

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5778

[Kindness, Compassion, Integrity, Honesty...](#)

The Challenge of Living

“And you wait, await the one thing that will infinitely increase your life; the gigantic, the stupendous, the awakening...” These words are from a poem by Rilke that we read during our contemplative *Selichot* service.

What are we doing here today? Perhaps we are here because this is where our parents and our grandparents would be on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Perhaps we are here because this is our community and our people’s way, tradition! In no small measure, explicitly and implicitly, we come into this space yet again this year, harboring the promise that somehow, something here has the power to radically alter our lives.

We call this period the *Days of Awe* ימים הנוראים, and our liturgy is literally asserting that *teshuvah*, *tzedakah*, and *tefillah* have the power to alter our destiny: תשובה תפילה, וצדקה מעבירן את גזר הדין. But is it really plausible that today’s prayers will impact our lives in a meaningful way?

As we sit in Synagogue focused on prayer and contemplation, we are called upon to account for our personal souls: חשבון נפש.

Here is how it may sound for many of us, or shall I say how it may have sounded in past years. We arrive to the New Year aware of our blessings. We are in touch with profound gratitude for the many godsendings in our lives. Undoubtedly for most, if not all of us, we may also be confronting real concerns that repeatedly challenge us in our lives, the breakdown of relationships, not feeling actualized or empowered, perhaps even a level of dissatisfaction with our lot or aspects of our life. We see today as an opportunity for reflection: what kind of mother was I this past year? How can I be a more present partner to my spouse? Was I compassionate enough to friends and family? How did I respond to the stranger in my midst? Are there ways for me to be more passionate, effective, or honest in my life? Did I carefully measure the weight of my words? Did I seize the opportunities to help or did I come up with excuses and look past people in their time of need? Was I kind, generous, and honest in my work life? Did I live with integrity?

When we think of these things, we imagine a change in behavior. Each of these questions is meaningful and characteristic of High Holidays. But while we may vow to do one or more of these things differently in the new year, most frequently, notwithstanding our best intentions, most of us will naturally revert to last year’s patterns. These vows address behaviors without addressing a core shift.

The time has come for us to address a deeper, more nuanced question. Rather than looking at the High Holidays as a time to address behaviors, we have an opportunity to address a shift in our core being. The question really needs to be how do I intend to change and shape my life so that I can live more fully this next year. When we live fully, we bring the same fullness to our relationships. When we live fully, we become more effective in how we shape and repair the

world. Addressing the question of our core being requires courage and a re-alignment of our most fundamental posture, a whole new way to think about our Judaism and to experience our lives.

Yom Kippur afternoon we read from Leviticus 19 which entreats: “You shall be holy, for I, the Eternal your God, am holy.” But what does it really mean to be holy? And while I am deeply moved by this supplication to be holy, it seems to me that for all of us, the concept of “being holy” can be hifalutin and confounding. How can we achieve a semblance of holiness in our lives?

As we begin to grapple with the concept of holiness, it is critical to state that the world and society in which we live does not esteem or reward holiness. We live in a world largely deficient of a moral compass, lacking in civic engagement, a world of infrastructure and institutions frequently immune to the needs of the other. We speak about, and create policies around, immigration without seeing the human beings we have labelled. Our society has elevated a type of nihilism that has birthed and condoned leadership, rhetoric, and policy that is abrasive, abusive, and hostile. We have accepted politics that are base, dishonest, and combative. The House of Representatives and the Senate represent a cacophony of special interests and partisan fighting that has utterly failed to legislate for the betterment of constituents. The present administration has identified winning as the goal with little concern for leadership, vision, character, or content. We have condoned policies that are devoid of compassion and generosity. Insurance companies and nursing homes are for-profit entities that enrich corporations while failing the needs of the sick and the elderly. We have elevated leaders who lack integrity. The very rubrics of our society consistently prioritizes wealth and power over the wellbeing of people.

As we arrive at this New Year 5778, I am profoundly distressed by that lack of kindness, compassion, integrity, and honesty as the core of our lives.

While the concept of being holy is central to Jewish thought, it is important to recognize that the **priority** of *being Holy* has not necessarily been the monumental question or the driving force that has shaped our Jewish identities and lives.

For generations as Jews, we have been consumed by the challenges of survival. We were occupied with the reconstruction of our people’s existence post-Holocaust. We were raised with a Zionist commitment, a sense of responsibility toward the creation and preservation of a Jewish homeland. We live with the questions and worries contiguous with assimilation. We grapple with the place of observance and ritual in our modern, even secular lives. We are aware that our Jewish identities can sometimes be more passive than active, the default choice passed down from generation to generation. And while this Congregation explicitly honors every reason we are here today, it may be fair to acknowledge that we have contemplated everything *except* the work of tending to our souls.

If we are to make Judaism relevant for today and for tomorrow, I believe that our singularly most significant undertaking must be a commitment to integrating personal, spiritual transformation.

