

HIGH HOLY DAYS 5760

Afterlife -- Rosh Hashanah 5760

Good morning, good Shabbos and happy birthday world!

It is a phenomenal thing to celebrate,
the **creation** of the world,
an inspiring celebration
that invigorates and enlivens us,
challenges us to **recreate** ourselves,
we come in our best threads
for some good soul-scouring and scrubbing...
so we're good and ready.

 But ready for what?
We're all prepared to process and fortify...
 but to what end?
To get back to work, recharged,
then to become jaded again
to put on some more milage...
To work in order to eat in order to work in order to eat?
To what end – this toil, this fixing, this repenting...
 To live in order to die?

No, that's not it.

That can't be it.

.....Is that it?
There's got to be a point,
a point to the constant cultivating and collecting
building, saving, storing, securing...

Why, to where, to what end?
Where is this life leading us?
Not tomorrow, not next year,
not next millenium,
But *ultimately*...
What happens after we die?

There is a gnawing, existential,
subtle-yet-terrible spiritual plague among Reform Jews
that has spread rapidly over the last half-century...

what started as a rumor
has taken seed in the heart
of the Reform Jew...
and flowered in a rather ugly, gnarled way...
disillusioning Reform Jews to somehow think
that nothing awaits us beyond the grave

to somehow think that Judaism has little
or nothing to say about the afterlife

to somehow think that as Jews
we don't believe
in guardian-angels-or-spirits-or-souls-or-heaven-or-hell-or-spells-or-sorcery-or-
supernatural-stuff-or-immortality...

*we believe in Gd,
we say we believe in Gd,
but somehow not the hosts-of-heaven or choirs-of-angels
that accompany the Supreme Being...
this delusion,
this collective amnesia of ancient Jewish wisdom
has taken hold of the modern Jew like a pandemic.

Some say that two millenia
in the shadows of heaven-obsessed church steeples
has made us surrender our belief in heaven.

Some say that as modern Jews
we have allowed ourselves to absorb
too much of secular culture,
secular culture with its bias against anything transcendent.

Whatever the source of this non-belief,
there is but one healing prescription...

And that is to know
that central to the Jewish faith
IS a belief in the afterlife...
that the end of this life is not the end of us.

Judaism has *always* affirmed
that souls live on after the death of the body,
and I'm not talking about that *frilly rabbinic verbiage* that they
"live on in our memories and in the acts of loving-kindness
they performed in the land of the living..."
I'm talking about actually living on!

Judaism has an authentic, ancient, lyrical, uplifting and awesome belief
in the hereafter,
a belief that is triumphant and uniquely Jewish.

Judaism believes, ultimately, in the death of death.
Judaism embraces the words of the prophet Isaiah:
Gd will destroy death forever.
Gd **WILL** destroy death forever.
We believe in the ultimate triumph of *life* and *good* over death and evil.

And isn't that why we are here on Rosh Hashanah

(even if you call yourself a cultural Jew,) isn't that why we are here?

Because it is the offer of hope in the **face of our finitude** that only religion can offer. That is its central promise.

Every time we close the blessing of the Torah we say:

“You are blessed O Lord our Gd,
King of the Universe
Who has given us a Torah of truth
and Who has implanted within us eternal life.”

And if you are a traditional Jew
and you worship daily at the appointed times,
you know that we reaffirm this belief *every* morning when we wake up,
every night during the bedtime prayers we recite the words:

“I forgive all who have hurt me in any way, whether by accident or
with intent, whether in this reincarnation or in a previous
reincarnation.”

You know that we reaffirm this
every time we say the *atah gibor* prayer which ends:
“praised be you who restores life to the dead.”

We reaffirm this belief
when we say the traditional grace after meals.

Countless times throughout our worship service.

We reaffirm this even in the very last words of the Passover seder incorporated into a playful ditty which conceals this profound philosophy...
at the end of Chad Gadya we say:

Then came the blessed Holy one and slaughtered the angel of death!

We say this at the end of our greatest festival of redemption
because we reaffirm that the greatest redemption of all
will be when Gd will destroy death forever.

And He will.

And this belief, this unswerving faith in the world to come,
is not *another* belief *added* to our belief in Gd. No.

It is an **essential part of what we mean by Gd.**

It is not added to Gd.

It isn't something *more*.

It is **what we mean by Gd.**

The belief in the world to come establishes us in the face of evil
to sustain our belief in an omnipotent, benevolent and just Gd.

And that **IS** the Gd we believe in!

We believe in a Gd of love,
our prayers say that over and over.
That Gd loves us.
It is absolutely contrary to this belief that that same Gd
would consign us and all we love to nothingness.
No. Gd's love is eternal.

⇒ In Judaism there are two major trends in belief in the afterlife,
and they are not altogether separate.

