

Rosh Hashanah Eve sermon 2011 “Remember who you wanted to be”

Just a few weeks ago, on Labor Day weekend, our family drove nearly seven hours north of Portland, through the beautiful city of Vancouver and along the jaw-dropping gorgeousness of the Sea to Sky Highway until we reached Squamish, British Columbia. There is a small, unique, barely four years old University called Quest, perched up on a hill which looks toward the peaks of Whistler and whose grounds leak into woody trails begging for hikes and mountain bikes. We delivered our first born to this promising institution with so much hope and wistfulness, his sisters surreptitiously burying their noses in the blanket David had wrapped himself in, inhaling the smell of their big brother, of teenage angst and aftershave. Most of us have experienced this profound transition of flight, lifting oneself or later one's child out of the nest. My husband, who rarely cries, stopped in the middle of transferring David's belongings and said quietly to me, quoting Indiana Jones' father, “I haven't taught him everything he needs to know...”

It is Rosh Hashanah, a transitional time. Transitions can be unsettling. Back to work, back to school; skimming over the equinox as summer ends and the days grow shorter. Rosh Hashanah is also a time of potential and beginnings, if we

make it so. Ten days of repentance and self-examination, of remembrance, regret, resolve, and re-energizing of the spirit. Transitions **are** unsettling; the unknown future is scary; remembering past mistakes is uncomfortable, often painful. The examined life may be the only one worth living, but it does not unfold easily; it takes continuous attention.

In Judaism, we have a weekly opportunity to give ourselves one day of rest and introspection; Shabbat was one of the Jewish people's finest gifts to the world. Once a week, Jews everywhere really stop and take time for what's important: family, friends, study. And once a year, we have **this** time together. It is different than the Sabbath, not a foretaste of redemption and of that final peaceful rest. Instead these days of *teshuvah*, of turning and return, should make our souls restless as we reach inside, stirring the pot of our emotions and our assumptions. Our tradition doesn't just crack open the lid on our carefully covered and orderly lives; it throws us three lifelines, three themes of the *yamim noraim*, the days of awe. Let's begin with *zichronot*, with remembrance. You can't go forward into apology and forgiveness without repentance, remembering where we may have failed in living up to our own ideals.

Remember this: your first drive alone in a car after getting your license; a first kiss, your first job and the pride of earning, your first encounter with an idea, a philosophy that rocked your world! Remember the idealism of youth, the moral certitude, feeling that you were invincible, that you could be anything and that **you** could really do something to fix this messed up world. Teenagers may affect a kind of world weary mask, but just beneath that protective surface is a purity of spirit, of hope that is the antidote to cynicism. A recent article in the National Geographic on “The Teenage Brain,” posits the recent findings of an NIH study which concluded that our brains stop growing physically around the age of six, but they continue to reorganize and “grow” with information and behavioral cues until the age of 25. The impulsivity and risk-taking we bemoan in our teenagers turns out to be a natural and necessary part of their brain’s development. Dangerous risk-taking aside, there is reason for great hope and optimism in nurturing a teen as they explore the world with the creativity and enthusiasm that can only come during these years. With aging come the lessons absorbed through a myriad of experiences which color our world with uncertainty and ambiguity. Taking risks, trying new things are not as natural to us later in life; we understand this now, even from a physiological vantage point. Nor do we want to indulge in this kind of behavior; it is enough to appreciate the young, to look at our

grandchildren and all the possibility they hold...and to remember our own youthful optimism and exuberance.

As our family drove home from Canada, I pointed out a bumper sticker that said, "Remember who you wanted to be." It reminded me of this slight retelling of a wonderful rabbinic story: Rabbi Zusya, a great teacher, bemoaned his place in the world, a world fractured with wars and idol-worshippers, the unresponsive people he had tried to lead. He cried out to the Maker of Heaven and earth that no matter how hard he tried, he could never even approach one iota of the wisdom, the lowest level of our great teacher Moses. When his time finally came and Rabbi Zusya approached the throne of glory, he pleaded with the Almighty to take pity on him, "All my life, I only tried to be more like the great Moshe rabbeinu. To which the Creator of Life sadly responded to him, "Dear Zusya, who told you to be like Moses? Why were you not more like Zusya?"

Remember who you wanted to be: What was your passion; when your career or volunteering started, where were you and what were you doing? Maybe you have branched into other vocations, other opportunities to serve; now remember those beginnings. Who have you loved without reservation and where are they

now? In other words, what is the organizing principle of your life and with whom do you share it?

