

ROSH HASHANAH 5767 POST-MODERN PAST AND FUTURE

A story from the legends of our people:

In a certain town there rose a disagreement about an important point of Jewish law. Quickly, the leaders of the town gathered four rabbinic scholars and asked them to settle the matter. The four retreated to the wilderness, in Hebrew 'midbar,' a place that allows great talking to occur. After hours of discussion, they voted 3-1 in favor of a certain decision. Rabbi Hyim was not used to being in the minority, and he argued vehemently but without success, for the others to change their minds. Finally, he shouted into the vast space, "If my way is the righteous way, that great old tree over there will grow another massive branch!" And it did, but the others were not convinced. So he shouted again, "If my way is the righteous way, the current in the river that we are sitting beside will suddenly change direction. And it did, but the others were still not convinced. So he screamed out once again, "If my way is the righteous way, that stone over there will grow into an actual mountain. And it did, but the others remained unconvinced. "Rabbi, we are aware that every part of nature has a spirit, and the tree, the stone, and the river may well agree with you. But they were not assigned the task of settling this matter, we were. Yet, Rabbi Hyim did not give up. With all his might, he bellowed to the heavens. "God, you know I am right. Please send a sign that you agree with me. Just then, a great shofar was heard, the skies opened and a voice emerged: "Rabbi Hyim is right!" After a while, one of the rabbis said, "OK, so now it's 3-2...."

Tell this story to the next person you meet who claims God on their side..."God may well be, but are you sure that's enough? (I also love telling it because it reminds me of our own Rabbi Hyim, and my favorite line of the year-we ran into each other one morning at the cleaners and he said to me, "What? You dry clean your tie-dyes!?)

I actually first heard that story on a tape as I once again drove solo this summer with my kids on a 14 hour road trip into the Minnesota wilderness. I remember well confessing to this congregation with brutal honesty last year how surprised I was that my children seemed to rarely...listen to me. However, I am pleased to report tonight that, it is my recollection that on this year's trip, whenever I made a request, they snapped right to attention! Of course, that version may change as the moon grows towards Yom Kippur and brings me closer to unpeeling the truth of the matter.

I know what those road trips are all about, by the way. For some reason, it is important for me that Zoey and Gabe experience summer in exactly the same ways I did as a youth. This is impossible, of course. My children, though from me, are entirely different human beings than me, and even if I were able to magically expose them to the exact same sequence of summer events, rituals and activities, the way they would internalize and integrate those experiences would be as unique as they are. Still, it is important to me to give them a sense of continuity and tradition, and I do so only in the admittedly limited ways I am

able, believing that the foundation will in some way be part of a future they will have to define for themselves.

David Macfarlane writes in his meditative novel about the rituals of Northern Canadian lake culture, *Summer Gone*: “It was the way memory curved back through time, the way hope reached forward, that made summer seem enduring. It was the steady accumulation of summers past and summers yet to come that saved the present from being over as soon as it began. Past, future. Past, future. And we treasure this poised moment, this skillfully held angle of time, this—balance between the same and the new.”

Rosh Hashanah literally translates to the ‘head of the year.’ The word for change, *shinui*, comes from the same root as *shanah*—we expect the new year to excite us with a *chiddush*; things, pathways, people, thoughts, behaviors and ideas that are new, fresh, innovative. But the word *shanoot*, meaning repetition, is also of the same root. We also hope that the coming year comforts us with familiarity; rhythms and moments already experienced and well understood. We had a wonderful men’s retreat last spring, and while I am bound to secrecy and will not divulge any personal details, I do want to share a poignant question that Michael Killian asked us all as we began the process of getting to know one another: “What would your 12-year old self recognize about your present incarnation?” I was startled to recount the ways in which the two of us are one

and the same, and all the reasons he and I also have become complete strangers. Change and repetition; repetition and change.

This is the essence of the philosophical catch phrase post-modernism which is, simply put, the desired balance between tradition and innovation. The pre-modern era was marked by soothing and unwavering faith, rich cultural heritages, and deep aboriginal wisdom, but its' intolerant chauvinism, often cruel rigidity, hyper-authoritarianism and superstitious short-sightedness had the world begging for a paradigm shift. Modernity has brought to many the gifts of rational reasoning, astounding invention, egalitarianism, and freedom of individual conscience, but after a Holocaust perpetrated by a sophisticated, scientifically orientated and anti-religious regime, the nuclear arms race, the ever widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, and the rapid despoiling of our planetary resources, it is clear that an established way of life has once again reached the limit.

