

Strength in the New Year

Rosh Hashanah Evening 5777 – October 2, 2016
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California
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When I was growing-up, my three brothers and I had a very unique custom. We had a belief that on the day before your birthday, you would grow weaker by the hour. By the time you were ready for bed, your strength would ebb to such a degree that you were fragile as a feather. The slightest nudge would knock you over.

But, during the night, you would become magically endowed with superhuman strength. On the morning of your birthday, you were reborn as strong as Superman. And the other brothers were obliged to acknowledge this great power. If the birthday boy gave a brother a push, he would go flying across the room, smashing into a wall with a loud crash.

Though we are no longer little boys, still to this day, on the evening before a brother's birthday, we call and ask, "Are you growing weaker?" The next day, I do not make a phone call to wish one of my brothers "Happy Birthday" because with his superhuman strength, I know he has the power to send a powerful blast through the phone and send me crashing against a wall once again. So I take the safe route and send him a text. Then I quickly put down my smart phone for the next hour.

How it is possible that this special custom of the Schulman brothers has lasted for so long? We're all grown men for gosh sakes. I think there are three key reasons. The first reason is that our belief that you first grow weak and then super strong on your birthday is our own special Schulman custom. I do not know of any other siblings who have this peculiar practice. It gives us a sense of ourselves; of who we are. It is one of the ways we define ourselves as unique.

Secondly, our special custom reminds us of our past. It seems very long ago when we were youngsters living with mom and dad. Most times, it is hard for me to even recall what it was like when all of us lived under one roof in a 1300 square foot house in Long Beach. But re-enacting our birthday custom each year awakens our memories and reminds us of sweet times.

Finally, a third reason why our unique birthday custom has endured is because it expresses a powerful hope. On the day before your birthday, you are a weakling, at the mercy of others. Yet, on the day of your birthday you are magically transformed, endowed with renewed strength and super power. Who doesn't want to believe in the possibility of transformation?

On this evening of Rosh Hashanah, I think there are ways in which the birthday practice of the Schulman boys resembles how we approach the High Holy Days. First, there is the fact that for Yuntiff, there are customs for the High Holy Days that are unique. Let's begin with the sounding of the shofar. Every religion incorporates music in some fashion. In church, you might hear an organ or chimes. In a Buddhist temple, bells are sounded. In Hindu temples, a drum or violin may be played. All these instruments are fashioned by hand. But on Rosh Hashanah, we hear the sound of a shofar. It is not handmade, rather it is an animal's horn. The shofar comes from nature. The blast of the t'kiah is primeval. Its clarion call has remained unchanged through thousands of years. It is the blast our ancestors experienced standing at Sinai. It is the plaintive cry our ancestors heard in synagogues around the world. It is the same sound for which we yearn every time we gather on Rosh Hashanah.

If we heard the shofar every week, it would lose its power. But on Rosh Hashanah and at N'ilah, the concluding service of Yom Kippur, the shofar awakens our souls. It reminds us of our covenant with God, to be God's partner in the work of creation, and to strive for holiness in all our endeavors.

On Rosh Hashanah and throughout these Days of Awe, we have other customs that are unique. We wish one another Shana Tova and Gut Yuntiff – extending to one another our heartfelt blessings. We eat apples and honey, so that the succulence of the fruit and the nectar of the bees symbolize a delicious and sweet new year. We say Motzi over a challah that is not braided but instead is round, representing the cycle of a year that has come to a close and begins anew.

During the Days of Awe, there are prayers that are recited only during this time of year. The U'netaneh Tokef declares the power of this day, reminding us of how fragile our lives are. We offer prayers of contrition: Ashamnu, V'al Cheit Shechatanu, and Avinu Malkeinu are meant to open our hearts to our shortcomings and move us toward repentance and forgiveness.

One other aspect of the High Holy Days that make them unique is the music. The majesty of these days is embodied by the soaring voice of our cantor, the joyful singing of our choir, and the sensitive playing of the piano. Our souls are uplifted and inspired by the music of these Days of Awe.

