



Temple Beth Sholom

A JEWISH CENTER OF LIFE, LEARNING, AND CONNECTIONS

2625 N. Tustin Avenue • Santa Ana, CA 92705
714-628-4600 • information@tbsoc.com

Rabbi Cohen Sermon Archive

Rosh Hashanah 5771
Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen

Answering the Door To Our Heart

Last year, I turned to you and asked, how are you? Today, I am still asking, but not only 'how are you' but rather, how are you feeling?

Our days are filled with so many emotions. Each of us live on an emotional rollercoaster. Some days there are bigger hills than others and some days there are even a few loops and corkscrews that send our emotional state into a frantic frenzy.

Being sexist for a moment – I think it's safe to say that sometimes us women may seem to be on more emotional rollercoasters than men. However, I have to say, there are some men who sit right next to us in that seat going up each hill and around the curves laughing and crying the entire way. And then there are some women and men who try not to express any feelings for anyone else to see and wait for the quiet dark moments alone to allow each emotion to pour over themselves.

However it is that we express ourselves, the reality is, we all share deep and varied emotions. From happy, sad, elated, angry, confused, perplexed. And with these emotions our body reacts accordingly.

Take a moment with me right now – try to sit in our seat and pay attention to your body. Humor me...put both your feet flat on the floor and if you can, place your prayer book next to you or in front of you. Close your eyes and feel yourself breathe. Now start to pay attention to your head – try to clear out all the thoughts regarding anything that is not about this moment. Let go of the to-do lists and thoughts about what you are going to do or need to do later this afternoon and evening. How are you breathing? Now focus on your neck and shoulders – are they tense? Do they feel like they are about to snap because they are so tight or are they relaxed? How high are your shoulders to your ears? Try to relax them and let them fall. Again, how are you breathing? Now consider your back – are you able to sit up straight comfortably or can you feel the pain in each vertebrae? Are you able to hold yourself high or does your lower back weigh you down. Try to relax each section of your spine to allow yourself to be pulled up, like a string is coming from your head and lifting you up gently, allowing you to relax. Can you breathe more easily while sitting this way? Is the tension slowly departing or are you still holding on to something inside? If you can, focus on your breathing for the next few breaths. [PAUSE AND BREATHE]

Now that we have allowed our bodies to relax and focus here on this moment, it is time to listen to the knock on our heart's door. God is knocking today on our hearts and we have to decide how we are answering.

Before taking these few moments to relax we might have heard the knocking and ran for the door, swinging it open and answer...YES! WHAT DO YOU WANT? Or maybe we hear the knocking and we just want to turn the light off and say, 'no one's home!' But rather, today, on this Rosh Hashanah, it is our opportunity to slow down, take a breath when we hear the knock and then open the door inviting God in so that we can begin a conversation. But in order for us to approach the door and answer it, we have to let go of some of the intense emotions that cause us to tighten our body and soul. Today is the day that we begin to let go of the emotions that cause us pain so that we can focus on repairing and building and trusting once again.

We read in Leviticus 16:31 in regard to our High Holy Days, and Yom Kippur especially, *Shabbat Shabbaton hee lachem v'ee'nee'tem et naf'sho'tei'chem chukat olam*. It can be translated, "This shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for you, and you shall practice self-denial; it is a law for all time." However, this does not present a very full translation. Rather, if we translate it more literally, we read it as, "this shall be a Shabbat of Shabbatot for you and you shall answer your heart or your soul. This is a law for all time."

V'ee'nee'tem naf'sho'tei'chem, you shall answer you heart or your soul. We shall pay attention to our heart and our soul. But do we? Do we listen to our hearts and souls or are they clouded by the deep emotions that we can't seem to shake? Is our vision clouded by destructive emotions that either we mark on our hearts? Do we allow others to mark our hearts and change

our perspective?

The Psalmist knew that we have to let go of destructive emotions if we are ever able to enter holy space and find an inner peace.

Come, let us sing joyously to God, raise a shout for our rock and deliverer;

Let us come into God's presence with praise; let us raise a shout for God in song!

For ADONAI is a great God, the great ruler of all divine beings.

In God's hand are the depths of the earth; the peaks of the mountains are God's.

God is the sea, God made it; and the land, which God's hands fashioned.

Come, let us bow down and kneel, bend the knee before ADONAI our maker

For ADONAI is our God, and we are the people God tends, the flock in God's care. O, if you would but heed God's charge this day;

Do not be stubborn as the Meribah, and on the day of Massah, in the wilderness,

When your fathers put Me (God) to the test, tried Me, though they had seen My deeds.

Forty years I was provoked by that generation; I thought, "They are senseless people; they would not know My ways."

Concerning them I swore in anger, "They shall never come to My resting place!"

The last phrase, "Concerning them I swore in anger, 'They shall never come to My resting place!'" refers not to God's anger, but rather, to our own anger, our own strong emotions that do not allow us to be in a place of rest and refuge. We tend to hang on to grudges that then prevent us from moving forward in our relationships, our work, our world.

When we are in a place of focus and rest, we are able to appreciate our relationships, our world, and our lives. But when we rush, when we forget our purpose and our vision, when we are not able to let go of that which we *shtoosh* about, then we are not able to enter into holy moments. We are not able to enter into a sacred space if we are not able to let go.

