

ROSH HASHANAH II
5774

Before we blow the shofar on Rosh HaShanah morning we reflect, as we did today, on Rambam's teaching that "the shofar exclaims: Wake up from your slumber. Examine your deeds and turn in *teshuvah*, remembering your Creator. You sleepers who forget the truth when caught up in the fad and follies of the time, frittering away your years in vanity and emptiness which cannot help."

We all need to wake up and become maximally self-aware. We are to wake up to the fact that we can be more awake than we are. Our best behavior and our best moments of relationship are when we are aware of ourselves. When we are not aware of ourselves we are not aware of how others experience us and this leads to difficult, unpleasant and even painful relationships.

The person who is told that he talks with his mouth full and responds that he is aware of this and is working on it is in a much different place than the person who talks with his mouth full but who is not aware. We cannot work on ourselves if we are not aware of ourselves anymore than we can get treatment for an illness if we do not know we have it.

Self-awakening involves becoming aware that our lives have purpose and meaning. There was a moment when Abraham did not know that there was a mission for his life and then there came a moment when he awoke to it and his entire life changed. What is our purpose, what is the meaning of our lives? How sad is it for a person to feel that he or she has no purpose, that one's life has no meaning? We need to wake up and discover the purpose for our being alive. Very few things are more important to do than this. To live without meaning and purpose is a nightmare.

What is the difference between our experience during the High Holy Days if we have been using the month of Elul, the month preceding Rosh HaShanah, to look at our lives, reach out to people whom we have wronged, make a plan for self-work for the year ahead, accept responsibility for our mistakes or if we have not?

Here in shul, what is the difference when the person to our right and left has been conscientiously preparing for Rosh HaShanah? What is the difference for a congregation when more have been preparing for the High Holy Days by examining their behavior for the past month as compared to fewer; when more of us come into shul with a month of momentum of soul searching as compared to fewer of us? Which is the stronger congregation?

Are we aware that we are free to choose not to try to make that which is transient permanent? We can wake up and realize how much our concerns for money, things, physical beauty, pleasure and power are causes of our own unhappiness, anxiety and suffering. Does anyone here not know the sadness of a moment lost forever, especially a moment with a loved one, because we put something of no importance, certainly of less importance, first? When we live like this it is like sleep walking.

There are those who awake to the realization that life is not limited to physicality; who become aware of the reality of love and hope, of thoughts and dreams, of blessings and prayers; whose eyes open and who are able to see into the hearts of other human beings and feel what they feel. What if at this very moment all of us were wide awake like this? What if?

The Talmud asks if the feet and body of the priest but not his head is in the Tent of Meeting can he fulfill his priestly responsibilities and answers, “no.” The same is true for us: when we are physically present but our heads—our minds and thoughts—are elsewhere, we cannot engage in self-reflection and self-work anymore than we can do an activity when we are asleep in bed. We may physically be here in this sanctuary but otherwise we are absent. The priests of Israel could only bring heaven down to earth when they were awake. The same is true for us.

Carl Jung reminds us that the person who looks outside oneself only dreams but the person who also looks inside awakens. The author J.M. Ledgard observes that it is easier for human beings to push outward than it is for them to explore inward. Why do we deny ourselves the inner adventure, living on the outside and on the surface? Why do we look away from ourselves and not into ourselves? Are we afraid of what we may see? If so, how is this different than avoiding going

to a doctor because we are afraid the doctor may find something wrong with us? Ultimately, the inner journey is the best health care available.

The question has been asked as to why so many well educated people with high IQs think so superficially about life and the world? Is it possible that it is because we do not regularly journey within, live within, explore within, analyze our inner reality? Could it be because we do not engage regularly in thoughtful and serious conversation and discussion, challenge ourselves to see things differently and be open to new ideas? Working on thinking about things more deeply, appreciating the complexity, uncertainty and wonder of life, wakes us up and keeps us more alert; not doing this either keeps us asleep or puts us back to sleep.

Our rabbis point out that the Torah's language describing both Jacob waking up after his dream of the ladder and Pharaoh waking up after his dream of the skinny cows swallowing up the fat cows is identical: "*VaYikatz.*" The difference is that the Torah tells us that Jacob stayed awake and proclaimed "this is the place of G-d" but Pharaoh went back to sleep. We are the children of Jacob, not of Pharaoh; we are to stay awake and not asleep. Staying awake requires being aware of what is really real and what is really important.

The Kabbalah teaches that as we live in this physical world we take on garments, *malbushim*. These garments are layers of corporeality, materiality and physicality that cover up our true inner selves. These garments are woven out of fear and insecurity, greed and lies, anger and jealousy, appetite and ambition. The truth that we are unaware of, as the Kabbalah teaches, is that who we are in our essence, our true and ultimate selves, are holy and filled with the capacity for love, compassion, generosity, forgiveness and peace.

But we fill our daily lives we are filled with triviality, competition, lusts and self-concern. We have to strip away these garments to discover our true selves, our better selves. Standing naked in front of others is embarrassing; standing naked in front of G-d is affirming and strengthening. This is why yesterday we were concerned with how we teach our children to worry about how they look externally and how they present to an audience as compared to how they look within and how they present to themselves and to G-d.

Rev. Kelley Murphy Mason who is a psychotherapist and on the faculty of Union Theological Seminary teaches us that “suffering and existential exile is a result of losing touch with our true nature and becoming stuck in constricted states of consciousness, suffering results when we become enslaved by inflexible roles, behaviors, mind-sets and opinions.” Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, is defined as the confining and restricting spaces in our lives that limit, if not prevent, our movement and growth just as we are immobile when we are asleep. Being unaware and closed minded is being in Egypt; becoming aware and open minded is coming out of Egypt.

