



Rosh Hashanah I Sermon – 5779 Connections

By Rabbi Lifshitz

This summer one of our daughters gave me an intriguing book, *Why We Need Religion* written by Stephen Asma, who was at one time a critic of religion, but who now has changed his mind. Currently he believes, based on research in many fields, that as human beings evolved religion developed as a positive adaptive tool for surviving in the world and that it still continues to serve a positive evolutionary purpose. Religious traditions, including the various civic religions, such as patriotism, to which people pledge loyalty, are necessary for individuals and for society, for they shape our values and anchor us in a constantly changing world. They affect our emotional intelligence as well as the cognitive part of our brains, and they sustain and strengthen us as we go through our lives, particularly when we dealing with matters other than provable facts. Religious faith is different than science, but it is just as essential for humanity. In short, he proposes that being religious is necessary, healthy, and wise.

One of the interesting things I learned from this book is that the word *religion* is derived from the Latin ligo, which means to connect or to unite, the same root from which the word *ligament* is drawn. Just as ligaments keep muscles connected and support organs, so does religion connect us, binding us together as a community, and so does it support us, particularly when we deal with existential dilemmas. When ligaments are torn, we are injured and motion is restricted. Similarly, without our religious traditions, we are wounded, we stumble, and we are incomplete. Lacking faith, there is an emptiness that limits us and a spiritual hunger which gnaws at us.

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Then to what can and should our faith connect us? To what do we want to be connected and to what values do we want to bind ourselves?

We need to connect with our self, with our nefesh, the inner being, that we ignore all too often in this environment of instant and constant communication and entertainment. Always texting, trying to cram still more into our schedules, hurrying to check off more on our to-do list, working ceaselessly, even on vacation, it becomes difficult to attend to our inner lives. While we document every activity on Facebook, binge on Netflix or Hulu, follow multitudes on Instagram, constantly check-in on Snapchat, the amount of time we have to think, really think, about our values, ideals and priorities is drastically reduced.

Judaism shapes space and time in ways that give us opportunities and tools for attending to our inner life. In rituals such as lighting Shabbat candles or wrapping our self in the tallit, standing before the open ark or listening to the Torah being read, it is possible to step out of the rushing world in order to become more attuned to our souls. During worship the sounds, the

choreography, and the familiarity of the prayers, enable us to shift our focus. For example, now that I no longer conduct the service, it is incredibly uplifting to stop turning pages, close my eyes, and begin to think about why I am here. That often elevates my spirit and stirs my soul. Try it at some point during our services. You might find that you are more in touch with your spiritual nature and with Judaism than you believed possible.

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Judaism also teaches that we must connect with others, after all half of the Ten Commandments refer to relationships between human beings. And we all learned in religious school Hillel's statement: if I am not for myself, who will be for me; BUT if I am only for myself, what am I? To be truly alive, to be human, requires that we care about others. The concept of *Kavod HaBriyot*, the idea of protecting the dignity of all, the command to be attentive and respectful of others, is central to Judaism's ethics and fundamental to the way our community, and any community, is to function.

In this country today, respect for others seems to be drastically diminished. Suspicion grows everywhere. Some citizens don't respect police and some police are overly distrustful of some of the people they are meant to protect. The awful scene of children being separated from parents, with seemingly little thought given to how they might be reunited, reveals far too little concern for basic human rights and human dignity.

Our opinions become more extreme and civil discourse is replaced by the harshest of language. We listen only to the news we agree with, we read only the opinions that reflect what we already believe, and we seldom allow our ideas to be challenged by another perspective. If a Jew voices a criticism of a particular action Israel takes, he may be judged by other Jews as being anti-Israel and then no meaningful dialogue takes place. If you support the President of the United States, some will question your integrity or sanity; if you are opposed to his rhetoric, his actions or his policies, you may be considered dangerously deluded or a leftist socialist, and again no meaningful discussion or serious analysis ensues.

When we fail to give respect to other points of view, when we shout at each other instead of actually communicating, we grow farther apart, and are increasingly disconnected. Instead of becoming closer to the ideal of being a *Kehilat Kodesh*, a unified and sacred assembly, we risk becoming a conglomeration of divided, fearful, angry and weakened groups. To combat this corrosive tendency, we have to stand up to confront these trends, to protest egregious actions and divisive proposals. Likewise we must listen more carefully, become more tolerant of diverse opinions, and strive to strengthen civility by ourselves being more patient and respectful.

At work and in schools, we know how that lack of respect for others leads to isolation instead of connection and concern. Even young children can feel that they are alone, can come to believe that they are being ignored by others, and then withdraw to dark places in their psyche. Bullying is not a rare or isolated phenomenon, no longer something we can tell our children to just cope with. One who is bullied is a victim and needs support, while the bully needs an intervention so that her or his issues can be addressed, lest that individual, later in life, acts out with hatred, road rage or worse. When we see or hear bigotry or bullying or overly harsh criticism or belittling words, instead of rolling eyes and *standing by*, we should *stand up* against

what is wrong and become a voice in support of kindness and compassion. It is not always easy to do so, but it almost always is the right thing to do.

