

First Evening – Rosh Hashanah

This Rosh Hashanah commemorates a milestone in my life. It initiates the completion of fifty years in the Rabbinate and forty years of service to Georgetown. As many of you have heard me say from this pulpit in years past, I do not like to refer to these solemn days as the High Holy Days. Describing them as such denigrates the significance of what is considered to be miraculous in Judaism. In our daily devotions we praise God for the miracles that are daily with us evening, morn, and noon. For us the miraculous is not the extraordinary, that which occurs only once a year, but rather the ordinary, that which occurs on a daily basis. From that perspective, Shabbat is regarded as being more holy than either Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah initiates the Yomim Noraim, the Days of Awe. When I think about this literal translation of the Hebrew, I become grateful to my teacher at Seminary, Abraham Joshua Heschel, for his rendition of the term “awe” as a state of “radical amazement.” That which is awesome is not to be feared but rather to be celebrated. Heschel attributes the most significant experience of awe to Moses at the burning bush, which is his prophetic

call. This is Moses' first encounter with the ineffable. His response is that he cannot assume the role because he is "heavy of tongue," often interpreted to mean that Moses is disabled by some physical condition, similar to stuttering. This is contrary to the reality that Moses is remarkably articulate during the forty years of wandering in the desert. Heschel interprets this heaviness of tongue to the reality that the human response to the encounter with the sublime is not to wax poetic but rather to be confronted by the inability to articulate the meaning of the experience. This is one of the many lessons that I have learned during my life journey. I was raised in New England and educated to believe that the ability to articulate verbally was the keystone to a successful existence. My education at Seminary was not dissimilar. The art of homiletics, delivering the perfect sermon, was regarded as that magical trait that would gain the aspiring young rabbi a prominent pulpit. The course known as Practical Theology was, in fact, a guide to pulpit presence, how to be eloquent in speech and elegant in stage presence. Fifty years in the rabbinate have taught me that being a rabbi should be more about teaching than preaching.

I am indebted to Heschel for many of my life values. This has been a year of loss for me. In November I suffered the death of my son, Grant, and subsequently the loss of many of my peers. In three years I will become an octogenarian, and I realize that praying for another year of life is more than just a rote ritual. I find that I now seek answers not only to the meaning of life but to that of death as well. I contemplate Heschel's idea that death is not an end of living but rather of doing.

I never had a conversation with my mentor on the theological implications of his statement but I don't interpret it to refer only to Heschel's personal commitment to a belief in the immortality of the soul. Heschel was a Hassidic mystic who looked at death in a figurative as well as a physical mode. He believed that a prerequisite for letting go of an entity was to imagine that it had died. This is how he interpreted the meaning of the binding of Isaac on the sacrificed altar narrative that we will read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. The act that God requires of the aged patriarch Abraham is a preparatory rite that will enable Abraham to let go of his thirty-nine-year-old son. We all are guilty of obsessive compulsions. We must allow them to die

in order to live fully. I often reflect upon the fact that doing is a type of occupational therapy for me that allows me to avoid contemplative reflection. The death of this obsession could in a sense be considered the gateway to a new mode of living.

Let me share with you a rather dramatic personal experience. It began with a dinner conversation at the home of friends on January 23, 1984. Other than my hosts, I did not know any of the invited guests prior to the dinner. They seemed to know quite a bit about me. I was troubled by a remark addressed to me by a yuppie-like upwardly-mobile individual who assessed me as a seemingly interesting personality. My response was, “How do you make that judgment?” He explained that the hosts had informed him about my ability to collect art, antiques, and a variety of significant and insignificant people. He invited himself to visit the nineteenth century Victorian farmhouse that I had been meticulously restoring over the past five years. I asked myself, “Am I the sum total of my possessions and avocational interests?” I had been concerned about the reality that my home was being transformed into a museum rather than a comfortable residence, and his remarks were

therefore not totally unwelcome. I made one simple request of him, “Forget what I have accumulated and judge me by looking into my soul.” His response was pleasing to me, “You really are a rabbi!”

On the following day I received an emergency phone call at my Georgetown office from an official of the voluntary fire department of the rural community where my residence was located. A fire had been reported at my home and the damage was extensive. By the time that I arrived at the scene, the fire had been extinguished but the smoke and water damage was extensive. Art and antiques were beyond repair, and I realized that I was seriously underinsured. The house itself was salvageable, but I knew immediately that my dream had died. The firefighters informed me that they had discovered the bodies of the two cats that I had adopted from an animal shelter. A pedigree cat had escaped the blaze. I mourned the death of these two living creatures. I did grieve over the destruction of family memorabilia, particularly photographs, but did not bemoan the loss of the material objects that I had collected over the years. The fire was an immolation similar to the refining fire described by Isaiah and other prophets. I had a feeling of

being cleansed and liberated from being judged as the sum total of the objects that I had collected. For the following two months I lived in a dormitory room on campus and began a journey that did not totally eliminate the need for doing, but which opened to the door to the possibility of a more contemplative life experience.

Rosh Hashanah is a time when we are asked to engage in the act of Teshuvah commonly translated as repentance. The root of the word Teshuvah is to turn but it could be interpreted as suggested by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan to imply the act of transformation. This is a time of letting go and the opportunity to offer voluntary death to that which could become obsessive. God lets go of the created world by letting go of the divine creation on the Sabbath day. Adam and Eve leave the creature comfort of the Garden of Eden. Abraham is able to let go of Hagar and his first son Ishmael as we will read in the Torah portion tomorrow morning. He is also enabled to cut the emotional ties to Isaac through the death simulation of binding his beloved son on the sacrificial altar.

This will be the last of many years of enjoying the privilege of serving as your rabbi at these Gaston Hall services on these days of awe. I will retire as Senior Jewish Chaplain this June but will continue to serve the University as an academic in the Theology Department and as an advisor to the Program for Jewish Civilization in the School of Foreign Service. I am not retiring, but *re-orienting*.

As I have remarked on previous occasions I am not certain that my forty-year career has been more comparable to the existence of Moses or that of David and Solomon. Moses wandered in the desert for forty years. David and Solomon enjoyed the stability of forty years of tenure as kings of Israel. I am one who is committed to the principle of unity in diversity and conclude that I am a hybrid of both experiences.