

Rabbi Gibson's Sermon for Rosh Hashana Eve 5767
"Finding Our Keys"
September 22, 2006

A couple of days ago I lost my keys - I do it a lot. You know when you get so frustrated that you just search random places? I tried the piano bench. There I found an old music manuscript. It was not Bach or Mozart. It was something that I, myself, composed for a class when I was in college. I wrote it in one night during the longest weekend of my life.

In December of 1972 I stayed up 68 hours straight. It was not a fraternity stunt. It was sheer stupidity. In my second year of college, not even 19 years old, I had invented the perfect academic system. It went something like this:

Ignore all class work until after midterms. Then, the last week of the term, step back from busy social life and do it all. After completing work, proceed back to social life. Youth is hubris. Some friends of mine warned me I was cutting it a little close.

Then I got word that a teaching assistant was angry I was skipping private meetings. Two other deadlines loomed. The last Friday of the term I took a deep breath and lined up my assignments: Research and write a 20-page history paper. Compose an original piece of classical music for the piano. Master 300 pages of lab psychology for an exam. All by Monday afternoon. A piece of cake.

No need for gory details here. When I got tired I went right for the hard stuff - No Doz. I did it all. The classical piano piece had been the hardest. I'd never written one before and I'd skipped all of the classes that would have taught me how.

On Monday I turned in the paper (A-) and took the test (C-). I went on to the music school to turn in my work. My teaching assistant yelled at me along with the professor, a well-regarded composer named Ross Lee Finney. Prof. Finney snatched the piece out of my hands and after one brief look at it commented dryly that the sonatina had been dead for 200 years and that my piece would keep it securely in its grave. He said that it was fortuitous that I had written it in the key of D. That's the grade he gave it.

I was crushed. But by then, all I wanted to do was sleep. When I finally got back to my apartment, I reached for my keys, and, to my horror, they were gone! I rushed out in front of my building and searched the snow. I looked for 2 hours, tears stinging, nose dripping. Strangers looked at me strangely. It got dark. I hadn't slept in 68 hours.

Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was my roommate Michael Kaplan. “Where have you been? We were really worried about you!” I said, “My keys, my keys...” He reached into his coat pocket and held them up for me to see. “You mean these? They were under your bed. Come in and get some sleep.”

But I couldn't sleep. Lying in bed, I pulled out my keys and looked at them, each one telling a different story in my life. Keys to saxophone cases and foot lockers; keys to old cars and older homes; keys to bike locks and mail boxes; keys to suitcases and one old skeleton key that I had kept when my family had moved from New Jersey to Minnesota.

It was kind of silly to have all of those keys. They poked holes in my jeans. But it also felt kind of secure, you know? Any of you carry keys you don't really need anymore? Admit it. [Pause] I see I'm not alone.

What do keys do? They open locks, both present and past. Today, on Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Remembrance, we are mindful that keys open the lock of memory.

One of the most important prayers of the Rosh Hashanah service is “*Zochreinu l'chayim, melech cha-feitz ba-chayim, v'chot-veinu l'sefer ha-cha-yim, l'ma-ancha Elohim chayim.* - Remember us for life, Ruler who delights in life, and write us for the Book of Life, for Your sake, O God of life!” This prayer, which calls for our lives to be remembered, is a key to remembering ourselves, not just having God remember us.

Today, Rosh Hashanah examines the keys of our lives. As we do, we find ones that don't seem to open the things that they used to. Every now and then we look at them and wonder what they are good for anymore.

On many of our rings is a key that used to open the door to God. Not necessarily God as Master of the World, but God, intimate Source, Friend, Confidante. When we were younger, it was natural to believe in a Power that knew and cared for us.

In my mind, I turn this key in the door of memory and the big, heavy door swings back slowly. I've written before about saying Shema with my mother at night as a child. It was very brief - only thirty seconds or so. But each of those seconds seemed an infinite protection against bullies on the playground and the math that never clicked in my head. Singing the Shema with my Mother is a key to God for me. In the hectic, non-stop, fussing, fretting craziness of day-to-day

life, I seek the warmth and closeness of connection to that God of my childhood, though I no longer believe as I did then.

