

EREV ROSH HASHANA SPEECH WED. SEPTEMBER 4, 2013**GOOD EVENING AND SHANA TOVA**

For the past seventeen years, I have had a nightmare a couple of weeks before High Holy days. I call these annual recurring nightmares my High Holy Day deliriums. Figuring prominently in each is of course me and you - well actually ME but not always you. As there are several variations to this dream.

In most of these night time visions you are not present and that is part of the problem. I come to the synagogue prepared for the services and the sanctuary is empty. No one in the seats – no one milling around in the halls – no one on the bimah – just me, standing in the sanctuary, totally alone and terribly perplexed.

In another variation of this dream, I come to the synagogue prepared for the services and the sanctuary is full. I come up to the bimah and suddenly realize that all my scripts, my speeches, my

notes, the supplements, all have vanished and here I am standing, figuratively, at least, naked in front of you.

And in all the variations of the dreams, I feel myself panic – maybe I am in the wrong place. Maybe I’ve got the wrong date. Maybe the service began and ended without me. Maybe I never wrote the script, the sermon, the supplements. Maybe I’ve finally lost my mind! And in these dreams, I search my pockets, my car, the office for the missing script and sermons and supplements - I run down the corridors and up the stairs, out into the hallways and down into the basement looking for a familiar face, any face - trying to figure out what is going on.

Finally, my heart racing, my pulse speeding, I awaken from this dream. It takes several minutes for me to catch my breath and check the date on my clock and then once I realize I have not missed the holy days, I finally relax and say to myself, “It’s okay, Aviva,

don't worry, Rosh Hashanah hasn't happened yet, this was just a dream –just your annual High Holy Day hallucination.”

I don't need a therapist to explain to me the hidden or not so hidden symbolism in these dreams; the anxiety I feel before the High Holy days. And though this anxiety manifests itself in my sleep, in the rather improbable events within these dreams, I do in truth have many waking moments and sleepless nights overwhelmed with apprehension, asking myself: Why am I doing this? Should I really be standing here on the bimah? What can I offer the congregation that is significant, that is meaningful?

I ask myself: How can I speak with integrity and honesty in services where the liturgy is often at first glance in opposition to my own beliefs. How can I repeat many of the themes such as Divine retribution and sin when they are themes to which I do not concur? What do the High Holy Days really mean to me?

Though I certainly will not say that I embrace this annual angst – in fact I have come to recognize that there is something quite important and welcoming about it. It is part and parcel of my personal preparatory process for these *chagim*. And in this respect I am quite fortunate in that I am forced in many ways to begin this process weeks before tonight. It is in fact for me the first leg of the journey that I think we all should be taking during the course of these High Holy Days beginning tonight and culminating at the end of Yom Kippur day at the Neilah service.

This is a journey inward –a journey that is both solitary and communal. A journey that is both privately reflective and publically declarative. A journey that is both sombre and celebratory. It is a journey we all walk in our lifetimes, a journey compressed every year into ten days of refection, the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

What will we discover and uncover about ourselves and others in these days? Will we see and act upon the realization, to paraphrase the words of a character in a novel by Rachel Joyce that “the world is made up of people putting one foot in front of the other - that the truth is that everyone is the same and also unique and that this is the dilemma of being human.”

Will we see and act upon the realization, to paraphrase the words of Rabbi Harold Schulweis “that the question is not to find God but rather to behave in a Godly fashion – to heal the sick, to feed the hungry to support the fallen to pursue peace and love one’s neighbour.”

And how will we end these ten days? Will we be disappointed by our initial expectations that somehow we will be transformed and leave these services different people? Will we feel, as contemporary rabbi Michael Latz notes, that we have missed something - that we did not experience some sort of spiritual or emotional epiphany on

these days; that we do not feel that *teshuvah* whether it is forgiving others or ourselves or being forgiven has actually taken place? Can we forgive ourselves for being human?

I believe that the process we take, the journey we embark upon tonight should never truly conclude. Ideally it should continue during the course of the days and the weeks and the months and the year between now and the next High Holy Day.

It is about taking the time to examine the way we are living our lives. Taking the time, time we are given in these ten days to stop and ask ourselves these questions. Am I using my time not only for work and career but for family and friends? Am I taking care of my physical emotional and spiritual health? Am I am doing what I want to do or being who I want to be? Am I allowing myself to forgive myself for disappointing myself? Can I find the strength to move forward? Can I find the strength perhaps from these communal services to realize that it is human to take tiny steps forward and

perhaps super human to keep taking these steps despite falling down, despite disappointment, despite the fact that at times we are not who we hope to be. We have not achieved in our lifetime what we hope to have achieved and the future looks dim.

Centuries ago the great Rabbi Hillel wrote “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?” More recently Professor Kaplan asked, “should not that the last part of this famous sentence logically read *who* am I and not *what* am I?” He rephrased Hillel’s words as such: “If you are only for yourself, you cease to be a real human being, and you become no longer a who, but a what.”

We are told that Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world – let it also be for each of us a new birth day – a day in which we contemplate the past, celebrate the present and find a light in the future: a day where the blowing of the shofar becomes a new birth day melody – sombre yet optimistic, filled with hope and promise,

**and the courage and the potential to express the light we were given
at birth, the essence of holiness which dwells within each of us.**