We are gripped by fear and anxiety from the very real threat presented by people and nations who are holding onto the ugliest of pre-modern notions. Yet, there are some who make the argument that an even bigger threat to the planet is from un-tempered modernism run amuck. Post-modernism posits that there is never absolute truth, only multiple valid perspectives, as the rabbis always taught, 70 faces has Torah. This is what both pre-modernity and modernity ignore-at their worst they are dogmatic mirror images of one another and their adherents

stubbornly refuse to acknowledge that the best elements of the other might be beneficial and even holy, and their own worst tendencies are incredibly destructive. Post-modernism now competes with both in a struggle for what will become the dominant world view of the 21'st century. Many people, but not yet a critical mass, have come to the realization that the complexity of humanity and the universe requires awe *and* skepticism, intellectual rigor *and* mystical intuition, technological wizardry *and* primal, physical contact, history *and* myth, scientists *and* shamans.

Not only do I believe that the post-modern perspective is a healthier, more meaningful way for individual human beings to walk through life's journey, I am confident that the anxiety and fear that is reverberating around the globe and threatening our very existence would be seriously reduced if the pre-modern world was infused with a healthy dose of modernity, and if the modern world would re-internalize elements of pre-modernity. At the very least, we would be able to start the process of understanding one another over the divide.

It is in that spirit, and with the deep understanding that my voice represents only one vote, that I humbly offer three pathways that may lead those of us who are products of modernity into a more post-modern direction.

For one, our modern lives are immeasurably more comfortable and convenient, but in the process we have become un-tethered from the natural world.

Consequently we are victims, some say, of 'nature-deficit disorder.' Most of us have experienced the expansiveness, the renewal, the sense of unlimited possibility that comes from being immersed, even temporarily, in wild and open spaces. In fact, studies have shown how physical, mental and emotional health increases the more one is exposed to nature. The Lakota medicine man, Luther Standing Bear once said: "Man's heart, away from nature, becomes hard."

Pre-modern traditions, including Judaism, again and again emphasized our intended relationship to the Earth. Jewish mythology teaches: When God said, let us make the earth being ('adam' for human comes from the word 'adamah' for earth) in OUR image, the Creator was addressing all of what had come into being until that point. We are, according to that ancient teaching, a collage comprised of everything that was ever created; spirits donkeys, monkeys, dogs, cats, spiders, trees, cactus, rocks, stars, wind, water, fire. Therefore, when we get away from the man-made world, we experience a family reunion. In Jewish indigenous wisdom, every animal has unique qualities that we ought to emulate, (as attested by Hebrew names such as 'Dov-bear,' Zev-wolf,' 'Tziporah-bird,' and 'Ari-lion.'). the Hebrew word for 'tree' is the same as the word for advice,' and we can rejoice with the elements, for in our prayers the rivers clap, and the mountains sing.

In a post-modern world, we would take time to unplug, disconnect and go outside, hug a tree or two and truly feel our visceral relationship to nature. Lately, I've been focusing on sister wind, trying to meditate on even barely

perceptible breezes. The word 'ruach' in Hebrew is translated into both breath and wind, and both forces, when we are aware of them, the breath from within, and the wind from outside of us, both are powerful forces of renewal, singing us a song of calm determination. The environmentalist John Muir said, "I am well again, I came to life in the cool winds and crystal waters," and it is true that those who find healing and wholeness in nature will tend to defend nature from the modern appetite to replace it.

With modernity came the primacy of the nuclear family. Our tremendous freedom of movement we enjoy has often left us isolated-our homes further removed from the homes of others, and neighborhoods further removed from any center of public activities. No less a primary modern figure than Albert Einstein saw this privatization of lifestyle as a prison, as he said, "a prison restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us." "Our task must be," he continued, "to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion." To read medieval Jewish law is to receive a different picture-one of close-knit villages that emphasized communal responsibility. In these communities, people of vastly different circumstances lived together; the healthy ones labored to bring healing to those who were ailing, the fortunate ones attended to the needs of the underprivileged, all of the adults contributed to the raising of all the children, newcomers, and strangers were welcomed graciously and shared in the communal benefits. While family was valued, it was often superseded by a social responsibility. We so often hear people say, "there is

nothing more important than family!” and while taking care of and being cared for by my family is so precious to me, a post-modern society wouldn’t allow that sentiment to also contradict that pre-modern African proverb we’ve all heard, ‘It takes a village.’

Because we no longer live in these types of villages, our obligation to help others is most often satisfied impersonally, denying us the chance to enrich our own lives with encounters and relationships with people from all walks of life. This separation also leads to the type of disastrous ignorance that led a government official to say in the wake of Katrina, “We’re dealing here with people we didn’t even know existed!

