealism, the people that we promised ourselves we'd become, the passions and values that we espoused when the world was bright and the possibilities endless. Only from that place of idealism can we seek to be better tomorrow. We look back, too, at the more recent past, to the year that has come and gone. So critical is this reflection to Rosh Hashanah that the ancient rabbis called today Yom Hazicharon, the Day of Remembrance. We take a day to stop to remember the past year. We did good things: We checked on neighbors during the height of COVID lockdowns. We masked and washed our hands and got vaccinated. We donated money to charities helping those struck hard by the pandemic. We took care of our families. We tried to practice self-care. We also look back at the bad things from this past year. All the times that we ran out of patience. All the times that we demanded more from our loved ones than they could give. The times that the news accounts of sickness and death became mere numbers in our minds instead of people with souls held in our hearts. And, of course, the bad things that mark any year, the litany of sins, of shortcomings that we recite in our High Holy Day liturgy. For, surely, we are human and have therefore done wrong.

The ancient rabbis have a name for this. It's called *השבון הנפש*, an accounting of our soul. And the rabbis teach that *השבון הנפש* is the first step toward redemption, toward forgiveness, toward a better future for us and our families and our communities. It is the kind of reflecting that we like to imagine we do regularly. And it is the kind of reflection that we know, actually, requires time set aside, special time, sacred time, these High Holy Days. The metaphor of the prayerbook tells us that on this day, God, too, remembers all of our deeds, all of our actions. This metaphor speaks to us powerfully. Through our skepticism and rationality and embrace of the sovereign self, the idea of God remembering our individual deeds helps us realize that what we do in the world actually matters – to us, to other people, and on a spiritual level. And so, we take today to remember. Because to remember matters.

Today matters, too, because it is Yom Teruah – the Day of the Sounding of the Shofar. Is there anything more primal? Amidst our decorum and careful staging and organ music and scripted prayers comes a blast from an animal's horn. The Torah teaches that it is the same sound heard by our ancient ancestors when they received the Torah at Mount Sinai. There is joy in hearing the blast and, when we close our eyes, we can feel the generations who heard its call before us. We can feel them hearing the blast, the blast touching something deep in their souls and inspiring them to make changes in their lives, changes that may well have led to our own existence. The blast of the Shofar wakes us up to the truths within us: who we really are, who we want to become, what matters most. And the blast of the Shofar wakes us up to the truths of the world around us. It's beauty and its many problems. For the rest of the year we ignore many of the ills of this world and the ways that we contribute to them intentionally or inadvertently. The blast blows away our rationalizations, our excuses that paper over the problems that surround us. Instead it demands that we pay attention. It demands that we acknowledge our roles in injustice and environmental degradation and racism and partisanship, all the ills of our society. The Shofar calls us to rise up from our places of complacency and to do better, to make our world better.

Rosh Hashanah matters because on it we celebrate *היום הרת עולם* (*HaYom Harat Olam*), the birthday of the world. There is not a person in here who thinks the world is only 5782 years old. But we are sophisticated enough to know what is literal and to know the power of a metaphor. A birthday is about so much more than the anniversary of a birth. On birthdays people celebrate their lives, what they have, who they love, what they've lived through, and their hopes for the future. Having a birthday of the world allows us to do the same for this singular planet we call home. We too often take our world for granted. Today tells us to appreciate the world, to revel in its natural beauty, to celebrate its existence and the gifts it provides to us daily.

That said, the Hebrew words themselves, *היום הרת עולם*, does not really translate as birthday of the world. *הרת* comes from the root letters *ה ר ה* which refers not to birth, but to conception. The 12th century French rabbi Rabbeinu Tam taught that it was on this day that God conceived of creation, conceived of the world. What world can you conceive of on this day? What personal world, inner world can you conceive of for the year to come? Are you kinder or more generous, more patient or stronger? What world around you can you conceive of for the year to come? Is that world more just, more equitable, healthier, or cleaner? Today invites us to conceive of the world's future. Today invites us to make that world a reality. Birthday of the world is not good enough because by the time we are born, we are in many ways fully formed. Conception of the world invites us, demands us, to imagine the world that we hope to see and decide how we will work to make it a reality. We do that work inside ourselves and in the world around us. We do

that work by ourselves and we do it together with family, with friends, and as a sacred community.

The prayers of this day matter. The prayers resonate deeply if we let them into our souls. A liturgical highlight of Rosh Hashanah is Avinu Malkeinu. According to the Talmud (Ta'anit 25b) there was once a terrible drought in the land. Rabbi Eliezer declared a fast day in hopes that God would reward a penitent people with much needed rain. It did not work. He declared another fast day and stood at the front of the congregation and recited twenty-four blessings, still no rain. The Talmud tells us that his student, Rabbi Akiva, then came before the ark and said, "Avinu Malkeinu – Almighty and Merciful – You alone are sovereign. Avinu Malkeinu, for Your sake, show us mercy.' And rain immediately fell." The congregation started to whisper among themselves. Why were Rabbi Eliezer's entreaties ignored while Rabbi Akiva's prayer was answered? The text tells us that "A Divine Voice emerged and said: 'It is not because Rabbi Akiva is greater than Rabbi Eliezer. Rather, Rabbi Eliezer is not forgiving and Rabbi Akiva is forgiving.'"

Today matters because it is a chance to forgive. There is nothing magical about the words Avinu Malkeinu, there is nothing magical about this holy day. Neither relies on piety or observance or a particular kind of faith. This day, and its Avinu Malkeinu prayer that so many of us have imprinted on our hearts, works only with forgiveness. Avinu Malkeinu, show us mercy. Avinu Malkeinu, bring healing. Avinu Malkeinu, hear our voice. Avinu Malkeinu, have compassion. Avinu Malkeinu, renew us. Each of these pleas to the Almighty and Merciful require that we forgive. Forgiving others is challenging but quite do-able if they are apologetic and we can let our egos rest. The real work is forgiving ourselves. Forgiving ourselves for the litany of personal shortcomings we find when we remember the past year. Forgiving ourselves for the ways we could have done more for our community. Forgiving ourselves for the ways we could have done more for our world. The God of the Talmud is not always responsive to the needs of humans. But this story shows that forgiveness can help make our words, our hopes, our dreams a reality. Once we can conceive of the world we'd like to see, forgiveness can free us from the past and allow us to make that world a reality. This day matters because it gives us the time and space we need to do just that, to forgive and to forgive ourselves.

We spend so much time and energy and resources on things that do not matter. Our houses are filled with stuff acquired online and at art fairs and at Home Goods. These things so often fill our days and our thoughts even though we know that, ultimately, they will not abide, they will end up in our basement and then our dumpster. Our lives are filled with superficial relationships and pursuits. We know that these will not abide, we will not tell our grandchildren about them, or write them in our memoirs. On the other hand, Rosh Hashanah, the High Holy Days, Judaism, our traditions and history and faith, these matters. These will abide. Those are the reasons that we stop amidst the chaos of this world and we gather tonight and tomorrow and next week with family and on our own. We will tell our grandchildren of our Rosh Hashanah memories and we will be a part of theirs as they pick up their own link in the chain of tradition. The sweetness of honey and apples will linger as the worlds we conceive of become a bit more real. On this Holy Day, here in the sanctuary or at home, on this Rosh Hashanah we affirm that this matters.

כּן יְהי רצוֹן

May this be God's will