

REFLECTIONS FOR ROSH HASHANAH

Good morning. My name is Jon Levine, and it is a pleasure, although a nervous one, for me to be addressing you today.

WHAT'S IN A BELIEF?

I mention my name, because it is customary, and also to illustrate a point. When I was a child, I learned my name and how to pronounce it. Levine. In my mind, there was no alternative. Not until later did I learn that most people would pronounce my last name in a way that makes absolutely no sense, in terms of the pronunciation rules of the English language. Even though my last name is spelled like wine, shine and line, it is pronounced by most people like wean, sheen and lean. Levine, Levene. So here is my point. Each of us has believes that we hold to be as true as the way we pronounce our names. That anyone else would believe differently has little effect on the core of our beliefs, which are essentially opinions. And yet we live in a world where there are many who we know have different beliefs than us. Who is to say which, if any is correct?

Rosh Hashanah marks the changing of the year. I always have to check my calendar because it seems to come on a different day each year. That is because I use a solar calendar (based on the earth's movement around the sun) but the Jewish calendar is lunar (based on the moon's phases as it orbits the earth). Who is to say which calendar is correct? Last night the moon began its 29 1/2 day cycle, and we began our new year. Coincidentally, this is also the autumnal equinox, when the length of day and night are the same. Many cultures observe these astronomic events with rituals, each in their own way. Each ritual represents some important belief. Who is to say that we haven't got things to learn from those beliefs which are different from ours?

KB Sunday School teacher Steven Brion-Meissels sent me an email from the Shalom Center in Philadelphia that pointed out the following:

This year, the High Holiday season is a special one not only for Jews but for people from two other Abrahamic traditions: Islam and Christianity. In the context of the current violence that plagues the Middle East, we can pause to remember our connections – and to renew our commitment to peace.

In 2006 and 2007, the Jewish High Holy days and Sukkoth will coincide with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan – when Muslims around the world fast, pray, ask for repentance, and pause to reconsider their commitments to peace, justice and service.

During this same month, two important holy days also fall for Christians. October 4 is the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi – for many Catholics, the patron saint of peace. In his time, Saint Francis stood virtually alone in condemning the Crusades. On October 1, Protestants and Orthodox Christians will celebrate the Worldwide Communion Sunday, which is a call to all Christians, regardless of background and tradition to acknowledge their commonalities.

Outside the Abrahamic tradition, on October 2, many Hindus will celebrate the birth of Mahatma Gandhi, a man known for his work for non-violent conflict resolution.

According to ancient tradition, Abraham's tent was open on all four sides to welcome travelers from everywhere. All of us in Congregation Kahal B'raira would do well to remember one of the central tenets of Humanistic Judaism: inclusion. Reflect on the connections among our traditions. Act in ways that strengthen respect, inclusion, forgiveness and connection during these special high holy days.

WHY DO I HAVE TO BE HERE?

For me, Rosh Hashanah is about coming together. We are a congregation and so we congregate, we gather, flocking together into a crowd. Why?

Some of us come here today as unwilling participants. If you are under a certain age, maybe you are here feeling like the choice wasn't yours. Perhaps your family has insisted that you come. If you are here with children, perhaps you are here to set a good example, but not feeling as if it is exactly your choice, more like your duty. Maybe you are here because it was someone else's idea.

You know, back in the olden times, I used to go to High Holiday services with my parents. There wasn't a whole lot of joy involved on my part. I grew up in Brookline. We would drive to our Reformed Synagogue, which was really quite a beautiful place, but its beauty was lost on me at the time. To me it represented everything that the end of summer's freedom could embody. I remember one particular instance. It was a lovely evening. The sun shone down the wide boulevard of Beacon St. People were walking on the sidewalk, enjoying the day, and I was stuck in the car going to services. Why did I have to do this, I whined to myself (maybe not just to myself)? Why did I have to spend time going to temple instead of doing something, anything, just like everyone else? I had no idea what everyone else was doing. I just knew it had to be better than where I was going.

Fast forward to me at 23. I lived far away, at the end of a tidal creek. The main road was across large soy bean fields. Don't ask me why, but come the High Holidays, I had the urge to go to services. A college friend of mine could get us into an Orthodox Shul. It was a two hour drive. I went. It was a worthwhile experience...I drank in the atmosphere and, in spite of the strangeness of the particular customs, there were frequent reminders of what was familiar from my childhood. That miserable drive to the synagogue of my youth, that service, which I thought was specially created to make my life a living hell, was actually tied in to traditions that reached far back in time and the memories of our people. Prayers were recited, songs were sung, chests were beaten. Oy mein Gott, I have sinned. I knew I didn't really believe this, but there was something about this that said home. There were portions of the service that I could finally see had something to say to me. It was worth my time to stop, reflect and listen.

Strangely, everyone seemed to be going at their own speed. That's right. People weren't reading responsively or in unison. Individuals were going at their own paces. It seemed

very strange and disorganized to me at the time. But I learned something new about our traditions. Rituals are interpretations of ideas created by people and so could be recreated to fit particular needs and purposes.

