

Reflection, Renewal and Responsibility: Honoring our Young People at Rosh Hashanah

Steven Brion-Meisels / October 2005

Good morning, welcome and shalom.

Our service began to day with these words: "*Rosh Hashanah is a time to pause, a time to reflect, a time to rest.*" It's an honor and a gift to have been invited to share some reflections with our community this morning.

My name is Steven Brion-Meisels. Linda and I have been members of KB for 20 years now. We joined as **Pediatric Jews** and we have stayed on as **Geriatric Jews**. That is, we joined because we sought a spiritual community that would welcome us – as a couple from two different religious and cultural traditions – and that would support in our children a commitment to Humanist values like respect and celebration of difference, service and responsibility, justice and hope. We joined as Pediatric Jews. But we have stayed because KB has given back to us, as aging adults, those same qualities: welcome, acceptance, service, responsibility, a commitment to justice and hope.

For the past 10 years or so I have had the great honor of teaching in the KB school 13 Sundays each year. I'll speak from these three perspectives this morning: as KB parent, teacher and member. I will try to touch some of the key elements that I return to each year during the Rosh Hashanah service. I will try to connect this particular Jewish tradition, to a larger set of ideas and values that I have come to admire and appreciate in the young people of this community and in the world of which KB is a small part.

First I want to find out a little bit about who is with us this morning, I want to welcome you with a brief activity. I'll ask a series of questions. If you can answer YES to the question, please rise for a moment, look around to see who is standing with you, and then sit again – ready for the next question.

- Who is looking forward to eating some apples and honey after our service? (stand)
- Who has been to a KB Rosh Hashanah service before this year?
- Who is coming to your first Rosh Hashanah service this year?
- Who is here with a family member?
- Who has a good friend, someone you can trust and count on?
- Who has ever been hurt by something that was said by another person, including a friend or family member?
- Who has ever been worried or afraid that something bad might happen to a family member or a friend?

- Who knows someone who has been kind to you?
- Who has helped someone who has been sad or angry?
- Who comes from a spiritual or cultural background that is not Jewish?

Thanks for sharing a bit of yourself with the rest of the members of our community this morning. In a few minutes, I'll ask you to do some more sharing. But for now, I want to say again Welcome to all who have come to join us. Thank you for bringing the fullness of YOU into this space.

Community

The first part of our service that I want to highlight is this idea of **COMMUNITY** – of welcoming differences as a wonderful way to make our community more interesting and strong. Here's one of my favorite passages from our service:

*What is good has been explained. This is what is required of us:
To act justly
To love mercy
And to walk humbly.*

In our service, this passage comes from Micah, a wise man and an agitator from the book I used to call "The Old Testament" when I was a Catholic child. But the same ideas appear in many other teachings. The "New" Testament, or the Gospels, speak the same exact core message. Islam teaches justice, mercy and humility. The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that compassion and understanding are the central actions we need to take if we are to be peacemakers.

Many of us in KB come from blended traditions – whether that is Christian-Jew, Sephardic-Ashkenazic, Yankee or red Sox fan, religious or agnostic. Humanist Judaism teaches respect and celebration of differences. In our school, we welcome the voices of our young people with their different perspectives. Today we welcome people of different ages, experiences and traditions to our circle. So as we celebrate our Jewish Humanist tradition in today's service, we can also appreciate and welcome the other traditions whose teachings stand on common ground. In our differences we find common ground; from our differences we build a strong community.

Reflection

In our service today, we read:

*Return to who you are, return to what you are
Return to where you are ... return and return again.*

Each year on this morning, I am thankful for the opportunity to pause and reflect ... and to return: to myself and to this community. Each Sunday morning when we have Sunday School, I am thankful for the opportunity to listen to the reflections of our young people. They continually bring new perspectives and new wisdom to ancient and ever-new questions: how shall we treat each other? What are the roots of fear and hatred? What are the roots of courage and kindness? What does it mean to do tikkun olam? What does it mean for ME as a young person to try to heal the world? What does it mean for me as a parent or teacher to treat others fairly, and to use my power well? We return, in our class, to these big and enduring questions. And we reflect together. I have learned much from our young people.

Service and Responsibility

In our service, we read that Rosh Hashanah marks a time of harvest, when people worked together with a common goal. But we also read that this time of harvest was a sacred opportunity to share and give back to the community. This is the key, for me, of the story of Ruth and Boaz – who met and were connected through an act of sharing and who stayed connected through a commitment to loving responsibility. In our service we also read that *the ram's horn reminds us of the time of Jubilee* – a time each seven years *when slaves were released and property was redistributed to the poor*. A time of freedom and fairness. May this year be a Jubilee year for our nation.

