

Yom Kippur Afternoon 5764
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Living In Sacred Time

I have always been fascinated by old time pieces. Antique clocks and watches intrigue me by their mechanical attempts to capture something as elusive as time.. Perhaps that is why I am captivated by Rosh Hashanah with its theme, commemorating the very beginning of TIME itself.

It is Rosh Hashanah, literally, the *head of the year*. One of its many Hebrew names is (HaYom Harat Olam)--the day the universe was born! Yes, this sacred New Year's day of ours celebrates the very moment of creation with all its awesome mystery, its majestic magnificence, and, its terrifying significance. According to Jewish tradition, this creation took place 5 thousand, 7 hundred, and sixty-four years ago. Hence, tonight we celebrate the advent of the year, 5764.

According scientists who study cosmology or the origins of the universe, the creative instant, which is commonly called "The Big Bang," occurred between 13.7 and 15 billion years ago.

Now, I realize that the Jewish view of cosmology may pose an insurmountable theological challenge to some of us when we contrast the poetry of faith to the mathematical measurements of science. We might even question the very credulity of Jewish belief. But in all honesty, even our ancient sages questioned the *literal* interpretation of the Jewish dating of Creation. In the Talmud (tractate Hagigah), the rabbis aver that the entire biblical description of creation in Genesis is a metaphor.

Time is perceived in relative terms for the rabbis who cite Psalm 90, "For a thousand years are in Your sight as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night." What for us is a millennium is but a moment for God. And the (Hoshekh)--the *darkness*, described in the second verse of the Genesis Creation story, they describe as "black fire," or "black energy"--a kind of energy that is so powerful that it is beyond human perception.

Amazing, isn't it, these rabbis living some two thousand years ago, speak in language similar to modern physicists describing the Big Bang.

A young Jewish scholar, by the name Daniel Matt has written a wonderful book entitled, *Kabbalah and the Big Bang*, in which he notes the parallels between modern scientific research and the mystical metaphors of creation found in the Kabbalah, the mystical tradition of Judaism.

The classical Jewish sources say that before the beginning, there was, literally NO THING--utter and total absence--(Tohu vaVohu)--what we, inadequately call, "chaos."

Our sages teach us that we can never fully comprehend what predates the universe. The Midrash asks the question: Why does the Bible begin with the letter Bet which begins the first word in the Bible, (Breisheet)? They explain that it is because the letter c (which is written like a backwards "C") is closed in all directions and only open in the forward direction. Hence, we can't know what comes before creation--only after the point at which time began.

Nachmanides, the medieval Kabbalist and commentator, expands this notion. He says that although the days are 24 hours each, they contain okugv ,(Kol Yemot HaOlam)--all the ages of the universe. So, you see, even for the rabbis, just like the consummate scientist Albert Einstein, time is relative!

Whether we choose to view creation from the perspective of scientific calibration or religious metaphor, on this Rosh Hashanah day we commemorate and celebrate the beginning of time. As Einstein taught in his theory of relativity, with creation, not only did matter come into existence, TIME itself was born.

This is relevant for us because each of us exists in four dimensions. As we live--we walk and work, we play and procrastinate in the three-dimensions of spatial reality. We also exist in a fourth dimension--TIME. In Einstein's spatial theory of relativity, three-dimensional space is combined with time to form four-dimensional "*space-time*."

Well then, are we here tonight to celebrate a theorem of physics? Is it science that we worship? Should we, perhaps, turn this sanctuary into a planetarium to better suit our modern sensibilities? Of course not. Rosh Hashanah, after all, is not about the beginning of time so much as it is about the *sanctity* of time.

It is the notion of **SACRED TIME** that informs Rosh Hashanah and gives it its meaning. In fact, one of the very foundations of our Jewish faith is the sanctification of time.

We Jews do not have much in the way of religious monuments--even the most magnificent synagogue is a (Beit Knesset), a house of gathering. Ever since the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed at the beginning of our rabbinic tradition two thousand years ago, our rabbis made sure that no *place*--nothing occupying space--would have transcendent sanctity. No person is sanctified either, not even Moses, our greatest prophet and Law Giver. No, we Jews have sanctified **TIME**.

Our religious calendar is marked by sacred times and holy days exemplified by these High Holy Days that we begin tonight and which continue through the end of our Sukkot celebrations. And more, each week is crowned by Shabbat, our weekly celebration of time. It is a significant coincidence that this Rosh Hashanah tonight coincides with our weekly Shabbat observance, which the Kiddush prayer reminds us is a (Zeikheir l'ma'aseih Vreisheet)--a commemoration of Creation.

