

SERMON EREV ROSH HASHANAH (September 24, 2014) by AVIVA GOLDBERG

GOOD EVENING AND SHANA TOVA.

When I was a little girl I looked forward to Rosh Hashanah and the months leading into it. In August, we would as a family go to New York and visit my dad's sister and my cousins in Port Chester which I loved because their home was very small and because there were the five of us, the only place for me to sleep was literally in a cupboard underneath the stairs – shades of Harry Potter!

And in those days, over fifty years or so ago, for whatever reason, the nights were lit up by fireflies and Jonny, my younger brother and I would run around trying to catch them in empty pickle jars and bring them into the house and then turn off all the lights in the house and see if we could use them as tiny flashlights.

And on those visits, my uncle Louis who rarely said very much probably because he couldn't get a word in edgewise when my father and my aunt, his wife, would be talking, would amuse us by having his budgie fly around and land on his nose and ours and eat apples from his hand while my aunt Sara would yell at him that she was going to cook the bird for supper if he didn't put it back in its cage.

One of the highlights of our annual trip would be going into Manhattan to shop for new clothes for the holy days. So we'd all pile into my dad's Ford and we'd go to what was then these huge department stores that we didn't have here in Toronto and my mum would choose new outfits for each of us three kids – a suit for my brother and new dresses for my sister and me– yes, I wore dresses in those days – and liked it! And I'd get a new coat and new shoes and all were put away for a month or so when we got back to Toronto, until we would take them out of our cupboards and bureaus put them on and walk to shul with my dad – and it was exciting.

I'd meet up with my friends from school and we'd sit in for part of the adult service and hang out for most of it in the hallways or outside. And we'd run in when the shofar service took place and count the seconds of the tekiah gedolah and make our pronouncements if this year's was better than last – and then we'd go home often a bit earlier with my mum and help put lunch on the table and it was great - it was wonderful.

And then it changed.

And I began to dread going to services. It was an obligation. My parents expected it of me and I hated it.

When I wasn't reading a book I had brought with me, as a teenager and young adult, I would read the prayers and say to myself 'wait a minute, do I really believe this? What am I saying? Why am I saying it? What do these holy days mean to me? And more importantly how long can I sit here as the chazzan drones on and on' – and I'd look around at the men and the women some appearing to take little naps, others conversing, still others walking in and out – and it really felt quite meaningless to me.

But the expectation was that I attend and so I did – and for several years when I was older, I would shop around for a shul that would satisfy my needs and sometimes I wouldn't even bother shopping around but instead would go for a walk in a conservation area where I thought that communing with nature would be a more significant way to celebrate the New Year.

But, to be honest with you those times that I did not attend any services, I actually felt frustrated and unhappy - something was missing.

When my sons were young we joined the Reconstructionist congregation and I thought here was a place I could intellectually feel at home and I soon became quite involved in the High Holy Day services and for quite a number of years this felt right for me.

But then it too changed.

And again as my life took a different path, I found myself uncomfortable in those services and again began my shopping for services that would speak to me.

And then as you know, we created this congregation Shir Libeynu- and my shopping around stopped - but my questions did not.

Because I still ask myself - What do the High Holy days really mean? What am I saying? Why am I saying it? How can these services be meaningful not just to me but in my role as the facilitator of these services how can I help these services to be meaningful to you.

And I am not sure if I am, or if Shir Libeynu is, always successful because for each of us it may be different –

Nonetheless we are here – as a community and as a community I believe we are seeking common ground, seeking within the various elements of these services keys to understanding ourselves as human beings and as Jews and to unlocking meaning within these services.

Some of these keys can be found I propose to you, by looking closely by examining and uncovering the significance to the alternative names the Rabbis have given to Rosh Hashanah.

One of these alternative names is Yom Hazikaron – the day of remembrance. Zikaron means memory and it also means as Rabbi Jonathan Shulman notes ESSENCE. That is to say Rosh Hashana is Yom Hazicharon, is the Day of Essence. Shulman suggests that the essence referred to here is to us, to people; we who are created with an essential purpose, and potential. This is the essence to be remembered on Rosh Hashanah – we are to remember ourselves. This is the day when we are asked to contemplate what this essence is, what we believe our true nature to be. – to remember who we are where we come from – and who we hope to become.

Rosh Hashanah is also commonly called by our rabbis YOM HADIN – the day of judgement. Some would say that this judgement is that of the Divine judging us. But I would suggest that we can also look at this term as the day we begin facing our own judgement – the day we truly contemplate resolving conflicts in our lives – where we reflect as we start a new year on those relationships we have had during the past year and take the time to ask for forgiveness and reconciliation.

The Rabbis also call Rosh Hashanah Yom Teruah the day of the Trumpets. Teruah

however literally means not so much trumpet but loud noise. And so today and in these days of Rosh Hashanah I would suggest we truly do make a loud noise - We do not sit back and wait to be a part of these services but rather we take what we engage fully with the readings, the sound of the prayers, the chanting and songs and join as a community in finding our own voices and joining our voices to that of our neighbours.

And finally there is another name the Rabbis use to describe this Holy day. It is a more obscure name yet it is one that I find most significant. Rosh Hashanah is also known as Yom Hakeseh – the hidden day the day of concealment. Why is it called by this name? The sages explain that all other festivals in the Jewish year fall either when the moon is full or near full. Rosh Hashanah however falls on the first day of the month, when the new moon is barely revealed. The Rabbis say that the House of Israel like the moon itself is radiant on the Sabbath and festivals but, they say, on Rosh Hashanah because we sit in awe of the Divine, we, Israel diminishes or conceals itself. In fact the mystics suggest that the Divine itself assists in this concealment and places over us a curtain so that our wrongdoings are concealed and we can gain forgiveness.

I would submit that the name YOM HAKESEH connotes a different meaning that in fact brings together all of the names of this holy day. For though we are loudly

singing as a community on this Yom Teruah –though we are seeking to find the essence of ourselves on this Yom Hazikaron – though we are on this Yom Hadin resolving the conflicts in our lives – in fact we are alone and hidden – we are concealed on this Yom Hakeseh.

And as the New Year begins we have the opportunity in the two days of Rosh Hashanah and the ten days coming before the Day of Atonement before Yom Kippur to remove that which we use to hide who we really are, if not to our community, if not to ourselves, then perhaps to that which is outside ourselves however we define that to be.

So that when the final shofar blows at the end of the Neilah service at the end of Yom Kippur day we are truly open – revealed – ready to start a new year - to being to plant the seeds of a new and better self a self that we nurture and grow throughout next year and we harvest before the start of the next Rosh Hashanah.

To paraphrase the words of Rabbi Leila Berner which we read at the beginning of this evening's service – As we stand at the threshold of a New Year, let us find the strength to face uncertainty to change what needs to be changed and to unveil the essence of who we truly are and can be.