In addition to our unique customs and practices, there is a sentimentality that permeates the High Holy Days. For those of us who were born Jewish, Yuntiff reminds us of when we were kids. We may remember how it felt when we were children, dressing-up in our best clothes to go to synagogue with our parents. We recollect the excitement of seeing our friends in shul. We may remember our rabbi giving an inspiring sermon; or recall the majesty of hearing Avinu Malkeinu or the heartrending singing of Kol Nidrei.

Rosh Hashanah awakens not only recollections from our youth but also memories that are far more recent. As we gather for Yuntiff at Temple Beth Torah, we

cannot help but feel the loss of dear friends who have died in the past year. A year ago, on the night of Rosh Hashanah, Florence Silver fulfilled the honor of lighting candles. She was clearly not well; the cancer that would soon claim her life sapped her of strength. But given the opportunity to fulfill this mitzvah in the synagogue, for which she gave so much, she would not be deterred. When called upon to light the candles, she stood and with the assistance of family slowly made her way to the bimah. Our eyes filled with tears as she recited the blessing and then *slowly* returned to her seat. Florence died a month later. *Zichrona Livracha*. May her memory be a blessing.

On Yuntiff, we think of loved ones who are no longer alive: parents and grandparents, siblings and spouses, family and friends. Our hearts are heavy as we remember those whom we have loved. In Judaism, sadness is not an emotion to be suppressed. Tears are not a sign of weakness, but of humanity. Grief is a reflection of our capacity to love; to feel deeply our bonds with those who have loved us. On Yuntiff, there is merit in opening our hearts and suffusing our prayers with emotion. A softened heart enables us to be more receptive to the meaning of these Days of Awe.

The story about my brothers and me believing that you go from being a weakling to becoming like superman on your birthday expresses a mythical belief in the possibility for transformation. During these High Holy Days we have the potential for transformation that is far more real and significant. Beginning this night of Rosh Hashanah, our souls can become more empowered. Our spirits can be strengthened and renewed.

But this does not happen by magic. We cannot just go to bed at night and wake up the next morning suddenly transformed. In Judaism, this process of transformation takes effort. It takes work. In fact, the Hebrew word for “work” is Avodah, which is also one of the words for prayer.

During the ten days of awe, there is Avodah, soulful work that needs to be done. Rosh Hashanah begins a process of Cheshbon HaNefesh, of self-inquiry. We ask: What did I do right in the past year? Where have I erred? How do I find the humility to ask for forgiveness from God and those I have harmed? How do I discover the compassion to forgive those who have hurt me? Am I capable of forgiving myself for being flawed and imperfect?

In addition to Cheshbon HaNefesh, we seek teshuvah. Teshuvah is commonly translated as repentance, but that word seems hollow. It lacks energy. Teshuvah really means to return to our better selves, to animate the divine spirit that is implanted within us. Teshuvah is a return to our most elevated selves: caring and compassionate; honest and true; generous and forgiving. Teshuvah is recognizing the godliness in every human being; seeing all life as sacred; treating the earth with kindness. Teshuvah is acting on behalf of our congregation; giving generously of our time and resources to guarantee the well-being of Temple Beth Torah not only in this year, but for many years to come. Teshuvah is seeing a link between ourselves and Jews around the world, expressing solidarity with Israel and acting on behalf of those who are

endangered. Teshuvah is seeking to right wrongs, establishing justice in our cities, and upholding the high ideals of our beloved country.

On this evening of Rosh Hashanah I do not believe that overnight we become supermen or superwomen. Judaism does not ask of us what is in fact impossible. But Rosh Hashanah is known as the Birthday of the World. It is a time for celebrating our unique customs. It begins a season for remembrance of our loved ones and for committing ourselves to fulfil the ideals they exemplified. On this birthday of the world we can elevate our souls; return to our better selves; seek forgiveness from God and one another; and begin this New Year with joy.

In the words of Rabbi Herbert Morris: Let us give thanks that “we are alive! . . . God has placed into the very heart of all that lives a capacity to begin again, to grow, to renew.”

Beginning this night and throughout the ten Days of Awe, let us take on the work of becoming stronger Jews. May we return to our higher selves; our more divine nature. May we work to become better people, acting with justice and mercy. May we commit ourselves to bringing forth a world of goodness and peace, a world made better by our deeds and our compassion.

Amen.