The first is resurrection.
In fact, the story of Jonah which we will read on Yom Kippur
is essentially a story of resurrection,
of sinking down into the darkest belly of the earth
and then rising to life on a new shore.

Now, a lot of us get a chill thinking about that.
We think its somehow yucky.
Rabbi Neil Gillman
(who will be speaking at our synagogue in November)
wrote that inevitably,
when he talks about resurrection with his students,
they ask things like:
“Will I be resurrected in the bodily form that I had at the time of my death? Will I be
naked?
Will I return with my arthritis?
Before my weight loss or after?
Which one of my spouses will I be living with?”

These questions focus on the mechanics of resurrection,
we are always so focused on the mechanics of everything,
and they miss the true beauty of the promise,
that the Garden of Eden is *here*,
that the messianic age *will* dawn,
that in a world of perfection
with no shame or pain or hate or jealousy or late fees or greed,
in a perfect world, such mechanics disintegrate
and are cast to the wind.

Resurrection means
that at the dawning of the messianic age, the perfect age,
our souls will reunite with our bodies
and rise to new life.
Our swords will turn into plowshares
and the land will respond to our downiest touch
in ripe, lush abundance.

This is paradise,
heaven and earth will lock together in amorous, ardent embrace,
the love between Gd and man will be consummated
and we will truly understand the meaning of **ONE**.

I ask you to suspend your queasy reservations for a moment
and try to see that there *is* a loveliness to the concept of resurrection.
Suspend your images of dirt and shrouds.

Judaism never completely embraced
the Greek dualism between body and soul.
Never believed that the body was a prison
from which the soul longed for release.

One story tells of a king who placed a blind man and a lame man
to guard his orchard of figs.
The lame man said to the blind man:
“I see delicious figs hanging from the branches above.
Lift me up onto your shoulders
and I shall gather some for us.”
In this way, the rabbis explain, the body and soul work together.

Another story tells of the death of Moses.
When Gd calls upon the soul to leave Moses’ body,
she refuses and counters with the question:
“Is there a body purer than that of Moses?”
Gd enters into a long discussion with the soul
and promises to raise her to the highest heavens.
Still the soul protests and begs to stay within Moses’ body.
Finally Gd takes Moses’ soul with a kiss.

These stories illustrate
that Judaism does not view the relationship
between the soul and the body
as a union of conflict,
but rather as a union of cooperativeness.

The role of the body is to facilitate
the journey and fulfillment of the soul in this life,

and the role of the soul is to maintain its purpose and reality
even in this world of glaring distractions.

The body and soul love each other.
Our religion commands us to nourish *both* body *and* soul,
without emphasizing one over the other.

A Jewish zealot can fast and meditate and worship as long as he likes,
but on the Sabbath,

he is commanded to eat three rich meals and make love to his wife.

The *Veahavta* prayer which we recite daily says:
“You shall love the Lord Your Gd with all your heart,
(which is your body, your blood),
and all your soul.”

Rabbi Akiva,
as he lay dying at the hands of the Romans,
exclaimed to his students:

“I have always known how to fulfill the commandment to love Gd
with all your heart, but wondered how to love Gd with all your soul.
Now I know that it means *Love Gd even if Gd **takes** your soul.*”

And with those words, he entered into Eden.

Jewish mysticism says that when a person dies
a part of his soul goes to paradise
while a small fraction remains for all time
nestled with the body that she loved so dearly.

The beauty of the concept of resurrection
is that it believes in the triumph of this eternal love over death.

The beauty of the concept resurrection
is that it is so incredibly hopeful...
it doesn't cast away this world as a broken, useless thing.
It believes that this world, these bodies, this life
is indeed perfectible,
and it is *that* notion, that this world is perfectible,
that has always driven our Jewish community
to pursue social justice
and defend the rights of the underclasses
with such tireless fervor.

Thomas Cahill wrote:

“All religions are cyclical, mythical,
and without reference to history as we have come to understand it...
all religions except Judaism.”

We believe in history,
that history is slowly perfecting itself,
not crumbling toward a final Armageddon,
but unfolding, in a slow and beautiful fulfillment and full-flowering
of its heavenly potential.
It is a belief that is positive and filled with light.

About resurrection,

the Talmud goes so far as to say
that the only people who do **not**
have a portion in the world to come
are those who say
the resurrection of the dead does not derive from the Torah
and those who say
the Torah does not come from heaven.

It is a fundamental tenant of Judaism.

⇒ The second major trend in Jewish thought is the immortality of the soul.

Maimonides said that the soul is immortal
and lives on in communion with Gd in the world to come.

In Psalms it is written:

“You will not abandon my soul to the grave,
nor allow the one You love to see the pits.
You will reveal the path of life to me,
give me unbounded joy in your presence
and at your right hand everlasting pleasures.”

