

Asserting our Values

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Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
Rosh Hashanah 5766

L'Shana Tova.

We have many blessings to celebrate as we gather to mark the beginning of a new year. We are blessed to join together with our family and friends as we welcome 5766. We are blessed to be a part of this wonderful congregation, which has united to create an inspiring Temple that will be a home for us in both good and troubling times.

Rosh Hashanah is by its very nature a conflicting holiday. We celebrate the New Year, and savor all that is possible in the coming months. At the same time, we reflect on the past year, its trials and tribulations, its struggles and mistakes.

We pause to consider the cycles of life, as we look around and see the new faces joining us this year. We see how the Jewish people have grown over the past year, and at the very same moment, feel the losses we have mourned during the last twelve months. The sweet and the bitter of the past year affect us simultaneously as we gather tonight.

That mixing of the sweet and the bitter always touched me when we first partook of the apples and honey each Rosh Hashanah. I grew up in Nebraska, the home of J. Sterling Morton and Arbor Day, America's *Tu Bishvat*.

Morton, who created Arbor Day as our national celebration of trees, was particularly fond of the apple tree, and specifically, Jonathan apple trees. So, Eastern Nebraska, my home and Morton's home, is dotted with apple orchards filled with trees that produce Jonathan apples by the bushel.

Growing up, we would go pick fresh Jonathans for the High Holidays each year. Those afternoons were glorious—crisp autumn days with clear skies, changing leaves, the smells of fresh apples. Jonathans are bitter—the first bite carries a bit of a kick, though it's followed by sweetness. Combined with honey, the bitterness is tamed a bit; just enough to create one of nature's (life's?) great treats.

Just as in agriculture, when some years see bumper crops and some years see weak harvests, life sometimes provides an abundance of the honey and sometimes an abundance of the bitter. We thank God for the sweet, and we pray for strength to process the bitter.

While we celebrate the sweetness of all the newness here, we know that others in our own land face historic challenges. The devastating storms of the past month have wreaked havoc on the Gulf Coast and have changed lives not just in that region, but throughout the United States.

Hurricane Katrina, and more recently, Hurricane Rita have both caused destruction, despair, and the creation of Diasporas. Many lives have been lost; many more have been unalterably undone. Whole communities are temporarily exiled, facing the daunting task of rebuilding and returning to normalcy.

Beyond the immediate challenges of food, shelter, and clothing for the thousands of evacuees, the storms have also exposed deeper problems within our society. While the tragedies of the storm have coaxed many Americans to act in incredibly giving and thoughtful ways, great societal fissures emerged.

The cities and towns will surely be rebuilt, but bigger wounds will need more time to be healed. On this Rosh Hashanah, we face cracks within our society that challenge our faith and our understanding of responsibility for one another.

Far too many of the victims of the two storms were part of the most at-risk sectors of our society. The poor, the infirm, and members of minority communities seem to have suffered disproportionately as our country struggled to respond to these biblical storms.

It is easy to question whether the slow response was a result of ineptitude on the part of government officials. But this Rosh Hashanah, we must ask ourselves tougher questions. Was the slow response related to the relative lack of power of the victims? Did we allow the weakest members of society to suffer more than others? Are we willing to accept the inequality which seems to have existed during the early days of these storms? What is our responsibility to the poor and disenfranchised among us? What can we do to make our world not just more whole, but holy – more just?

Rosh Hashanah calls us to account for ourselves and our communities during the year just ending. In Talmud Rosh Hashanah, we learn that Rosh Hashanah is to be a day of Judgment, during which we stand before God.¹ But Rosh Hashanah is not only about divine judgment. Rosh Hashanah also calls us to judge ourselves.

Rosh Hashanah calls us to explore not just our actions, but the underlying values which motivate those actions. This Rosh Hashanah, the Gulf Coast storms must prompt a wide-ranging accounting of the values by which we live our lives. Our sacred holiday and the events of the recent past unite today as we begin the soul-searching so sorely needed to clarify our values and find ways to better live those ideals.

We progressive Jews uphold many sacred beliefs. We acknowledge the centrality of God in our lives, and proclaim God's unique covenantal relationship with us as Jews. We recognize the centrality of family, placing great importance on the lives we lead at home.

Education has been a hallmark of our people, and it continues to be a vital element to the well-lived Jewish life. And as partners with God, we recognize that we have a responsibility to continue creating the world, engaging in Social Action and *Tikkun Olam* as we work with God to make our world more perfect. These beliefs become visible through the values we practice in our everyday lives.