Closer to home, being connected means being truly attentive to others. Consider this: A little girl comes home from school, eager to show her mother a drawing. Her mother is washing dishes. The child squeals with delight, waving the drawing, “Mommy, Mommy, guess what?” //Without looking up, her mother responds, “What?” //“Guess what?” repeats the little girl.// Again the mother asks, “What?”// “ But Mommy” the girl says,“, you’re not listening!.”// Still not shifting her focus from the dishes, Mom says, “Sweetie, yes, I am.”// Sighing the girl says, “But Mommy, you’re not *listening with your eyes.*”

Perceiving sounds and responding without much thought is hearing, but real listening requires paying attention and making a conscious and obvious connection. The difference between hearing and true listening is found in how truly focused we are to the one who is speaking. Consider that when we recite the Shema, we close our eyes so as to fully focus on what we are saying, to listen to what we are proclaiming. So too in order to actually listen we must be similarly focused on the other individual.

Too often I find myself hearing the noise around me, hearing what someone is saying, and I am even able to respond, but I am not paying serious attention to the one who is talking to me — my ears hear, but my mind and heart are not listening — and the connection between us is weakened and frustration occurs (You can ask my wife and children about that — and that has probably happened in your house as well.) How much better it is when we hear and listen with intentionality, focusing on the other person and on the words — and the message — being spoken, for then understanding increases and the quality of our interpersonal connection, our relationship, is improved.

We may not be able to make politicians listen to each other, we may not be able to reshape public discourse, but in our interactions with those closer to us — our family, our friends, the members of our synagogue, those with whom we interact each day — we can listen more respectfully and patiently. Then our human connections, our relationships, will grow warmer, our perceptions will change, mutual understanding will increase, and our community will become more holy.

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A question: “What brings us to services today?” Does obligation, fear, responsibility or habit draw us here? It may be any of these, but I believe it is more likely that we assemble here because here we find connection. Through our worship we connect with our *fellow Jews*, we connect with *our memories* of parents and grandparents, we connect with *relatives and friends*, and with those *with whom we have shared these holidays* over the years. In reciting our prayers we connect once more with the traditions and teachings that link our own lives with those of our people long gone and with the generations still to come. Here, joined together as a faith community, we remind ourselves that we are connected with an enterprise — namely, Judaism and the story of the Jewish people — that in some links us with eternity and that guides us toward the future.

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Now for a third connection---

Remember that ligo, the Latin from which the words *ligament* and *religion* are derived means connection. So religion means reconnecting to the realms of faith and the ineffable. Judaism is the way we freely and knowingly bind ourselves to our Jewish beliefs and to the Creator of All. In a world where many may misuse religion, where many denigrate faith, where rampant secularism leads us away from God, we are, almost mysteriously, pulled here, no matter how much we know or practice, to renew our own relationship with Adonai, with Judaism and with our people.

The Talmudic sage, Rabbi Simlai, taught that before we are born, when we were safely ensconced in the comfort of the womb, God dispatches a personal angel to sit beside each and every soul. There, *in utero*, this angel actually teaches us all the Torah, all about God, and all the wisdom we will ever need to know. Everything. // And then ... just before we are born, the angel gives us a "tap" between the nose and the upper lip and instantly we forget everything he had taught us.

But perhaps some remnant, some recollection of that state of being before birth, remains and it propels us to quest for what we once knew, it urges us to relearn what we once possessed. Maybe that is why there resides somewhere within us a yearning to reconnect with Torah and God. During these Days of awe, that spiritual thirst, that longing for the Holy One, that we ignore or stifle too often, is what brings us together to support each other as we search for the way to affirm our relationship with our religion, our people and with God.

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And where is God to be found? A final story. "The angels, having heard that God planned to create humans in His image, grew jealous. They asked, 'Why does mere mortal man deserve such a gift?' So the angels plotted to hide the image of God from humankind. One angel suggested that it be hid on the tallest mountain. Another suggested that it be sunk into the depths of the sea. But the shrewdest angel demurred. "No," he said, "Man will be an adventurer. He will climb the highest mountain and he will one day plumb the deepest ocean, and so he will find the Divine Image. But if we want to really hide it from him, let us hide the divine image within man himself. // It is the last place in the world that he will seek it."

Let us prove that angel wrong as we search for the Presence of God that is implanted within us. Let us respond to that same Holiness within others. Then by listening to and interacting with others with respect and love, we will reconnect with each other to create a more holy community. In our journeys of listening and learning, of praying and pursuing faith, may God's light ever illumine our lives. Then this new year will indeed bring joy and blessing to us and to those we love. Amen