

Elul Reflections 2018/5779

Cantor Ross Wolman

WEEK ONE: PREPARING FOR THE HIGH HOLIDAYS: What is on your mind? What do you want to leave behind in the year that is drawing to a close? What are you looking forward to at the High Holidays? What are you anticipating in the year ahead?

Aug. 14: Cantor Ross Wolman

“By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.” – Benjamin Franklin

Preparing for our Days of Awe is my busiest time of year. Musicians to call, choir music to print, organize and copy, Prayer Lab, Family Services, Tashlich, Shofar team, Kohanim (you get the point). It is a most hectic time and I find myself surprised even in my 16th time leading High Holy Days since beginning HUC, there is still so much to be done.

As a trial lawyer, my father often has wisdom about such things and he recently commented on this as he chants Haftarah on Rosh Hashanah morning each year at my home synagogue in Pennsylvania. “The material is the same,” he said, “but I have changed.” Indeed, we have spent our year with friends, working, caring for our families, celebrating, and grieving, and arrive back at the 1st of Tishrei with a new year of experiences to shape our approach to the new year.

When I find myself bogged down in paperwork, emails, and minutia, I focus on the M'loch (majesty) prayer, a central focus of our Rosh Hashanah Amidah. An excerpt (on page 198):

Astound us with the beauty of Your presence, so that every breath of life shall say,
“Adonai is the God of Isreal; all-embracing – God’s rule and sovereignty.”

I lift my eyes from the *tachlis* to consider the majesty of our world. What beauty have I beheld in the past year that has changed me into the person I am today? How can I grow from and show kindness to the ugliness in this world? I pray for strength to make choices for the good of myself, my family, and our community.

WEEK TWO: TESHUVAH: What are your thoughts about forgiveness? What are your challenges? What process works best for you in effecting reconciliation? How do you teach your children/grandchildren about teshuvah?

Aug. 18: Cantor Ross Wolman

As a parent of young children, it is especially important to be pursue the chance for an apology. Our kids watch our every move and mimic our behaviors. This is often difficult and it takes a great deal of self-control to do so with intention and integrity. Rick Lupert, poet and friend,

uses humor to show how we struggle with judgements and regrets. It is important to go out of our way to seek resolution and forgiveness.

S'lichot by Rick Lupert

Excuuuuse me!

~ Steve Martin

If I could count all the times I've sinned just while writing this sentence, I'd have invented mathematics.

Oh, forgive me, ignored punctuation
Oh, forgive me, unsignaled lane crossings
Oh, forgive me invented words like *unsignaled*

If I could admit to the pre-meditation of my sins,
the lottery numbers and I would have kissed on the lips.

Oh, forgive me,
the oven left on hours after dinner was pulled out.
Gas doesn't grow on trees.
The air conditioning doesn't need this.
Oh, forgive me, for hiding sins against humans
behind sins against grammar.
Oh, forgive me, body ignored, pushups ignored
fruit ignored, for the love of cheese.

If I could genuinely appreciate all the times I've been forgiven for my sins,
a Nobel prize would live in my kitchen.

Oh, forgive me, envy of fame,
I've been pre-signing autographs
for people who might someday like me.
Oh, forgive me, man at the Syracuse 7-Eleven
in nineteen seventy something,
who caught me with unpaid-for candy bar.
I *did* know my mother's first name.
I just didn't want to tell you.
Oh, forgive me, for not using the word *stolen*.

If I could live up to the ideals I purport to admire
my sins would all have college funds and wouldn't hesitate to apply themselves.

Oh, forgive me, mercy I don't deserve.
Everyone go ahead of me in the line.
You just have that one thing,
and I can't even pronounce the items in my cart.
I'm going to the end of the line.
I'm getting out of the line altogether.
I'm signing a petition to ban my future privilege of being in the line.

If I could just stay in line, you wouldn't be reading this.
There'd be nothing to excuse. Excuse me. Please excuse me.
You know why.

WEEK THREE: TEFILAH: How does the HHD liturgy speak to you? Do you have any childhood memories of HHD worship? What do you find most touching and meaningful? What, if anything, is missing/would make the prayer experience more powerful? Consider writing your own prayer or re-framing a traditional prayer?

Aug. 27: Cantor Ross Wolman

Un'taneh Tokef is complex. We have struggled with this text for centuries. It challenges us to consider our mortality and the weight of our deeds as we prepare for a possible untimely death in the year ahead. As we come back to the High Holy Days, I appreciate the text in a different way each year. It is easy to find oneself in this text as it covers a broad spectrum of theologies and beliefs. While you could even say it contradicts itself, I'd like to call it inclusivity. Our teacher, Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig, illustrated the following list in my High Holy Day Liturgy class at HUC:

- God has the power to inscribe and record... but when God opens the book God READS what WE have written.
- God communicates through the sound of the great shofar and through the still small voice.
- God's throne will be established in CHESED (covenant love; mercy) and God will sit on it in EMET (truth – what is, is – no emotions involved).
- God is both DAYAN (Judge) and RO'EH (shepherd).
- While God is Judge and forgets nothing, God is also slow to anger and easy to appease (kasheh lichos v'no'ach lirtzot).
- God fixes the limits (tachtock kitzvah l'chol briyah) of every living creature and inscribes the decree of their judgement (v'tictov et g'zar dinam) and on RH it is written, on YK it is sealed: who shall live and who shall die.