In our community, many young people include some aspect of service and responsibility, of Tikkun Olam, in their Bat or Bar Mitzvah work. I have been honored to help with some of these, and to attend 30 or 40 over the years. I want to appreciate and remind us as adults that the young people of KB are generous, responsible, and deeply committed to the Humanist values of service. They teach us in their actions, and today is a good day to celebrate them for that gift.

I also want to pause a moment today, on this Rosh Hashanah of 2005, to be mindful of children and families in our own nation whose lives have been lost or hurt and whose homes have been destroyed as a result of Hurricane Katrina. I reflect on many Katrina questions this morning. How does the story of Boaz and Ruth help me understand my responsibility to these sisters and brothers? How did our unwillingness to share our wealth weaken the levees that might have held back that mighty storm? What will I do tomorrow and the next tomorrow to uphold my human responsibility to children and families huddled in shelters across our nation? Our young people remind me of this responsibility, and I thank you for that.

I also think today of a song from a wonderful rabbi, songwriter and social activist: Si Kahn. He writes,

*"It's not just what you're born with, but what you choose to bear.
It's not how large your share is, but how much you can share.
It's not the fights you dreamed of, but those you really fought.
It's not just what you're given, but what you do with what you've got."*

Justice

In our service today we read several times about **justice**. Justice is a complex word, because it so often talks about courts, blame and punishment. But the justice in our service is really about fairness – something we all understand, and something that is really important in our Sunday school discussions. In our service, we return again and again to this theme: *the slaves are released, the property is shared*. We say together, " *The sound of the shofar is a call to conscience.*"

How do we stand up for justice, as individuals and as a community? How do we help our children keep the courage to do this as well, especially when it might make them unpopular? Do we have a special responsibility to justice as Humanists and Jews? And how, as we read earlier, do we temper justice with mercy?

Forgiveness

This brings me to the next idea: **Forgiveness**. An important Humanist principle is to forgive. In our service, we read that we reflect on the past year so that we might forgive ourselves for the mistakes we have made; and we blow the shofar in part to remind us that we can begin again, once we have forgiven ourselves. In our service today we ask:

*Were we a help you our mates or did we take them for granted?
Were we there when our friends needed us?
Did we mind only our own business?*

As we seek the strength to forgive those who have hurt us, we need to first find the courage to forgive ourselves. How many of us have hurt someone we love? Not helped? Teased? Told rumors behind a friend's back? Shouted at a student or our own children because our frustration spilled over? Each year on this morning I stand in awe of my own children's capacity to forgive ...me – comforted by the words of song writer Michael Cooney:

Be kind to your parents, though they don't deserve it.

Remember that parents are a difficult stage of life.

But as Humanists – and as humans – this day also calls us to forgive those who have hurt us. Before he was killed by a fellow Israeli, Itzak Rabin said, “It is easy to make peace with your friends. It takes courage to make peace with your enemies.” The same is true of forgiveness? How do we forgive those who have hurt us? Or who hate us? How do we forgive even if we can not forget? How do these challenges apply in our homes? Across ethnic differences and national borders? How can we let our children know that we appreciate their ongoing acts of forgiveness?

Joy and Renewal

I end with joy and renewal, light and hope.

In our service today, we read:

“As parents, our hearts are filled with gratitude on this day. Our lives have been blessed with the precious gift of children, through whom we have become partners in the ongoing creation of life.”

Of course this is true for those of us who have not given birth to children, because in many ways all children are our children. So we also remember and celebrate how children mean renewal:

“We think of generations gone and generations to come... of what is good in humankind, what is worth keeping ...and who will hand on what we have learned.”

Let’s not let our commitment to service and responsibility and forgiveness get in the way of our joy. I am aware each Sunday morning of the joy that our young people bring me – in your (and their, because some of them are not here today) smiles and laughter, courage and worries, silliness and wisdom, curiosity and commitment.

Hope and Light

Finally, Rosh Hashanah always remind me of this simple fact: **Light is always and everywhere stronger than the darkness.** As the days shorten, we begin to bring light inside. We light candles, and we hold the light inside our hearts as Solstice and Chanukah come nearer. In our service, we read:

“Let us rejoice in the light of day, in the glory and warmth of the sun, in the awakening of life to duty and love.”

We also sing Ay Fo Oh Ree, and we say, "*Blessed is the light that is in each of us. Blessed is the light that brings joy into the world. Blessed is the light of the future. Blessed is the light of the new year.*"

We have in our home a wonderful Hannukah blessing that includes these words:

"A candle is a small thing. But one candle can light another. And see how its own light increases as the candle gives its flame to another. You are such a light."

Blessed indeed is the light within us. But more blessed when we pass it on. So to close I ask you to turn to someone near you and pass on some light -- in the form of a hope you have for the coming year.

[Wait.]

Thanks for coming into this space today. Shalom.