CRC is an example of a community working to become a post-modern village. Hilary Skirbol and the Mitzvah Corps have given our members the opportunity to directly serve people who are ailing and grieving, and the CHIPS health clinic, Holy Ground alliance and our food and clothing ministry has allowed us to get to know our neighbors. And within this one sacred community, it is a truly humbling experience to recount the many individuals who have created institutions of social justice from scratch, efforts that help us widen our circles beyond family and friends: Marshall Cohen’s Lift For Life gym and academy, Josh Goldman’s mentoring and tutoring program, Karen Kalish’s Cultural Leadership, Lisa Orden-Zarin’s College Bound, Carole Zimbrolt’s Health Care Clinic for Kids (may her memory inspire us all), and others. I have found that the more I reach out to

others and extend my village, not only am I bringing some tikkun to the world, but I also actually have more capacity and energy for my own immediate family. This must have been what our pre-modern philosopher Maimonides meant when he exclaimed, "There is no greater or more glorious joy than to bring happiness to the hearts of others; including to poor people, orphans, widows, and strangers."

In 1885, a group of rabbis gathered in Pittsburgh to craft the quintessential unapologetically modern religious document. Among other statements was the following: "We reject all religious celebrations as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization." I applaud their motivation when it came to rejecting rituals and traditions on ethical and moral grounds, but I have a hunch they were also emphasizing their distaste for ceremonies that appeared too primitive. Modernity stressed decorum, and while I obviously believe ours is a better society for the various refining customs, it is difficult for me to find transcendence in ceremony cut off from high emotion, spontaneous expression, sensory enticement, bodily movement, and earthy rooted-ness.

We still have access to the pre-modern way of worship. It allows us an outlet for our primal selves, and satisfies a sometimes long-dormant need for intensity and ecstasy. You should have seen us, right Robert, at that men's retreat, wildly dancing with our drums around the bonfire...oops! In a few weeks during the festival of Sukkot, each morning for seven days I will go outside grasp leaves,

branches and fruit of the trees, and shake them passionately as an appeal to every direction-to the east, place of beginnings; to the north, place of mystery; to the west, place of blending; to the south, place of clarity; upwards, to the place of mystery; and to the Earth, place of compassion. On one of those mornings, Hoshannah Rabbah, the tradition is to make seven circle dances with the tree branches, pausing to pound the willow on the ground, in an attempt to rouse mother earth's love for her inhabitants. The midrash imagines the Shabbat services in the days of the Temple to be filled with song, dance, bells and drums, and then bemoans the disappearance of such worship. Have you been to CRC on a Saturday morning lately? All that's missing is the incense! I am hoping this year to lead 4 ceremonies in the presence of the full, glowing moon during the full moon holidays: Sukkot, from our leafy hut; Tu B'Shevat, celebrating the glorious trees; Passover, searching for Eliyahu; and Tu B'Av, in search of one another.

I was blessed this year to have welcomed the new moon of Nisan with African drum and dance thanks to the Hebrew Israelites whose ancestors thankfully brought their brand of Jewish practice with them on slave ships from Africa. I also participated in a Kabbalistic healing ceremony facilitated by a Navajo convert to Judaism who began by having each of us blow the medicine of cedar and sage dust to The Great Mystery in all four winds.

One of the advantages of reviving ancient ceremony in a post-modern context is we can share wisdom with other traditions. I love when I am asked to lead seders at churches. What a mitzvah to share the holy concept of a communal meal that takes some time because it is engaging; a meal filled with symbolism, song, questions, and sacred dialogue. We who have made a priority out of embracing interfaith families need to be open to the various ways that non-Jewish rituals will be woven into our ceremonies. And you should have seen the awe on the faces of the beautiful seventh grade class last Sunday as they listened to Cornerstone Baptist's drum kit powered gospel-they've already started asking how to inject some Jewish soul music into their B'nai Mitzvot. Getting to the heart of ceremony, passion and inspiration and transformation, teaches us that the distance between cultures and life-styles is not so great after all.

Among the legends of our people is a story about the primordial man, Adam and the primordial woman, Eve. Upon learning of their banishment from the Garden, they asked and received three items to take with them. A branch from the tree of life; a jewel containing a spark from the first light of creation, and a mantle made from skin from all of the first animals and plants. These same remnants have been transmitted across the generations, only continually transformed. The branch made an appearance as Moses' staff; the jewel was used as the eternal light on the tabernacle; and the mantle was used for Joseph's colorful coat. Now, the branch is our walking stick as we re-connect to the natural world, the jewel is

the beaconing light we spread when we reach out to someone outside our sphere, and the mantle are the colorful ceremonies that enhance our lives.

Past, future. Past, future. And we treasure this poised moment, this skillfully held angle of time, this—balance between the same and the new.”

Shinui-may it be a new year

Shanoot-may it be the same as every year

Shanah Tovah-May it be a year of peace