I hear the objections. “That’s what you need rabbi, not me. Like the famous French philosopher LaPlace, who once said of God, “I have no need of that hypothesis.” But maybe today, the Day of Remembering, we might remember the God of our childhood and transform that into a more mature belief.

In a world filled with science, our lives dominated by the gifts of technology we ask, “Where is God?” Not on my PDA or in my cell phone or recorded on the DVR. In a world filled with cruelty and baseless hatred, we ask, “Where is God?” We are adults, no longer children being tucked in at night. God seems distant and sometimes non-existent. What is the key to finding God now?

Maybe as adults, God is not found high above and far away, rather in the stillness of self, the silence of what is called hitbodedut meditation.

Maybe God is in the bleary eyes of someone who rides all night long to attend a rally at the UN against genocide in Darfur, Sudan.

Maybe God is in the faith of patients who allow their hands to be held in the hope for good despite the fear of cancer and the cancer of fear.

Maybe God is in the sparkling eyes of a young person who chants Torah in front of the congregation for the very first time.

Maybe God is found in learning to care for our parents in the twilight of their lives, though we resent the reversing of roles.

“Oh God, remember us unto life, O God of life.” Not God as Santa Claus but as Inspiration.

I do not often speak publicly about God. Having laid aside my own key at times, I cannot criticize others who find this first step in our faith to be the most challenging.

But when believing seems too hard, maybe we can, as one Hasidic master put it, act *as if* there is God, and that will be enough. If we do that long enough and persistently enough, maybe we will push the door and jiggle the key in the lock and the door to a more adult faith will open.

Zochreinu l’chayim...May we ourselves remember God. For God does not need it, some of us do.

It is sad that some want God instantly, here, now, in a moment. We are shocked when the key snaps off in the lock. Learning the language of God takes time, effort and patience. We understand that practicing scales and brushstrokes make music and art possible. Why should the fruits of the spirit be any less demanding?

I remember going on that all-protein diet. I did it for an entire morning, right through early afternoon. Eggs for breakfast, cheese for lunch. And I could feel the pounds just melting off me! Then I had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and all of the weight came back. Why would we think forging a relationship with the Divine would take less effort than losing 5 pounds? We might have to work a little harder at it.

Maybe, as Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, we do not have to find God. He taught that God seeks us, if only we would stand still long enough to feel sheer awe and wonder.

Arnie Eisen, one of the foremost Jewish scholars of our day, has said, “In both our rational and mystical paths for living our daily lives let’s be clear here and now. We need both. We need the highest level of scholarship about the world...We [also] need the daily mysticism of *wonder*...Both are necessary to faith, both are necessary to bring Torah to Jews and Jews to Torah.”

And what about Torah? How many of us have completely lost the key to Torah so that the word never escapes our lips, much less guides our daily decisions? What is the key to Torah, its knowledge and teaching, our heritage of values?

Torah is a locked book for far too many of us. It is locked up in Hebrew and holiness and many feel intimidated by both; so intimidated or put off that many who are wonderfully talented do not even try to insert a key into that lock.

It is painful that there are business leaders and professionals who will not accept an aliyah on this pulpit to say the blessings for Torah on Shabbat, not even in English. They feel so awkward, they don’t want to make a mistake and feel like a fool. They possess the key to success in most every other area of their lives. It is time for our talented adults to find that key and immerse themselves in the riches of Torah, starting at any level they desire.

There is a segment of our young people who demonstrate mastery at Bar or Bat Mitzvah and immediately throw the key into the back closet of their lives. Too many of our Israel scholarships go unclaimed; too many of our high schoolers

separate themselves from Torah as Jewish moral teaching. As one student put it, "All the Torah I need is inside of me."

If we simply go by the Torah within us, how do we get answers to the difficult questions of our day? By our feelings alone? Feelings are like shifting sands that blow away. Torah is the tree that stands strong despite the winds of the storm. Torah is more than heritage; it is our moral compass. We as Jews believe that there is one North, not many and that it is ethically precarious to think otherwise.

Some say the Ten Commandments are all that matter. But sometimes I wonder if most of us even know them, much less see them as sacred guides to right living. Try it with me:

I am *Adonai* Your God. Have no other gods before Me. Do not use God's name in a worthless promise. Remember and Observe Shabbat. Honor your father and mother.