Ilan Stavans, a Mexican born Jewish author and social commentator, writes that “our wandering is meant to lead back toward ourselves. We are to set out on adventures that are to give us deeper access to ourselves; we are to travel to transcend our own limitations. Travel should be an art through which our restlessness finds expression. We must bring back the idea of travel as search.” Travel is to include self-discovery and soul searching. This is why we talk about spiritual journeys, paths of enlightenment and religious odysseys. Think of how for Jews traveling to Israel is a critically important way for us to be more awake and aware as to the purpose and the meaning of our lives as Jews and as human beings.

How many of us travel like this? Americans are traveling more than ever and, in the opinion of some observers, covering less territory than ever. Why? Because we insulate ourselves from spontaneous experiences, encounters with different people and walking off the beaten path. Our itineraries are super planned; we leave and return too often as if we never went anywhere. We may have our bucket lists that we check things off on but our buckets have holes.

When we travel we are to be moving inside and not just outside otherwise all we have is the still pictures and no live telecasts. Travel is for meeting different people, learning different things, eating different foods, thinking in different ways and for coming to appreciate with every trip how magnificently and wonderfully diverse G-d created the world and all that dwell thereon. The 19th century German rabbi, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was asked by his students why he took the time and bothered to visit the Alps? His response was: “I wanted to be sure that when I die and G-d asks me if I appreciated the beauty of Creation and

saw the Alps, I could say yes.” Traveling is to inspire awe and reverence, thankfulness and humility and hopefully also be a good time.

Rev. Mason reminds us that people fall asleep while driving and tragically bring harm, even death, to themselves and others. When we are asleep intellectually, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually we do the same. We bring harm to the quality of our lives and to the quality of our relationships. We harm ourselves when we remain asleep and unaware.

It is true that being as fully awake as we can be makes us vulnerable to the harsh and painful reality that we live in a world not yet redeemed, a world filled with suffering and pain. Terrence Rafferty, a novelist, points out that “the unexamined life may not be worth living but the examined life is no joy ride either. The inner adventure, self-awakening, thinking deeply can be disturbing.”

Rafferty rightfully reminds us that “we are required at times to be unflinching and, possibly, depressed, which is what happens to any compassionate and reasonable person who stares closely at the world.” Yes, being awake can be painful. When asleep during surgery we feel no pain; it is only when we awake that we do. Would any of us prefer not waking up from surgery?

To examine our lives and life as Rafferty notes requires a fair amount of courage if it is done properly. He thinks of the afterlife as a place where all there is is thinking—just thinking—which makes it both heaven and hell depending on the individual and what and how this person thinks. What is each of us thinking right now on this Rosh HaShanah in this sanctuary?

You may recall that when I introduce Psalm 27, the special Psalm of this season, I point out that it tells us to be strong and take courage. When the Psalm tells us to have hope it is not referring to our hope that we will find nothing lacking in ourselves and nothing in need of fixing. To the contrary, it tells us to have hope that we can be strong and courageous enough to see accurately what needs fixing in our lives and be confident that we can do it.

Judaism, especially our mystical tradition, insists that we all have a spark of G-d in us and are created in the image of G-d; that as small as we are in our world and as small as our world is in the Universe, we are nevertheless of immense significance

and importance. When we are aware of this, we are fully awake. Perhaps this is why so many spiritual teachers encourage us to stand outside and look up and contemplate infinity and eternity; to stretch us inside by trying to grasp that which is without beginning or end in time and space and then to contemplate that we are part of infinity and eternity.

Rabbi Heschel reminds us that the earth may be small within the infinite universe but if the earth is of any significance, human beings hold the key to it. How much more empowering can anything be than to be aware of this? What greater purpose could we have than to use every day of our lives to unlock doors of life for ourselves and others with the keys we hold?

We are to be aware that when we live morally and ethically we are doing the will of G-d. When we bring more kindness and compassion into the world we are doing the will of G-d. When we are sources of more justice and peace, we are doing the will of G-d.

Our rabbis tell us that angels are no more than extensions of G-d's will. They do not have free will; they can only do what G-d commands them to do. Human beings on the other hand have free will and therefore, we are free to do G-d's will or not. When we do, ironically, this makes us like the angels. We do not have to sleep and dream of angels going up and down a ladder; we can be fully awake and be angels.

A nine year old child was asked to describe an angel. She wrote: "My Bobby is my angel who died last year. She got a big head start on helping me while she was still down here." This girl's child like awareness should not only make us smile but inspire us. It should wake us up to the purpose and meaning of our lives: to be angel like to the people in our lives; to be angel like in doing G-d's will in healing this world.

Are we self-aware, awake and feel that we are part of something much, much bigger than ourselves? Rabbi Abraham Twerski teaches that we all have the ability to be self-aware, to be awake, to seek truth, to have purpose and over time to change, transform ourselves and transform our world.

No one can do anything in his or her sleep just like Bernie, being sound asleep, could not read the clearly written note telling him to wake up at 5:30; he missed everything. Let us all wake up and realize that when we are awake and aware is when real dreaming, dreaming that can change the world truly begins. Such dreams can only be dreamt while we are awake and aware of ourselves. In the year ahead, may we all be blessed to have such wonderful and important dreams; peaceful and restful sleep at night but wonderful and important dreams every day.

SHANAH TOVAH