It is eighteen years since I was ordained as a Cantor from Hebrew-Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and furthered a career in Jewish life. It is forty years since I first sang professionally and knew that music touched my soul more profoundly than anything else. Through music, I found my way to the cantorate. It is challenging and wonderful to teach, to develop sermons, to counsel and be a pastor. But, when I am honest with myself, I know that none of it is realized completely without the pure pulse of music, my soul's heartbeat. When I remember who I wanted to be, it was a fabulous concert and opera singer. Those fancies spun a story of an "artiste." Somehow along the way, though, the true center of my soul's dream kept surfacing each time I sang in a synagogue. It was then and there that I often felt the music rise and reach a height which was different than the pinnacle of operatic wonder. Instead, something within the sound, the sensation, the rhythmic nuance, flowed out and made connection. Connection between me and the congregation, between music and the word, between God and all of us sitting there together trying to pray. Today, it is my dream to be a good musician who serves God and the Jewish people by communicating something ineffable, that which can sometimes only be expressed

through song. Of course, I remember that first dream and sometimes wonder, “what if?” ...but now, hardly ever. There is too much good that has come out of this change in direction. Remember who you wanted to be; remember that first dream, how it has evolved, how you had the wisdom to let go of what didn't work. Our rabbis teach us that in order to forgive others, we must first forgive ourselves.

Each of us comes to this time and place a bit battered and broken. The year has brought our world economic turmoil, political upheaval leading to more uncertain ends, catastrophic natural events. Many of us have faced illness, depression, loss of loved ones, disappointing relationships. We need a life-line. Remember.

Remember who you are, how much you have reached for and achieved.

Remember the wisdom you have attained in letting go of that which is really not important. Remember who and what it is that causes your pulse to beat with appreciation for life's gifts.

This year, as I remember who I wanted to be, the unfolding story of my brother-in-law, Rabbi Ronnie Cahana, mesmerizes and animates my soul. There is one more family story which I share with the prayer that it will change you as it has me. My niece writes about her father:

Five weeks ago, my father Rabbi Ronnie Cahana had a severe and rare kind of stroke in his brain stem. His mind has been severed from his body; a quadriplegic, on a respirator, with a fully functioning and brilliant mind. They call it incomplete Locked-in syndrome (in French: maladie de l'emmuré vivant – walled-in-alive disease).

My father, ever the spiritual poet, has through a process of blinking out letter by letter, been insisting on communicating endlessly day and night, despite being in the hospital. As my father's mouthpiece my mother, siblings and I facilitate for him to blink out long spiritual messages and sermons, letters in multiple languages and now aphorisms and poems as well

Communication is slow and gentle (taking hours to write a few paragraphs) and requires a level of mental endurance and tenacity reserved for the yogi or mystic. But perhaps that is in each of our powers, when we sever body from mind. My father speaks much about the division of body and mind, and how special he is to have the outer limits of human experience sparking through his fingers. Most people in this compromised physical condition ask for death, sometimes using all their life force fighting for it. My father has only said let me show you how to live, from the very first instance of occlusion.

We are experiencing something few on earth experience; my father floating through spirit and space, and us through his endless thought-process and spiritual high. I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT THIS TOO IS HEALIGE (holy in yiddish) he blinked to Tamira, my sister and to me: I AM IN A BROKEN PLACE BUT THERE IS HOLY WORK TO DO.

In part of Rabbi Cahana's first "blinked" sermon which was delivered to his congregation by his wife, Karen, he expressed gratitude to God which seems unimaginable, given his physical state.

To the Compassionate One, the Most High Constant and Pure, who breathes meaning and truth into life. You have allowed me another verse of one more song, one more kiss to a loving life.

There are many when low, who stop growing. Last week, I was brought so low, but I felt the hand of my father around me, and my father brought me back.

I am grateful for all the love, messages and prayers I have received. They are uplifting me, and I hope to be back home soon.

Ronnie, so many are praying for you that you will be back home soon. You have inspired so many to choose blessing over curse, gratitude over bitterness, appreciation of exactly where you are, rather than regret.

It is my fourth year here in Sun Valley with your beautiful community and I am grateful to you for every honor and opportunity you have extended to me. I hope that some of the personal reflections I share may help you to remember who you once wanted to be and to accept with gratitude each moment of life you have been given. Imagine yourself being dropped off at college; moving to Sun Valley; the sense of wondrous possibility. Even in our most limited capacity physically or mentally, we are perfect reflections of divinely inspired creation. ***“I AM IN A BROKEN PLACE BUT THERE IS HOLY WORK TO DO.”***

Looking back in remembrance, this Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, hold onto the dream of who you wanted to be, with gratitude for all that you have achieved, forgiving yourself for what you had to let go of, and giving yourself the encouragement to reach just a little higher. May this year, 5772, be a year when body and mind and soul find healing as we do God’s holy work.

[We join in singing together the prayer for healing, *“Mi Shebeirach”*]