If we acknowledge the sanctity of time--then, how do we live accordingly? How does this spiritual insight affect what we do and how we live?

A number of years ago I gave a sermon on what came to be called " (Sheheheyanu) moments"--singular moments in our lives that give meaning and significance to our existence. But, by definition, these moments are just that--moments. What about our lives inclusively? How do we view and measure the length of our days?

The Chinese have a curse, "May you live in interesting times." To be sure, we Jews tonight live in interesting times, don't we? When we consider where we are now, in this year marked by war in Iraq, on-again/off-again road maps between Israel and the Palestinians, continued economic uncertainty at home, and an upcoming re-call election in California which is as much slapstick as politics, we can attest that these are *very* interesting times, indeed. And, we can well appreciate why the Chinese used this as a *curse* and *not* a blessing, can't we?

But, in marked contrast to this "interesting" view of our times, our Jewish faith professes that we live in *sacred times*. Though we are beset by problems both personal and public, and haunted by the challenges of our age, we Jews gather together at this season every year to be reminded what it means to live in sacred times.

It does not mean living in times of blessing, rather, it means that we should live so as to be a blessing to our times.

This is the essence of our Reform tradition, and the reason for our sacred Mitzvah-obligation--to make our world better through Tikkun Olam and acts of Gemilut Hesed--loving kindness. In this hallowed enterprise we are-- (Shotfeem eem HaKadosh Barukh Hu)--literally, "Partners with God," in the on-going creation of the world.

To be a good partner with God is by no means easy; it requires careful consideration and dedication. But, it is our destiny--the destiny of each and every one of us. Our choice is whether or not to *acknowledge* that destiny and to live our lives accordingly.

On a personal level, I have given a lot of thought lately about destiny and what it means to live one's life in consonance with sacred time. During the past few years I have taken a close look--a real (Heshbon haNefesh), a personal inventory--and examined my life and the purpose of my being alive. It has been a difficult and sometimes

frightening experience, shaped by the realities that life presents to all of us in one form or another, with its triumphs and tragedies, its joys and its sorrows. But, it has been an inspiring journey that, personally, has led Wendy and me to make our decision to pursue our destiny by making Aliyah to Israel in two years time.

Regarding this decision, I must also say that, though I am retiring from the pulpit, it would be inaccurate to say that I am retiring from the rabbinate. No, in fact, my rabbinic career is taking a new turn. In Israel I hope to serve the Jewish people by writing, teaching and, please God, helping to shape the next generation of American rabbis, educators and cantors who come to the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem to study.

And, as *religious* Reform Jews, Wendy and I feel most in tuned with the rhythms of Jewish living *in Jewish time*. In Jerusalem, Jewish time--the currents of the Jewish calendar--is so real, it is a part of every day reality. The whole week builds to the Shabbat, when Jerusalem is transformed into a city at rest. The very streets and stones of the buildings offer their own kind of prayer as the pace of life slows palpably. And each holy day is as publicly significant as the Fourth of July is here in America. To live in Jewish time, is my dream, and to live a life of Jewish significance is my goal. Wendy and I are *religious Zionists* because we see our lives as a sacred journey finding its fulfillment in the Land of Israel.

I have been very moved by the response of our Temple family to my announcement in July. This was, by no means an easy decision to make. The past twelve years at Temple Beth Sholom have been filled with such blessing for me. I could never ask for a better congregation through which I might serve the Jewish people and my community. It is more difficult to leave TBS than you can ever imagine. Ever since I informed you of my plans, people have come up to me or called and reminded me about so many experiences we have shared over the years. In reality, I can never really leave TBS because it will always be with me--here--in my heart.

Many of you have acknowledged the risks that Wendy and I are taking--financial as well as physical--in fulfilling our dream. Yes, it does come with risks, but isn't that true for many opportunities? Many of you have said that you wish that you could stop in the middle of your lives and pursue *your* dreams. Well, "Why not?"

Fulfilling your dreams does not require a major life change, or uprooting yourself and going off to a distant land. It can happen within the realities and parameters of your present life.

If my personal decision provides inspiration for others, let it be this:

Each of us has the opportunity--no, the obligation really--to examine our lives and to be conscious seekers of our destiny. If not, then we condemn ourselves to lives of little direction and purpose, and when we die, we may look back on a life spent merely surviving and being bounced around by circumstance--not living with meaning. It is as if we are but flotsam and jetsam bobbing up and down on the seas of life, washing up on no particular shore at the end of our life's journey.

