

## ROSH HASHANAH I

5774

It is so easy to get lost and so easy to think we are not.

In Bereshit, G-d asks Adam: "Where are you? Ayeka?" This is the ultimate existential question. Where are we right now? Where are we ethically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually? Where are we as a congregation, a community, a society and country? It is the perfect question for each of us to ask not only but especially on Rosh HaShanah.

Often, Americans in considering such a question think in terms of material and financial position. Others when asked where they are and where do they hope to be, provide a different kind of response. For example: "Right now I am full of resentment and anger but I want to be more forgiving." Or: "Right now I am full of jealousy but I want to be more thankful." Or: "Right now I am filled with trivialities, narshkeit but I want to be filled with more meaning and purpose." Or: "right now I am looking at other people's faults but I want to start looking at my own." "Right now I am discouraged but I want to be more hopeful." Where are we? Are we lost? If so, will we find our way?

Where are we as a congregation and community? What are our challenges and opportunities? The most significant challenge for the non-Orthodox American Jewish community is that we are an ageing and diminishing community. Jews are marrying later and having fewer children. In 1960 only 8% of women and 13% of men at age 30 or older were unmarried; today it is 33% for women and 40% for men. Demographically, this is extremely significant for the American Jewish community.

There are those in our communities who very much want to find their b'shert and many couples who very much want to have children. We need to be aware of and sensitive to these individuals and couples. We share our prayers with all of you. It is a complicated and challenging world we live in and we want our synagogue to be a source of support, encouragement and hope to all.

We need to accept different life styles. Single Jews, Jews living in committed relationships, married Jews who have chosen not to have children or to have

children much later, gay Jews, interfaith couples and families all need to be welcomed genuinely—not superficially—into our synagogues and communities. In a culture that worships youth we need to be very careful to not only accept our elderly and be kind to them but to truly appreciate, value and respect them.

Everyone is welcome at Adath Israel. I remind you that everyone can be a full member of our synagogue regardless of their financial situation. Everyone! No one is ever turned away as a member, from a Shabbat dinner or adult studies class. No child is ever turned away from religious school, youth programming or Mercaz. No one!

There needs to be as many portals as possible into our synagogue for everyone to find an entrance. There are religious services, adult studies, social action, Sisterhood, Brotherhood, Hazak, youth and family activities and more; the doors are wide open. Some congregants think that a particular program, event or class is not for them, it is what others do. Too many of us pass up significant Jewish learning opportunities and experiences because of our attitudes and life style.

Non-Orthodox American Jews are joining synagogues much later if they join at all. It is interesting that in studies like the one our community did several years ago, significantly more adult Jews say they belong to a synagogue than actually do. A recent New York City study showed the same. Our study indicated that almost 70% said they were members of a synagogue when in reality the figure is 37%.

Many adult Jews continue to live their Judaism through their parents and grandparents. The fact that synagogues cannot pay their bills this way is critical but what is even more serious is that there is no future if adult Jews do not accept the responsibilities of being adult Jews. It is not simply adult Jews turning to their parents and grandparents for the High Holy Days and other synagogue provided services, it is adult Jews not making Shabbat and Yom Tov, seder and Chanukkah in their own homes and not creating their own personal rituals and customs. Where are we? Are we lost? If so, will we find our way?

We are thankful that our membership has grown a little in these declining demographic years and our religious school enrollment has increased. Every year is different; every member who dies, moves away or leaves for any reason is missed. Throughout the country it is becoming increasingly more difficult for

synagogues to replace members. Synagogues are and have been for thousands of years the foundation of every Jewish community. This is why the health of a community's synagogues is so critically important.

Our members are our best marketing option. It is perfectly appropriate to invite and encourage non-affiliated family, friends, neighbors and co-workers and others to come to our synagogue. How many times have members shared how family and friends have said to them after being here for the holidays or a bar or bat mitzvah celebration how much they loved it? We need to encourage these folks to consider becoming part of our congregational family. Where are they? Perhaps we can help them find their way.

Raising Jewish children is at the very heart of our future. The Hebrew root for parent, teacher and Torah is the same. Our rabbis tell us that parents and other adults of influence are to be teachers and role models for our children and youth. The reason we have the Chair of Elijah the Prophet at a brit milah or baby naming is to remind us that if there is ever to be a world of justice and peace that Elijah represents, our children need to be raised by us to live lives that bring more justice and peace into our world. This defines parenting and what it is to be a parent. It is not going to happen by magic or miracles.

Parents have shared with me their own self-criticism as to how over-programmed their children are but they continue doing it anyway. What about parents who are not concerned about this problem or choose to ignore and deny it? The same may be said for how we raise our children to feel entitled, giving them so much more than they need, failing to teach them to appreciate all they have and the value of working for and earning what they get. We encourage unhealthy levels of competition and define success irresponsibly not as having to do with the quality of one's ethical and moral life but as having to do with one's material and financial life. We know what is right but we have difficulty doing what is right. Where are we? Are we lost? If so, will we find our way?

Madeline Levine, a psychologist and professor at Stanford University's School of Education and who wrote **Teach Your Children Well**, asserts "that there is something not right about our parenting. Too many children have too much stress and anxiety, too many do drugs and alcohol and engage too early in too much sex."

Levine notes “that not every child may be shaped into Harvard material—if indeed this is or should be a goal—but every child can have his/her spirits broken, depression induced and anxiety stoked by too much stress, too little downtime and too much attention given to external factors that make them look good to an audience of appraising eyes but leave them feeling rotten inside.”

