

I am humbled by the responsibility of speaking to you this morning and finding words to complement the inspiring poetry and prose of our ancient and modern liturgy. On a very personal level, I marvel at the miracle of my being here with you. I ask myself, why have I survived, when so many, including leaders of our community, have died? - But I quickly move on, knowing there is no answer other than the one found in faith in the Divine. A faith which has been sorely tested over the decades, from the time I began to understand the Holocaust to watching young men wither away to skeletons.

A faith which Freud writes comes from a commitment to belief in an invisible G-d. In “Moses and Monotheism”, his last published book, this famous atheist writes that a “compulsion to worship a G-d whom one cannot see, means that in Judaism, a sensory perception was given second place to what may be called an abstract idea – a triumph of intellectuality over sensibility.” This intellectuality is most present today.

Yom Kippur, in the words of one writer, speaks to our search for intellectual introspection. It is “like the lighthouse on the shore of eternity, flashing a message of holiness.” We cannot connect this day to the agricultural festivals of our biblical ancestors, nor to a particular biblical event, but it represents a summons to raise ourselves to the loftiest spiritual heights, through the intensity of our prayers and the sincerity of our penitence. We can marvel at this opportunity for the most cosmic of confrontations and the most intimate of encounters and observances, which we enact in the midst of community and in the deepest recesses of our individual souls. The power of our speech and prayers contains within its consonants and vowels the power of creation, the power of our transformation.

Freud’s notion of intellectuality helps us to understand that, when we worship that which is not evident in the realm of our physical senses, we come to appreciate that which is symbolic and not immediate. This abstract model of experience has enabled us to achieve some measure of control over nature and to bring humane order to life. It also gives us the gift of what Freud calls inwardness. If we can be here contemplating our invisible G-d, then we are better positioned to try to understand the inner dynamics of our lives. We can

pause to consider our character, our desires, inhibitions, values and inner contradictions. We can be summoned to a reflection of who we are, but also who we want to be. Even when our prayers are directed to G-d, they begin with us. We do not know whether our prayers impact G-d, but they can lead to our being changed.

By reading and chanting the prayers of our machzor, we are brought together with the whole House of Israel, here and throughout the world, in a practice of collective conscious search and homage to the Divine majesty we call G-d. The turning inward focus of our liturgy today helps us to understand the spiritual power offered by our Jewish faith. We are challenged to examine our thoughts and actions: Have we been silent, when we might have spoken out? Have we failed to be responsive to the needs of others, when it was easily within our power to do so?; Have we pursued those paths of actions which fulfill our responsibility to be partners with the Divine in the repair of the world?

I wonder whether it is possible to fully use the power of Yom Kippur for introspection and change if it is but one day that comes every year. While Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that the focus of prayer is not the self, but the momentary disregard of our personal concerns and the absence of self-centered thoughts, prayer is also an invitation for the Divine to intervene in our lives by enabling us to change through introspection.

For those of us who have been in therapy, and to the three of you who have not, please forgive me, introspection and change requires hard work. It is much more difficult than talking about what your mother did or did not do to you. Yet I wonder why so many of us do not approach Yom Kippur with the same intentionality and intensity? We often spend time determining what we will wear to synagogue, what and where we will eat before the long fast, where we will celebrate the end of the fast, but what about our spiritual preparation? Do we begin to do the work of teshuvah before we walk through the doors of Herbst Hall? Have we asked anyone for forgiveness of our actions or slights before we begin the Yom Kippur tefilah?

There are those among us today who set an example for the House of Israel as their journey has become a search for belonging, belief and behaving.

Rabbi Heschel used the words worship, learning and action to describe these attributes. Though they were strangers at one time, Jews by Choice, show us the power of the birthright of our faith. They set an example for our appreciation of the spiritual gift of “living Jewishly”. They understand that the call to avert the severe decree on this Day of Atonement is through teshuvah, tzedakah and tefila. They are worshippers and not spectators of our liturgy.

Belonging represents the understanding and knowledge of Judaism. It is so much more than the pediatric Jewish education many of us received and which ended at b’nei mitzvah or confirmation. In every 365 day cycle – do we find time and more importantly, an inclination to attend an adult education class or even a one time lecture? Those who choose Judaism as adults understand the importance of lifelong Jewish learning in order to be literate, but they also learn how to create a spiritual life. The search for spirituality has led many Jews to eastern religions, but the question I often wonder, is what have you done to access the rich spiritual possibilities within your birth faith? In coming to synagogue we join with other members of our community in seeking G-d’s presence or at least some sign of spirituality, as if a thunderbolt would prove that G-d was present. Instead, Judaism provides for each of us to find and create spiritual space for ourselves, whether in synagogue, on a mountain top or at the shores of the sea.