And the belief in the immortality of the soul
has also been affirmed in every platform of the Reform movement.
It might surprise you to know that the Reform movement
has NEVER EVER rejected the belief in the world to come.

Never.

The single figure who most shaped the history of Reform,
Rabbi David Einhorn in the early 1800s, said:

“I believe with perfect faith that the soul of man
was breathed into him by Gd and is therefore immortal.”

The sages taught that there are three partners in creating a person:
Gd,
father
and mother.

Gd contributes to a person’s being:
the spirit of life, the soul, the senses of light-smell-hearing,
speech, the ability to move,
and the potential for acquiring knowledge.

When a person’s time comes to leave this world,
Gd removes **His** share
while the share contributed by the mother and father
is placed before them, and they weep.

Gd says to them: “Why do you weep?
Have I taken anything of yours?
Only what was Mine did I take.”

The spirit of life, the soul, the senses of light, smell, hearing, speech, the ability to move
and the potential for acquiring knowledge, *the personality*
all remains everlasting for they the fingerprints of Gd.
Dust returns to the ground,
and the lifebreath returns to Gd who bestowed it.

The Talmud teaches us that the soul has five levels.
Jewish mysticism says the immortal soul
is sent into this world to perfect itself
on each of these levels through study and deeds of loving-kindness,
and if it does not perfect itself in the brief span of one lifetime,
it returns again and again,
each time to work on perfecting a higher plane of consciousness.
They say that when a child dies,
it is because he or she
only had a little more to complete before that soul was perfect.

But it is crucial to remember
...that Judaism never claims we should long for our death
or rejoice at its immanence.

Judaism still believes that every death is a tragedy
because we have a religion that celebrates life
and yearns for that ultimate death of all death.

Judaism also believes that we are morally held accountable
for the acts of loving-kindness we did NOT perform in this world,
and for the acts of transgression that we did.
Upon death this judgment occurs before
a judge who never makes an incorrect ruling,
never takes a bribe,
and never has to run for office.

If a soul is seen to be as yet unfit for paradise,
she is sent to Gehennom which is Hebrew for Hell,
but unlike our daughter religion,
we have never believed in eternal damnation.
Rather, Gehennom, albeit unpleasant,
is a privilege, for it prepares and cleanses for entrance
into that perfect place.
The maximum any being is sentenced to Gehennom
is twelve months.
That is why when a loved one dies, it is traditional
to only say kaddish for eleven months,

because Heaven forbid anyone should hear you saying Kaddish for a full year
and suspect, ah, your loved one really *was* a scoundrel
and deserved the maximum sentence!
Even after death we must protect our reputations along the Jewish grapevine.

*Whether you are a resurrectoid or an immortalist,
both ancient and authentic Jewish beliefs -
faithfully regarded for thousands of year,
or whether you,
as many,
believe in both,
bringing the two trends together,
believing that the soul never perishes
and is rejoined with the risen body...
really isn't the issue.
This is not like a Pepsi vs. Coke debate.

Whatever happens, something happens.
It is an extraordinary fact
that Life after Death
is the **only belief shared by all religions in the world.**

It is not Gd,
for Hinduism believes in zillions of gods,
we believe in the One,
Buddhism does not believe in any.
But **ALL** religions believe that our journey to love and enlightenment,
to wisdom and peace
is not completed in the time allotted us here on earth.

All religions believe this,
including Judaism,
including us.

The Talmud says:
When one is born he is designated for death.
When one dies he is designated for life.

And not only do we believe that death is a threshold
rather than a door slammed shut,
but further,
we believe that one die death itself will die.
And the blessed Holy One came and destroyed the angel of death.
Gd **WILL** destroy death forever.

On the day that I die
my life will flash before my eyes,
and though it will be in the space of a moment
I will watch it on slo-mo on the big screen.

Indeed I will be wrapped in the screen like a
caterpillar in a cocoon, and my whole body
will soak up the images of my life.
And at the end of the reel there will be a bright light
and I will cry,
as I always do at the end of a show.
And my spirit will caress my cheek
and kiss away my tears
until I am exhausted and fall asleep.
Then my little soul
will poke and nibble
through the screen.
It will shake itself loose and blink in the Godlight.
It will undoubtedly be damp and a little sticky,
and so it will take some time to dry on the grass.
Then it will take a deep breath,
so deep,
deeper than the breath of a sail on a giant pirate ship,
and it will fly like a moth to the moon,
it will sail into the sea,
the upper sea
which has fathomless depths but thinner than a thread,
too thin too fathom.
It will sail out to this sea
like a heavy fog, and rain crystal tears into the waters,
and add to this sea my memories.

When Gd kisses me
and takes my breath away.