Levine and others observe that “we are not teaching our children and youth empathy, we are not encouraging them to discover and develop their authentic selves as compared to images for external viewing and we are not teaching children to make time for dreaming, creating and for unstructured play in general and especially play outside.” We dress our young daughters as sex objects and teach our children that winning is what is important. And all of this is happening to our children whom we love. Levine notes that this is a very difficult message for most parents to hear.

Higher education has become vocational, students are made to start stressing over college earlier and earlier, unbridled competition and cheating are serious issues and the debt incurred for an undergraduate degree is extraordinary even for those graduates who get jobs. Helicopter parents are increasing in number and extending their intrusion into their children’s growth and independence longer. College professionals observe how parents, and at times grandparents, are inserting themselves into their children’s and grandchildren’s lives involving everything from having their grades changed to getting them into sororities and fraternities at precisely the time when their children should be left to push off from the dock, make mistakes and learn.

Arlie Russell Hochschild, professor emeritus at UC Berkeley and author of “The Outsourced Self,” examines the price we pay when we pay others to live our lives for us. He shares his concern as to how many of us export our lives to experts and professionals instead of living our lives ourselves. Educators are alarmed at the level of expectation parents have on their children’s schools to be the primary source for moral and ethical education as compared to the home. If, as parents, we are not teaching our children about ethical and moral behavior, what are we doing? How can we outsource this? Some argue it is because we have lost our confidence as parents in being able to be our children’s ethical and moral role models and teachers. Where are we? Are we lost? If so, will we find our way?

What are we doing with our discretionary time? How many of us are engaged regularly in adult education? In recent years we have developed a fine adult studies program at Adath Israel but the number of our members who participate is sadly and concerningly low. It has been humorously but poignantly pointed out that if we really want to stay safe in the world, we should all come to synagogue and take a Torah study class. Why? Because statistics show us that only 0.01% of deaths in America occur in synagogues and even fewer in Torah study classes.

Professor Moshe Halbertal of Hebrew University wrote: “Years ago a teacher of mine introduced me to a new concept of heaven and hell. ‘Don’t think that hell is where people are consumed by fire for their sins or that heaven is where they are rewarded with pleasures for their piety. What really happens is that G-d gathers everybody in one large hall. G-d then gives them the Talmud and other texts and commands them to start studying. For the wicked, studying is hell. For the pious, it is heaven. Clearly, the role of study in Jewish life is so profound that even the afterlife cannot be imagined without it.”

Many of us acknowledge the importance of our role modeling for our children by reading books, coming in on Sunday mornings to study in an adult studies class as our children come into Sunday school and coming into synagogue with our children on Shabbat and not dropping them off and driving away. As we have considered before, many if not most of us are a lot smarter than we behave, much more intelligent than often our behavior reflects. Where are we? Are we lost? If so, will we find our way?

Where are we religiously? What is our theology? Do we think about G-d, what do we believe? Are we lost in fundamentalist thinking or lost in doubt, are we lost in Sunday school theology or in no theology at all? Where is Shabbat in our lives? It is an easy argument to make that if our ancestors needed Shabbat each week, we need it desperately more given the craziness and hecticness of our lives. Where are prayer and meditation in our lives, moments of reflection, quiet and stillness in our lives? Where are *kaddish* and *yartzeit* in our lives? Where is kashrut, concern for what we eat and how what we eat gets to our tables in our lives? Where are *Talmud Torah*, *tzedakah* and acts of kindness, *gemilut hasadim*, in our lives? Where is Israel in our lives? Where are synagogue and Jewish community in our lives? Given how often we describe Judaism as the path of life for us, when

it comes to living as Jews, where are we on this path? Where are we? Are we lost? If so, will we find our way?

Where are we in terms of our political positions and views as they relate to our Judaism? Last Rosh HaShanah I shared an assortment of mitzvot, Jewish laws and rabbinic teachings informing us where we should be vis-à-vis health care, social welfare, the environment and the death penalty. I referenced the State of Israel and how we should look to Israel to help us understand where as American Jews we should be regarding these American domestic concerns and debates.

I could do the same regarding gun control, sharing Israeli attitudes and laws about privately owned guns. How much do Jewish values and teachings influence our social, economic and political positions? Where are we as American Jews regarding immigration law reform, climate change, poverty, human trafficking and privacy issues? Where are we regarding war, attacking Syria, having armed vigilantes and civilians patrolling our borders and neighborhood? Where are we with regard to all the violence in our country?

Judaism is not parve on any of these. We are of an ancient and wise people who, for over three thousand years have been commanded to be guardians and stewards of this planet, to take care of all those disadvantaged, to never dehumanize anyone and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Over three thousand years! How can any American Jew not have these commandments and values dictate where we stand on these problems and issues?

Regarding anything affecting the well-being and dignity of another human being, the well-being and health of our planet, the state of justice and the pursuit of peace in our societies and world, as Jews no political affiliation, no political bias and certainly, not money are to influence us as Jews. Jewish ethics and values are to have exclusive authority in our lives. Where are we? Are we lost? If so, will we find our way?

What is so ironic about all of these concerns—children, parenting, Jewish living, studying, synagogue and community, political and social issues—is we all can be where we need to be so that when asked where we are, we not only will know the answer but will answer definitively, passionately and confidently: “We are

here! And here is the right place to be; here is just where our Judaism tells us we need to be.”

Will we get un-lost during the year ahead, will we find our way? We will learn the answer next Rosh HaShanah when we are asked again, “Ayekah, where are you?” But, we are being asked today, “Ayekah, where are you? Where am I?” Where are we? Hopefully, we are clearly present and deeply conscious as to where we truly are and straight on course as to where we know we need to be going.

SHANAH TOVAH.