Believing returns us to the majesty of our liturgy. Belief is defined as our having trust and conviction. Our liturgy is both ancient and modern. In every generation, we are moved by the power of prose, poetry and music. Liturgy, ritual and prayer help us to sanctify time, preserve our uniqueness, and unite us with the Jews throughout history who found strength from communal worship. The melodies of our minhag help us to create a spiritual place in which to pray. It is easy to dismiss the power of prayer – if we never truly engage in it. If the prayers of the machzor are strange to you, or you cannot grasp their full meaning in a few minutes, you can ask to borrow a machzor or, even better, visit the Jewish Community Library and learn from the machzorim of different denominations and communities.

Praying from the heart is a learned behavior. It is much more than a mindless repetition of words. Prayer can be a key to our inner selves, if only we allow it to be. Jewish prayer is a foundation for the experience of spirituality. Just as study opens the door to the knowledge of Jewish spirituality, participation in meaningful worship and liturgy fills the senses and provides us with a robe of sanctity in which to explore our being in the world. Our community's leadership takes the responsibility of creating and presenting meaningful liturgy seriously. They understand the power of a prayer book to move us through the beauty of words, both ancient and modern. Judaism is not a fixed faith system. It is an evolving way of life, but it requires active participation and behaving.

The Hebrew verb L'hitpalel means "to pray", and its root, Pey, Lamed, Lamed literally means to judge or examine oneself. It is a reflexive verb, which means that you do it to yourself. Finding G-d through prayer is an inward journey. When we pray, we really are asking ourselves, "What do I need to change about myself in order to maximize my satisfaction with life?" The search for the Divine requires kavanah, deep intention, thoughtfulness, quietness, sensitivity and preparation. Whether we petition G-d to give us what we need, or to give thanks for our portion, or to extol for the awesomeness of our world, all prayer is intended to help make us better human beings. Rabbi Judah Halevi writes, "Prayer is for the soul, what nourishment is for the body – a richer and healthier quantity makes for healthier sustenance."

Behaving is what we do after learning the mitzvot through Torah study. Judaism has little appreciation for a monastic way of life. We are fulfilled as humans and as Jews only within a community. The community, both Jewish and non-Jewish, represents an environment in which to fulfill our responsibility of tikkun olam. We teach those on the journey to Judaism that many people and religions teach the importance of good works, but we have a special responsibility as partners with G-d. If we are to be a "light unto the nations", each of us is required to find ways to fulfill the mitzvot of caring for other people, animals and the environment.

My parents taught us the importance of volunteering, even when we thought we could not take on another responsibility. I admit to a much too

enthusiastic following of their teaching. But it was not until I began working with folks on their journey to Judaism that I truly began to understand and appreciate “our way of life”. I really never thought about how I was being Jewish in the world every day. My behaviors, good and bad, were fairly entrenched after 30 plus years. One day, some ten years ago, I was visiting with my friend, Susan —not a Sha’ar Zahav congregant to my regret—and expressed that I was having thoughts about bringing kashrut back into my life. Bob and I had just returned from a wonderful culinary exploration of Tuscany and the Veneto. I told her that I needed to call Rabbi Martha Bergadine, our interim Rabbi at the time, to help me understand why my interest in kashrut had suddenly arisen. Susan became the interpreter of my dreams: she said that, as both Judaism and fine food were of such significance in my life, I might really be trying to find a way to live Judaism more consciously every day, in the same way I was teaching my students to see the world through a Jewish lens. For the past ten years, I strive to maintain a level of kashrut, both in and out of our home, ever mindful of a mitzvah which is within my power to follow.

As the liturgy of Yom Kippur asks us to turn inwards, we are also mindful of those with whom we share this experience. Most of us are not here because our parents told us we needed to be here; although some of us have partners who act in their stead. We are drawn here for many reasons, including some having to do with memory. Our Yizkor prayers this afternoon offers us time to be close to the loved ones whose memory lives on through us. Our prayers this morning emphasize the connections between their struggles and ours to live the best lives we can. The miracle of my survival has allowed me to find the religious practices and rituals which have added such meaning and depth to my life. As a gay man, I have read the literature about our self indulgences and lavish lifestyles. I admit that I choose to live well, using my own and my partner’s resources to create a good life but, as a Jew and one without children of my own flesh, I will be willing to face my G-d some day (not too soon – I hope) and say that I have lived by the words of our liturgy, L’dor V’dor, with a responsibility to teach and share the beauty of our particular faith with the next generation.

Introspection is important to living a Jewish life. Judaism fosters the maximizing of our potential. Freud’s appreciation of the relationship between our commitment to an invisible G-d and our ability to succeed was a surprise to

me, but it makes so much sense. It has helped me to prepare myself to stand with you as we pray for forgiveness for ourselves and our community.

May our inner search as the spiritual children of the Divine lead us to renewal and a year of health and happiness.