One of the most important, and most difficult Jewish values can be found in the biblical dictum, *v'ahavta l'ray'echa kamocho*, love your neighbor as yourself². Most of us see this value as the simple statement taught to us as youngsters. Be kind to your neighbor. Do unto others as you

¹ Rosh Hashanah 16a

² Leviticus 19:18

would have them do unto you. But like much of Jewish tradition, as we grow, the simple gives way to the complex.

Loving your neighbor as yourself does mean treating others with dignity, kindness, and respect. But it also means much more. For if we look at the plain text, we see that the love we show our neighbors depends on the love we show ourselves. We must first learn to love ourselves. Only then can we show our neighbors the love we are commanded to show.

In our modern world, loving ourselves is not always easy. All too often, we look in the mirror and see only those things which we dislike. Some of us can even come to the Temple on Rosh Hashanah and identify those attributes which need changing.

Much harder is the task of recognizing our strengths, and turning those strengths into good actions for others. Yet, we are commanded to do exactly that—to make our love for ourselves the fuel for love that we show others. One may ask, even if we do find that self love, how can we possibly replicate it towards others?

Rabbi Moses Maimonides, the RAMBAM, recognized the difficulty inherent in this commandment. Can we possibly show the same level of care and concern for others that we show for ourselves? Maimonides, the great physician-philosopher, offers a solution. If we cannot offer the same quantity of love, at least let us offer the same quality of love.

We show love for ourselves in many ways. When we take care of our needs, both spiritual and physical, we show love for ourselves. When we take the time to study, to explore our faith or our history, to delve deeper into our tradition, we show love for ourselves. And when we allow Judaism to guide us to greater deeds, we show love for ourselves.

Here at Anshe Emeth, we do this in many ways. As we sit in a newly-refurbished Temple, we can see the love we have for ourselves and our community. Love built this Temple, and love enabled us to rebuild it during the past year. Our task now is to take that love and give it to others.

The programs and services which take place in this building give us the opportunity to show that love. Come to the Temple any day of the week, and you can hear and see and feel that love.

Through our CDC, Anshe Emeth's Community Development Corporation, we have sent goods to the Gulf Coast from this place, a gift of love. On a regular basis, our CDC gives medical equipment to those who cannot afford to purchase such vital goods. The work of our CDC is a work of love.

This December 25, our Temple will participate in Mitzvah Day, a chance for us to give of ourselves and our love to those in need in our community. Whether they be students at a local school, residents of a nursing facility, clients of a shelter, or patients in a hospital, our friends and neighbors in New Brunswick and beyond need our love. Join us in December as we work with God to make our world better.

We must arise from this Rosh Hashanah ready to give more love, to give more of ourselves to others. By our own actions on Mitzvah Day and throughout the year, we can teach our fellow

citizens the important Jewish value of loving one another as we love ourselves, a value which seemed so lacking during those first days after the first hurricane.

In addition to our *Tikkun Olam* efforts, Anshe Emeth is filled with groups which exist to help people come together in a community filled with love. Whether at a meeting of Generation Alef, our group of young adults who gather to celebrate Judaism and learn together, or our new Young Couples club which meets to provide a warm and enriching Jewish community for the newly married and young families, one can hear the love of Judaism flourishing.

As Jews, nearly all of our values derive from the command to love others as we love ourselves. Whether we are interacting with another person, an idea, or even nature, as Jews, we are commanded to enter into that relationship with love.

Perhaps this is why, when asked by a passing Gentile to explain Judaism while standing on one foot, our sage Hillel answered by paraphrasing this command as he answered, “what is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. The rest is commentary. Go and learn.” This Rosh Hashanah, we are called to go and learn, and also to do. Our world needs healing, and we Jews, who value love, have much to offer.

Far too often in our world today, we hear the word ‘values’ in contexts other than the sacred. Politicians and leaders have usurped the word, using it, and the holy concepts it represents, for personal or partisan political gain. At the same time, too few actually live the values about which they speak.

Put simply, the word ‘values’ does not need ‘right-wing,’ ‘conservative,’ or ‘red-state’ in front of it for authenticity. We progressive Jews live our values every day when we treat others with love. When we see the suffering of another human, and respond with love, we liberal Jews act with the highest understanding of morality and values.

Friends, this Rosh Hashanah, let us highlight the values we hold dear. Let’s celebrate the value of love in our daily lives, and take pride in our communities which have been built on love and devotion. And let us commit ourselves anew to the value of love, so that we may sanctify ourselves, and bring more holiness to our lives. In this way, on Rosh Hashanah our future will be written for good, and on Yom Kippur, we will be sealed in the book of life.