For many among us, when it comes to cultivating soul spaces, to irrigating and cultivating a spiritual inner landscape, we have turned to disciplines and practices separate from our Judaism. When contemplating our soul spaces we have been attracted to alternative endeavors. And yet, once again on the Days of Awe, we find ourselves here with our Jewish souls asking these hard questions: who am I? What do I believe in? What is non-negotiable for me as a person? What are my values? How can I make a difference? How can I be happy, fulfilled, and satisfied. What is that thing that will radically transform my life?

If we are going to be honest about what we are doing here today, we need to hold ourselves accountable for our complicity in a world that doesn't prioritize kindness, compassion, integrity, and honesty as the highest value.

The study and practice of *Mussar* is a Jewish instruction for transforming one's life. Its roots go back to the 10th century, but it was dramatically expanded in the 19th and 20th centuries. *Mussar* became dormant following the Holocaust and now is resurging in diverse, progressive, Jewish communities around the world.

Alan Morinis, teacher and founder of the contemporary *Mussar* Institute, suggests that "*Mussar* is most accurately described as a way of life": you don't study *Mussar*, you do *Mussar*. In his book, Everyday Holiness, Morinis asserts that elevating our lives is "a human's job description". The verse, "You shall be holy" is written in plural קדושים תהיו, the implication being that holiness is for each and every one of us. Each of us, created in the image of the Divine, is called upon to live holy lives. *Mussar* means correction. In Hebrew we describe it as ethics. *Mussar* is the discipline by which we shape our inner core so that we are capable of becoming who we need to be and behaving how we ought to behave in the world.

What roles do humility, patience, gratitude, and equanimity play in your life? Do you experience joy, enthusiasm, happiness, and awe in a deep and transformative way? Are you slow to anger and do you judge others favorably? Are you generous in actions, words, and deeds? Are you able to give and receive love with a magnanimous, open heart?

We are misled to imagine that there is an external force that defines and dictates our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

I am happy, because...

I am angry, because...

I am successful, because...

I am frustrated because...

It is all too human and too seductive to delude ourselves in imagining our lives would be different if only something outside us changed: if only "x", then I would "y". These are dishonest avowals that mislead us and distance us from true contentment and profound actualization. These emotions describe a superficiality without owning and addressing something essential in ourselves.

Real change in our lives comes from within. *Mussar* is an ancient Jewish, spiritual practice in which the individual is attentive to specific character traits with the purpose of understanding, discerning, practicing, and becoming his/her best self. Rabbi Wolbe describes *Mussar* as

“building your interior world”. Engaging in the practice of *Mussar* makes it possible for the individual to cultivate the inner landscape, and in doing so, radically alter his/her life.

בראש השנה יכתבון וביום כפור יחתמו

On Rosh Hashanah we are inscribed, and on Yom Kippur that inscription is sealed. Our liturgy suggests to us that this is a matter of life and death. This is more than magical thinking; it is a fundamental Jewish belief that we choose life. “I put before you the blessing & the curse, choose the blessing so that you may have life.”

Rosh Hashanah is a magnificent celebration of the Jewish New Year, Yom Kippur *the Day of Atonement*, and Sukkot the first step in transforming our prayers from words and contemplation into action and deed. We are in the midst of a period of intentioned introspection. Its purpose is to set the stage for our doing *tikun*, literally repairing and improving ourselves, improving our world so that we and our children may live more fully.

The very best practice of our faith endorses that these Days of Awe can in fact profoundly impact our lives. A nuanced understanding of Judaism evokes that this is not the purpose of the Days of Awe alone. Ultimately this is the goal of all of our holidays and observances, including the observance of the Sabbath and a recalibration of self through study, practice, and ultimately transformation. We look at the past year, our deeds, our accomplishments, and our transgressions. We notice the ways in which we can repair who we are and how we live, each and every year, each and every week, each and every day. This is the ultimate purpose of our lives and *Mussar*.

Maimonides reminds us that the decision of who I am and who I am going to be is entirely my individual responsibility.

We live in a fractured world with elusive morality. Our Judaism provides us with a spiritual practice to bring ourselves to wholeness. As *Mussar* undergoes a revival throughout the world, I want to be certain that this community has the full opportunity to explore, study, and experience this extraordinarily rich tradition. Beginning November, two Thursdays a month, I will lead a group through the study and practice of *Mussar*. I welcome you to study with me. I dare you to radically change your life.

It is written in the Talmud, “Don’t say that when you have time you will study. Perhaps you will never have time.”

“And you wait, await the one thing that will infinitely increase your life; the gigantic, the stupendous, the awakening...”. It is within our reach to change our lives. When we change our lives we change our relationships. As we change, so we transform our community. As we practice kindness, compassion, integrity, and honesty in our lives, so we shape these realities in our world and in our soul. “And then all at once you know: that was it. You rise, and there stands before you the fear and prayer and shape of a vanished year.”