- But God doesn't want anyone to die (ki lo tachpotz b'mot hamet).
- On RH it is written and on YK it is sealed (what can be more final than that?) yet t'shuvah, t'fillah, and tz'dakkah can ma'avirin (avert, temper) God's judgement
- Even though God doesn't want anyone to die (ki lo tachpotz b'mot hamet) none the less
- Our origin is dust and to dust we shall return (adam yisodo meyafar v'sofo leafar).
- No matter how righteous or how evil we have been and even though some things can ma'avirin et ro'ah hag'zerah, in the end, it is decreed (hard wired into the universe) that we shall all die (adam y'sodo ...)
- We are mortal but God is eternal (v'Atah hu Melech el chai v'kayam)
- Similarly: God sets the limits of our life (v'tachtoch kitzvah l'chol briyah) but God's years have no limits (ein kitzvah lishontecha)
- This list of paradoxes reminds me of the rabbinic saying: Every person shall carry in his/her pocket, two pieces of paper. On one it should be written: From dust you came and to dust you shall return. And on the other it should be written: For you the world was created. (Or: you are only a little lower than the angels.)
- Each statement is "true" on its own. But neither statement, on its own, conveys the entire truth. The two statements express opposite views of our place in the world (one humble the other exalted). Yet we are instructed to believe both of them.

With this long list of contradictions, you could throw your hands in the air and say, "forget it!" but I see this as an opportunity to seek out what applies to me this year. What do I need from this catchall piyyut (liturgical poem). I invite you to take a look in our books (RH p 174, YK p 208) and seek out what you need.

Aug. 30: Cantor Ross Wolman

One of my favorite quotes in our prayerbook, Mishkan T'filah, is found on page 243. It reads, "Pray as if everything depended on God. Act as if everything depends on you."

In the Reform Jewish world, there are several different theologies regarding God's role in our lives. Some believe God is actively present in our lives, setting our destiny during the High Holy Days, inscribing the fate of those who shall live and those who shall die. In this vein, God sees us and judges our choices, punishing the wicked and rewarding the righteous.

Another strong belief is that God was active in the days of the Torah but then sat on the sidelines after handing us laws and ethical teachings to guide us throughout our days. As a father of young children, you could say we are like God's toddlers, having been told not to stick a finger in the metaphorical electrical outlet. To the baseball player who makes a gesture to God in gratitude for the homerun we ask, "Do you think God wants your team to win more? Does God want you to hit that HR or is it just a combination of skill, practice, and a good pitch?"

I posed this question to our 4-7 graders last spring and their answers were remarkable. We had a students on each side and one who stuck out and asked, “does it matter?” My first thought was that this child was an atheist who did not think God mattered. I asked her to continue and she said, “Does it matter if God is active in our lives? When I pray, it gives me strength and helps me to be brave when I am scared.” I was beside myself. This was not a trick question and I was keeping it pretty simple however this student looked beyond the question and spoke from her heart about prayer. May prayer give you new insight and strength this High Holy Day season.

“Pray as if everything depended on God. Act as if everything depends on you.”

WEEK FOUR: TZEDAKAH: What is the role of tzedakah in your life and that of your family? What are your tzedakah priorities? What values inform your choices about tzedakah? How do you relate to the middah of generosity?

Sep. 3: Cantor Ross Wolman

One morning in New York, during my days in cantorial school, I saw a classmate on the F train during the morning commute and we walked together to HUC. We seemed to favor the same route and along the way, as we passed the homeless, my friend greeted each of them and handed them some money. He gave attention and a few coins to each homeless person, perched in their usual places, and I was surprised. I asked, “For how long have you been doing this?” his response came easily, “Since our year in Israel.” He had been doing this for two and a half years.

“How much has this cost you?” I inquired

“I don’t really think about it.” he said, “I go to the bank and get a roll of gold dollars. I keep them in my bag and pass them out to the homeless I encounter. When I run out of coins, I go back to the bank.”

“Don’t you worry about the \$\$ being used for a vice or addiction?”

“It’s not for me to judge. If someone can retain their dignity and stand on the street, it’s the least I can do. There is a need and I have plenty.”

That afternoon, I went to the bank and got two rolls of gold coins. I decided to try an experiment, to hand out these two rolls of gold coins until I ran out. I was meeting the homeless instead of just nodding or ignoring them. Soon, they became regulars on my route

and I got to know them by name. Some even became visitors to the weekly HUC Soup Kitchen, at which I volunteered. The practice opened my heart to their humanity and some appreciated my smile and attention and said, “you keep it today” of my money.

I have continued this practice and keep a roll of gold dollars in my car for the homeless in our community. Being a car commuter has changed the nature of our interactions but I still look for opportunities to give back, in person, without judgement.