

Rosh Hashana  
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The impact of the Enlightenment on the Jewish people can not be underestimated. It was a period when the nature of humankind was debated. What is it to be free? What is it to be part of society? What is the role of Torah to this new society? Ucchh.

John Locke writing how government was created by consent of the governed had no idea the impact he would have on the Jewish people as they reevaluated mitzvot in the context of a non corporate Jewish community. Ucchhh.

This is no good. In small groups, a classroom, it would be great. We can study and debate with each other and really engage in a sophisticated understanding of Judaism. But in a sermon with all these people, I don't know.

This past month at my Basic Chaplains Course, I remember one of the guest speakers was lecturing when he told us he was an old fashioned "grab 'em by the throat Gospel preacher." That's quite a line. Really speaks to his passion to bring his passion to the people in the pews.

Is there room for a "grab 'em by the throat" style in Reform Judaism? That's a lot of emotion for a staid rational movement. Well I guess I could try...

Let me hear you say Amen. Oh that's a cliché perhaps but a good one. Learning from my fellow evangelical chaplains I saw that the call and response, the amen corner

was more than cliché it was feedback and it was personal. Do you hear me? Do you hear the message? Are you with me? In the Talmud<sup>1</sup> we get this discussion of really getting into it and praising God. Here's three examples.

1. There's a prayer at the end of the amidah, we prayed it tonight, that starts off *modim anachnu lach*, "thanks we give to You." Now let's say that someone in great reverence really turns it up a bit and shouts out not just "modim" thanks, but "modim, modim." Is that okay, such piety? Can we raise our hands in the air like my Pentacostalist brother chaplains? Modim, modim!

Can we do that according to the rabbis in the Talmud?

No.

The rabbis make quick work of that. Ever worried Jews might be influenced by the Roman pantheon of gods all around them at that time they feared that by saying, "we give thanks, we give thanks" someone might think that Jews offer thanks to this god and thanks to that god. When it comes to ecstatic praise vs. sober clarity, sober clarity won that argument.

Second try. But what if someone adds to the prayers, "For the goodness You have accomplished is Your name remembered?"

No again.

For the goodness? So nu? You only thank God when things are going well? Shouldn't we also acknowledge God when things are rocky? For the goodness? For

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<sup>1</sup> BT Masechet Brachot chapter 5, 33b.

everything! God is remembered for everything, good and bad! It is all God. Why else do we praise God when remember our loved one's at by saying kaddish?

And then there is one more try. In Deuteronomy, there are a couple of p'sukim that speak of the kan tzipor a bird's nest. The thing with the bird's nest is that if you find one with eggs you can take the eggs but not the bird with the eggs. Killing mother and child together is just too much. So we take the eggs but do not eat the bird. We shoo it away as an act of mercy.

We can get into whether or not that was an act of mercy later but for now let's assume.

Any way, the rabbis in the Talmud offer this: Can a person add in a moment of extra piety, "Your mercy extends to the bird's nest." This means, even to something as small and easily overlooked as a bird's nest, God's mercy extends. How great is God's mercy! Even to the bird's nest!

No.

Can't say it. Why not? Because the rabbis remind us that the mitzvot in the Torah are not there out of mercy. The mitzvot are unemotional decrees. We are called upon to follow the mitzvot for one simple reason:

Make the world a better place, make yourself a better person. Make the world a better place, make yourself a better person. Can I get an amen?

The rabbis didn't want you thinking that the mitzvot were done out of sympathy. They didn't want you to think that you treat that mother bird this way just to be nice. They wanted you to remember that this small example of the kan tzipor was

an example of how you make the world a better place, make yourself a better person. And not because it is nice but because this is our job, this is our role. This is what we are called upon to do. This is what God asks, no, demands of us. Make the world a better place, make yourself a better person.

But I can hear some of you now. Mitzvot? Oy. I'm not into that religious stuff. I'm more of a spiritual person.

Everybody's into spirituality. Everybody wants to be spiritual. Nobody wants to be religious but they all want to be spiritual. For Jews, I need to tell you, you need one for the other.

Spirituality isn't an easy thing. It is a disciplined thing. It requires patience and desire. Spirituality isn't a feeling, it is an accomplishment. Meditation is one discipline to get you there. Studying esoteric kabbalah is another. But Torah is the way in for most of us.

When we study, really study Torah, understand the background of each mitzvah we begin to see ourselves in the Divine plan. We begin to understand what we are here for. Make the world a better place, make yourself a better person.

Why do we dress up for Rosh Hashana? It is the lesson found in the mitzvah of hidur mitzvah: making a mitzvah beautiful. We learn in Psalm 29 to "prostrate ourselves in holy splendor." This word splendor means attractive. Now I know that many of you think we dress up to show off our new clothes and maybe that's the way things have become. But the tradition of getting new clothes for Rosh Hashana came from this mitzvah. Dressing up is a spiritual discipline. We prepare ourselves physically as well

as mentally for the experience we are about to have. We are physically prepared to meet God and accept the challenge to make the world a better place, make yourself a better person.

The shofar is a meditative device. Unlike any other instrument, it focuses our attention. We think of nothing else but that sound and fuse it's sound with the call of God as we enter into the Days of Awe. Focus on it. Let it stir our soul as it demands to know have we - this past year - made the world a better place, made ourselves a better person.

All of our B'nai Mitzvah students make their own tallit but then they often become embarrassed to wear them. Why? Because parents never wear them. Parents never wore them. That's a shame. Your tallit is a spiritual technique to cocoon ourselves away from the daily grind that distracts. When you put on a tallit you block out the rest of the world. We play with the tzitzit and we remember that the intricate knots represent the 613 mitzvot. We stare at them, feel them and focus in and accept the call from God: Make the world a better place, make yourself a better person. That is the essence of the tzitzit we twirl in our hand. Jewish prayer beads that bring mindfulness to our prayers. Make the world a better place, make yourself a better person. Tomorrow morning wear your tallit as a spiritual act.

In our school we are going to teach the kids to make the world a better place, make themselves better people. There are posters up in the classrooms with a selection of mitzvot for the classroom. Treat your books properly, respect your teachers, do not lie about what you saw, do not be wasteful or destroy things for no purpose and more.

Not because they are rules. Not because you'll get in trouble but because this is what we are called to do as Jews. This is our charge. This is our connection to the Eternal. Make the world a better place, make yourself a better person. This is our duty and call.

And now we are back here for another Rosh Hashana. We're back to sit in synagogue, see our friends, read the prayers. We begin this season, these days of awe thinking of our past year, promising to be better this year. But this year, we will hear the call: Make the world a better place, make yourself a better person. We will no longer see the mitzvot as empty ritual. This year we will embrace the mitzvot, even just ONE more mitzvah that brings us closer to our heritage and closer to God and closer to accepting the challenge to make the world a better place, make yourself a better person.

And can I get an amen.