Don't murder. Don't violate your sacred marriage vows. Don't steal. Don't witness to what you know is false. Don't lust anything or anyone that isn't yours.

I went over the list with someone recently who smiled when I finished. "Rabbi," he said brightly, "I follow six of them. Six! That's a .600 batting average! Pretty great, don't you think?"

Well, no. The Ten Commandments are the base line of decency, the *minimum* requirement for civilization. It is not all right in Reform Judaism to choose to violate these commandments because we need to get ahead.

High school students still tell me, fervently, that it is not only all right to cheat, but necessary to get along in the world in which they live. They defend cheating as a legitimate response to authority figures who impose rules and requirements on them without seeming rhyme or reason. They say, repeatedly, that they are just marking time until they get on with their real lives. Then they will play by the rules. I wish.

This month, in Europe, tons of rotten meat were sold to food companies by an unethical German company. That company wanted to increase its profit at the expense of the health of thousands of people who would eat the filth it was peddling. Don't think the same couldn't happen here. You know it would. You know that it does happen - People tampered with flu vaccine to make profit in this country!

When we were children, we sang children's songs, read children's stories and played children's games. As we grew up, we grew in our tastes and abilities in many other endeavors, but not Torah. Some still claim that the Torah is only a children's tale. As if there was no adult Torah.

But there is. It is time to enter the world of adult Torah. That means all of us here today. No exceptions. The key to adult Torah is here, in this synagogue, in our libraries and classes and programs. Adult Torah can strengthen our moral core. We cannot afford a world without Torah to give standards and ethical direction.

The adult Torah says: "In a world where there are no moral human beings, strive to be one."

Without an adult Torah, we doom ourselves to spiritual immaturity. The adult Torah is for rationalists, mystics, thinkers and doers. The adult Torah makes demands on us. The adult Torah does not let us off the hook by saying that the Bible is just fairy tales.

The key to Torah is not lost. We need to reclaim it. Our Torah cares about more than turning on lights on Shabbat and whether it is okay to eat cheeseburgers. Our Torah is robust enough to tackle fairness in the work place. Our Torah is vigorous enough to meet the challenges of sexuality in our day and even say no to our young people. Our Torah is open enough to guide us through the rocky shoals of stem cell research. The adult Torah is wide open. Your key fits just fine. Come on in.

Many have lost the key to caring about Israel. I don't mean all of us, but many Reform Jews, who are universalist in their ethics, who de-emphasize all difference between our neighbors, are kind of embarrassed by Israel. It seems to be in the news all the time, doing things that other people don't like.

It was not always this way. In 1973, as a junior in college, I watched in horror as the Yom Kippur war broke out. At that time it looked like the Zionist experiment might just end with the rumble of Syrian tanks into Northern Israel from the Golan Heights. Down in the Sinai, orders were given for Israeli soldiers to fight hard and then fall back if the Egyptians got the upper hand. Against the Syrians in the Golan, soldiers were told to fight until victory or death.

Israel survived that day, thanks to a massive resupply of arms by America. But now Israel is seen not as David, but Goliath. It is seen as an aggressor, not

nation defending its right to exist. Many young Jews in college have a difficult time understanding Israel and so they stop trying to defend her.

But I am proud that some of our teenagers have found the key and made this vital connection to the Jewish people through Israel. One of our brightest students, Hannah Morner, made *aliyah* this summer. She plans to live in Israel permanently.

This summer Temple Sinai had more than 20 teenagers to Israel on various summer programs, the most of any synagogue in the region. When some had to come home early from their trip because of the Hizballah bombings, they were angry. They wanted to stay.

I know this because I went to see them twice in Jerusalem before they returned to Pittsburgh. Over and over I heard them say, "My parents don't understand - we have to stay here, it is the only place that makes sense for us as Jews to be." "Can't you talk to our parents and get them to change their minds?" They were filled with the wonder and a fierce pride of being Jewish in the only Jewish country in the world. They were terrified at the prospect of a world without it as the missiles crept further south toward Haifa.