How do we allow ourselves to release those strong emotions that we might be able to enter into holy time and holy space?

In some *Machzorim*, High Holy Day prayer books, in the prayer, *unetanetokef*, we see the words, *Teshuvah*, *T'fillah*, and *Tzedakah*, yet in some versions of the prayer book, we notice above those words in smaller print are the following: *tzom*, *kol*, *mamon*. Together, they read:

Teshuvah with *tzom* – repentance or returning with fasting

T'fillah with *kol* – Prayer with voice

Tzedakah with *mamon* – charity with money or sustenance

Our rabbis teach that on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur the evil adversary sought to distract us from righteousness. Therefore, each of us has to fight for our existence. The words, *tzom*, *kol* and *mamon*, are our tools allowing us to focus on our lives at this moment.

Teshuvah with *tzom* – repentance, returning with fasting. While today, Rosh Hashanah, is our sweet moment, we enter into a time of seeking to return to righteous ways in our lives. The tool in doing so is *tzom*, fasting. But why will we fast? We will fast because we recognize that there are some things that we do not need to indulge in in order to survive. Yes, food is a necessity, but this is the time to consider what we can refrain from in order to enter into holy time and space.

We are all over connected to our task lists, technology, and world. Each service I ask us to disconnect from our smart phones in order that we can connect to these holy moments we create together. But then, how often do all of us immediately return to the phone, the computer, the list – all causing us to forget the comfort of the moments we just experienced? *Teshuvah* and *tzom* might include returning to less connected times in order to focus more on the present.

T'fillah with *Kol* – Prayer with our voices. While I am always elated to see so many faces today and on Yom Kippur, I miss so many during the rest of the year. To raise our voices together in prayer or even in casual conversation at social gatherings in this space brings connection. But too often we find ourselves too busy, too tired, or just not feeling like we need to be together. And when we do find the times in which we are able to share moments as one family, we walk away feeling satisfied and happy. Yet, it is forgotten too easily and then time robs us of moments together. Moments in which our voices can rise up to praise, to thank, to reflect, to connect.

Tzedakah with *mamon* – charity with money or sustenance. Let's face it, we are still in the midst of difficult times. Yet, we are proud that no one was left behind – our entire congregational family remains intact this year. Through the generosity and creativity of our congregational family we were able to sustain one another. Yet, there is still much work left to be done and we will not stop reaching out to help.

This week of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur mark an important anniversary that we tend to not realize. It was during this time that Moses completed the second set of tablets containing the Ten Commandments. As we recall, God carved and wrote the first set of tablets for Moses and the Israelites on top of Mt. Sinai. However, when Moses returned to the camp, there he found the Israelites dancing around the Golden Calf. Moses was angry about how quickly they forgot about how they were freed from slavery and their devotion to God and smashed the tablets.

Moses returned to the mountain, but this time, God said, 'you will carve the tablets and you will carve the words that I tell you.'

The first time, it was God who did all the work and provided us with the gift. Without having made much effort, Moses was quick to drop them in a fit of anger. Now, in order for us to truly enter into a partnership, we must share in the responsibility of carving the tablets and writing the words. We must enter into the partnership with God to enter into holy time and holy space by letting go of our grudges and anger toward those who wrong us. We must enter into holy space and holy time by raising our voices together and being a part of the community. We must ensure that everyone has a place in the community by providing for its sustenance through *tzedakah* of money or time. This is our time to be partners in ensuring that our congregation, our community and the Jewish people are sustained, for if not us, then who?

How are you feeling? And what are you going to do with all those emotions that rise up and wash over you? What are the outlets that allow you to experience those emotions, love, hope, fear, anger, etc. How will you hold on to the ones that are beneficial and how will you release those that are destructive?

This Rosh Hashanah, this coming week as we prepare for the Day of Atonement, this year, take the time to write your own tablets. What are the commandments that you need to bring into your life? How will you apply *T'shuvah*, *Tefillah* and *Tzedakah* to your life? Will these be commandments like: you shall make more time for family and friends? That you will make more time for yourself? Will you enter into a covenant of learning through one of our many programs, such as the Adult *B'nei Mitzvah* class or carving out the time to take a Shabbat hike?

What will our commandments say about our community and our role in the community? Is the synagogue only a place where we walk through the doors a couple of times a year or will we make it a priority to find the opportunity to come in more often for our own personal spiritual growth? Will we heed the command of, thou shalt not just drop the kids off at the curve but rather park thy car and see what is inside for me?

The door is open, the lights are on, and there are a lot of people at home. As *Pirkei Avot*, the saying of our Ancestors teaches us:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

If I am only for myself, what am I?

And if not now, when?

Our community is only as good as those who participate. Our community only exists because we are all a part of it. Our joys are much sweeter and our burdens are lighter when we share them. It is not enough that we should say, someone else can teach our children, someone else will say the prayers, someone else will learn and teach the history, someone else will sustain the family. That someone else is us and the time is now.

God is knocking on the door – how are you going to answer?

Temple Beth Sholom
2625 N. Tustin Ave. Santa Ana, CA 92705
Phone: 714-628-4600 • Fax: 714-628-4619
Email: information@tbsoc.com

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