Compare our services which have a different style of liturgy. I have read that the word 'liturgy' derives from the Greek word 'leitourgia' (meaning "work of the people, public service performed without payment in return.") It was initially used to describe the chanting, singing, dancing and acting done by the chorus at outdoor Greek amphitheaters. It started out as a response to the soloist and later to multiple actors on the stage. The audience joined in on this "liturgy" enthusiastically. It takes no great leap of imagination to see how such responses by the people could evolve into the responsive readings which we use as large portions of our KB services such as our service today.

And what or who do we serve? Who indeed, if not our own needs and those of each other?

And what will we do, then, with our time together?

What if we take our circumstances, that we are here, and consider that we can create our own good reasons? We can reflect on what is the best of us. Reflect on what should be the important lessons which inform our lives and choices.

Sometimes, I need to turn off the radio, the TV, the cd player and reflect in quiet and stillness. There was a time when the first thing I would do when I started my car was turn on the radio, when the first thing I would do upon entering my home was put on some music. Often, I will still do this. However, it is sometimes worth turning off external noise and listening to the voice within. So too, are we spending time here. Together we have turned off random external noise and tried to create an intentional time and space where we can reflect.

A TIME TO TAKE STOCK

We are at a beginning, we are at an end. Rosh Hashanah allows us a time to come together, to take stock. It is a good time to plant the seeds of good cause in our lives. As it says in our congregational liturgy:

Let the possibilities of this moment be not lost. Let every potential for wisdom, harmony and elation be realized. This is a time for an expression of the best in us and all that we can share. A time for peace, for contemplation, for introspection, for understanding and for hope.

The ten day period which we call the Days of Awe is the time where we not only look forward to the new year, but we also look back on times gone by. I am awed by the prospect of sitting for a few hours to reflect on my life, and the lives of those important to me. Because as we set out to begin anew, we are nothing if we do not bring our passed year's experiences with us. These past experiences might prompt feelings of sadness and regret. Those are certainly legitimate reactions to our mistakes.

We also might be proud of times where we have taken adversity and grown. What is the nature of growth? Does opportunity knock on our door and say, “Here I am. Take me?”

Linda Ellerbee, in her book Take Big Bites writes, “It’s been said that the only joy in the world is to begin. This is wrong. What happens next is what counts. Life is lived with dailiness, not drama. This is why a wedding is easier than a marriage-why giving birth to children is easier than raising them. Try to cherish the dailiness...”

That is so true. How many times have we made promises that we have not been able to keep? The grand gesture...the going out on a limb...these are important statements that we make. When we speak aloud our commitments, we begin the process of bringing them into being. But after the initial dramatic flourish is taken and the celebrating is over, comes the day to day putting our words into action. Life is lived in small steps, in the little things we do. I have said it before, I will say it again:

When you sew an act you reap a habit.

When you sew a habit, you reap a character.

When you sew a character, you reap a destiny.

How can we follow through on our commitments and turn them into action? What do we do when we mean to do the right thing but fall short?

WE CREATE COMMUNITY

At this point, all of us, ought to be considering our presence here as something of our own creation. I maintain that why we are here is not nearly as important as what we do now that we are here.

We can come to terms with our own lives as individuals in a group which happens to be together. Or we can consider that we have come together and now we have an opportunity.

Here in the KB community, we work as a cooperative. That means that if everyone doesn’t show up to pitch in, there are things that won’t get done. It is a given. As the few do the more, things will fall through the cracks. Now, you might think that this is about to become a shameless pitch for you to volunteer, but I’m not going to do that. I am talking here about opportunity. Kahal B’raira is different than what I am used to experiencing. I have been to a number of different observances, and I find that we have one that is unique. At the present time, we function successfully without official spiritual leadership. We have survived for over 30 years now by trying a variety of paths. We have employed rabbis, we have stayed our course without them. How important is this? According to the Talmud, a sage, when asked, “What is the law?” replied, “Go out and see what the people say.”

So here I am, just a guy who has had some time to think. And in the process of thinking I have wondered about how we all have come together from many places, circumstances and frames of mind. We walked into each other’s lives. We are a random gathering, a congregation. We spend some time together, in this room, in this part of our lives and, if

we touch each other in some way, perhaps we leave this space a community: a set of people with some shared characteristics, with a common ownership. Kahal B'raira is a small piece of the pie. At its best, we share common ownership of our congregation. In the bigger picture, we share common ownership of the planet, maybe beyond.

Choice is what this is all about. The choices we make are how we create our world. We are the community of choice. What makes us a community? We are individuals with common interests. We are not discussing and grappling with uniquely Jewish issues. They are issues which have taxed and strained the understanding of all peoples at various times of their lives. We choose to meet in a Jewish setting, and use Hebrew words and rituals, but I assert that all people grapple with these questions...and more. "Where do we come from? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" This is the name of a painting by Paul Gauguin from 1897.

After all is said and done, the different rituals, the different ways of observance, what sets us apart are our choices. Or rather that we choose.

What Judaism has brought to the world is the significance of the particular, the unrepeatable.

Each moment and the decisions of each moment are precious. This, most Jewish perspective, is something to live by. Each moment and the decisions of each moment are precious.

I think it is a profoundly empowering way to live. I create the future by what I do now. As a community, we create the future by what we do together. Community of choice.

May we write our names in the Book of Life for the coming year, and for many years to come. La Shana Tova.