Our students who were in Israel this and last summer have found a key to their Jewish identity. They affirmed it in front of the entire Monday night school this past week. I affirm them here and now.

Yet, I sense that some of our congregational family is doubtful about Israel's behavior in this latest conflict. It is hard to see pictures of children's bodies carried from shattered apartment buildings in Beirut. Israel made many mistakes in this summer's war. Israel tried wherever possible to drop leaflets to warn the civilian population in Beirut that they were not targets of the counter attack. The target was Hizballah terrorists, who rained more than 3,900 missiles on Israel's northern cities this summer. Many Israeli soldiers put their own lives at risk so as not to harm Lebanese villagers.

In contrast, Russian troops in Chechnya leveled entire city blocks in their effort to defeat terrorists there, killing entire families at a time. In Vietnam, our forces napalmed mile after mile of countryside, carpet bombed villages and shot their way through civilians to try to flush out the Vietcong. In Serbia, US airplanes accidentally destroyed the Chinese embassy and never stopped bombing until the dictator Slobodan Milosevic finally surrendered.

But I keep hearing that Israel should not be compared to Russia or America. It has a special responsibility in war not to hurt civilians, ever. It should

not even try to kill Hizballah terrorists, rather maybe arrest them and bring them to justice.

Then there are Jews who accuse Israel of war crimes for its bombing of bridges, ports, roads and runways - to thwart the re-supply of missiles to Hizballah.

Maybe it doesn't matter. Hizballah still has more than 9,000 missiles to launch against Israel, some of which have the range to reach Tel Aviv. Should the Jews in Israel revert to dying instead of killing? Would that elevate their cause in the eye of world opinion?

Why Israelis who die or are wounded or who live in terror are not considered innocent? Do they deserve to have death rained down on them? Does proportionality mean that Israeli soldiers can only fire when they see the whites of the terrorist's eyes? Must they die first?

Where is our key to caring for Israel in this difficult time? Mine is right here. I discovered it when I was clearing out a closet. It is my room key from the hotel where I bring groups to stay in the Upper Galilee. That Kibbutz is called K'far Giladi. You may have heard of it this summer. Twelve Israeli reservists standing at its entrance were killed by one Hizballah rocket. They were simply hanging out where I've stood so many times before.

And the key? I had forgotten to turn it in when we our group checked out in 2004.

I was so happy at finding the key that at first, I didn't notice the room number: 613. 613! The number of commandments in the Torah! 613! Torah and Israel the same piece of plastic! 613! On the rabbi's key? Coincidence? Yeah, maybe. Maybe they do that to all the rabbis who lead groups.

I am going to Israel next month with other rabbis. I am also going in December with a group from Temple Sinai. That's when I will return this key to K'far Giladi.

Since 1993 Temple Sinai has brought seven groups to Israel. All have come back with the key to Israel in their hands. You can still get one. We have space on our December tour and we are looking for more of our people to come with us. There is a key waiting for you in Jerusalem, in the Galilee and on Masada if you will just come with me to retrieve it. Come and get the key and bring it home with you. Come with me and find the key.

Keys. They open all kinds of things - diaries, doors, trunks and chests, safes and even computer screens. Where are your keys to your faith, your heritage, your people? Do you remember where they are? Have you lost them?

If you have, do not fear. The greatest secret of all is that you don't need a key to find the gifts of God, Torah or Israel. You need only to want to be here, now and come tomorrow. No keys needed. This sacred place is open. Just come on in. Come in. Don't wait an entire year. Come in.

Sing the song. Hear the silence. Bend the knee. Read the Torah. Raise your voice. Ask your question. Say the Shema. Eat Shabbat Dinner. Explore Israel. Come back and do it all again. And again.

Our faith is a house of many rooms. This sanctuary is one of those rooms. It is filled with you and your smiles, your pain and sorrow, your hope and dedication. Rosh Hashana opens locked hearts and hope gushes forth as we see that each of us is precious and necessary.

This Rosh Hashanah, remember to turn your key in the lock and push open the door. Inside you will find wisdom and wonders and love.

Your key is in the lock right now. Turn it. Here. Now. New Year's night. Tonight is the night for turning. Open the door. Open the door. Open the door!