We have a choice: to recognize that we exist within sacred time and to live accordingly, or to ignore that fact and merely exist, as we suffer through another day, earning another dollar, or accumulating more material comforts and diversions to make the journey a little less tedious.

The message of Rosh Hashanah and living in sacred time is this: *whatever we do* can be done in resonance with the sacred.

Imbuing our work, our relationships and our transactions with the world, with sanctity makes us aware of the transcendence of our lives. In other words, there is a *reason* you exist, you are not just an accident of nature in which chemicals have conjoined to become a material you. You have a purpose. Your life is a holy enterprise played out in sacred time. This is as true for life's challenges and pains as it is for life's joys and achievements. You make of your life and *all* its experiences what you choose to make of them. *That* your life is holy and you live in sacred time is a *fact*, whether or not you choose *to acknowledge* that fact is your *choice*.

During this time of (Heshbon haNefesh)--of sacred self-judgment and personal stock-taking of our High Holy Days, I challenge each of you to examine your life reverently and to ask yourself how you can make the personal journey of your life a sacred one.

There is a communal dimension to this teaching as well. Dwelling in sacred time as a congregation, we mark an historic milestone in the life of Temple Beth Sholom. This year, TBS begins its sixth decade. Sixty years ago this November, a small group of Jews got together on a fall evening to make a promise to the future. They came from Santa Ana and from surrounding communities representing 28 Orange County Jewish families. The purpose of their gathering was to lay plans for a new congregation--Temple Beth Sholom.

What you may not know is that there were two previous attempts at establishing a congregation here.

One early attempt was in 1919. There were twenty-five Jewish families in Santa Ana at the time. And, serendipitously, an attorney named Jacob Butcher arrived in town from Colorado. Jacob H. Butcher was an accomplished Hebrew scholar. And so, with the newly arrived Mr. Butcher as spiritual leader and Hebrew teacher, the congregation was launched with its first service held on Friday, January 2, 1919. As Orange County's first "official" Jewish spiritual leader, Mr. Butcher spoke on the topic, "The Power of Vision."

The early attempts at congregation building did not succeed. But, they were not failures. Were it not for the vision, the efforts, love and dedication of those first pioneers, the next generation may not have created Temple Beth Sholom. It was because of that "power of vision" about which Mr. Butcher spoke 84 years ago, that another attempt at starting a congregation was made in 1943. And, that time, those Orange County Jews were successful, precisely, I believe, *because* of those earlier attempts at congregation building, not despite them.

Today, we, as a congregation, celebrate the wonderful accomplishments of the past as we dream for the future and seek our congregation's destiny, realizing that we exist in sacred time and that our mission is a sacred and significant one.

Where will we be in a decade--in two, or three--from now? Will our children and grandchildren still be members of TBS--will they identify as Jews? How best can TBS serve the needs of the next generations of Jews in our community?

These are not questions to be asked in the future, when its realities confront us head-on; no, they are questions that we must consider carefully now. And, indeed, thanks to our foresighted Temple leadership we are exploring the future today through our Master Plan Committee and within each and every committee in our congregation.

You know, as I look back on the past twelve years I am amazed at the advances that we have made together. I am enormously proud of our new TBS Siddur, *T'feelat Shalom*, and how well it has been received, and how it has become a valuable resource to bring people closer to Jewish prayer.

When I first came to TBS, there was a one-page flyer for our adult education program--today, we boast a complete catalog of offerings.

Twelve years ago we had no Social Action Committee, in the year 5764, we have an active program of community service putting into action our fundamental Jewish principle of *Tikkun Olam*--repair of the world.

In 5752, during my first High Holy Days we sat in a synagogue much in need of repair, with a crumbling exterior, and a sanctuary with seats that kept every congregant alert during services, thanks to springs that prodded and poked. Tonight, in 5764 we pray in this beautiful and inspiring sanctuary, and it is now up to the rabbis to keep you awake during the sermons! Yes, we have achieved much of which we can be proud, but there is so much yet to do.

We have a mission--to nurture, celebrate and create the Jewish community of the future. It is a sacred mission, based on the guiding principles of our faith. As we mark the years--going back sixty years, and forward to decades more--we continue our journey together in time made sacred by our actions and our faith.

That is what this Rosh Hashanah of ours teaches us: that it is within our power to make the time--the days and years of our lives--a sacred journey filled with meaning and significance, elevating our joys in good times and giving us the strength to persevere in times of difficulty and trial.

So may this year be for us, sweet as honey and filled with seeds of hope like an apple. May each of us be blessed with a year of healing and hope, of satisfaction and significance, a year of sanctifying the time of your life.

AMEN.