

1st night Rosh Hashanah sermon

1 Tishrei 5760 (Sept. 10, 1999)

Rabbi Robert Scheinberg, United Synagogue of Hoboken

Shabbat Shalom! Shanah Tovah!

I have to begin by sharing something unfortunate with all of you. Well, it's not such terrible news. But it's something surprising that I learned this year about Jewish traditions for Rosh Hashanah.

I learned that the mystics of our tradition have taught that one must be very careful about how one spends one's time on Rosh HaShanah because these days serve as a microcosm for our entire upcoming year....

And our sages counsel: One should try to avoid over-eating on these days -- because if one over-eats on Rosh haShanah, one is likely to be over-eating for the entire year. Well, I'm probably in big trouble....

And -- this part is far worse -- one is counseled not to take a nap on Rosh HaShanah because if you take a nap on Rosh HaShanah, since Rosh Hashanah is like a microcosm of the entire year, you'll end up sleeping away the entire year. Now this fills me with some trepidation because never in my life have I NOT taken a nap on Rosh HaShanah!

Now I'm sharing these traditions somewhat tongue-in-cheek. but the principle behind them is a very sound one. What we do at the BEGINNING of something -- at the beginning of any event, or at the beginning of any special length of time -- tends to set the tone for the entire period. So no wonder our sages were so concerned with how people spend Rosh Hashanah! What we do on Rosh HaShanah - how we act, what occupies our time - sets the tone for our entire year!

And you can tell something very important about Jewish tradition and Jewish priorities just from seeing how Jews spend Rosh Hashanah.

If we choose to spend our New Year's Day in reflection and introspection -- then it demonstrates that we want to set a tone of reflection and introspection for the entire year.

If our New Year's Day is a day for reconciliation with our friends and relatives -- then it demonstrates that we want to set a tone of reconciliation throughout the rest of the year.

And if our New Year's Day is a time when we focus on our relationship with God and with Jewish tradition, and we focus on our obligations to needy people in our communities and throughout the world, then it is clear that these are among our most important priorities for us throughout the year as well.

Because whatever we do at the beginning sets the tone for the rest of the period.

So it's very interesting that we as Jews choose to celebrate the New Year by expressing these priorities.

Because of course we know that this is not the only possible way one might celebrate a New Year!

For example, some four months from now, many people in our society are going to be celebrating the new year and the new millenium in an altogether different manner - Some will be spending tens of thousands of dollars to travel out to the middle of the Pacific to be among the

first people to glimpse the first sunrise of the millenium. Others may be shelling out hundreds of dollars for millenium clocks, millenium jewelry, all the millenium merchandise you can think of. And of course, some are at least hoping that they'll be in a hospital maternity ward, hoping that their son or daughter, whose conception was meticulously planned back on March 30 or 31, 1999, will be the lucky winner as the first baby of the millenium - and eligible for the press coverage and lifetime supply of diapers and baby formula that probably accompanies such a distinction. In my humble opinion this represents a difference in priorities! This is the REAL Y2K problem -- that so many people are getting so excited about a row of zeros when so much else in our lives and our world demands so much attention.

One of my favorite stories about setting appropriate priorities is the one the noted author Stephen Covey tells in his book *First Things First* about a time management seminar he once attended for a group of busy executives.

At the beginning of the seminar, the facilitator took out a one gallon, wide-mouthed jar and put it on the table in front of him. Then he produced about a dozen fist-sized rocks and placed them carefully, one at a time, in the jar. When the jar was full to the top and no more rocks could fit inside, he asked, "Is this jar full?"

Everyone in the class said, "Yes."

He said, "Really?" Then he reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. He dumped some gravel in and shook the jar, so that the pieces of gravel worked themselves down into the crevices between the rocks. Then he asked the group once again, "Is the jar full?"

By this time, the class suspected something was up, so they said, "Probably not." "Good!" he replied. And then he reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He started putting the sand in and it quickly went into all the spaces that were left between the rocks.

Then once more, he asked the question, "Is the jar full?"

"No!" the students said, Again he said, "Good." This time, he took a pitcher of water and began to pour it into the jar until the jar was full to the brim. (By the way, rather than telling you all this, I was originally planning to demonstrate it -- but I knew Louise would say that it would make the Bimah too messy.) SO, then the facilitator looked at the class and asked, "What do you think is the point of all this?" One participant raised his hand and said, "the point is that, if we learn the time management skills that you're going to teach us, then no matter how full your schedule is, you can always fit something more into it if you want to."

The speaker said, "No, that's not the point at all. Nor is that statement true! The truth that this illustration is meant to teach us is **THAT IF YOU DON'T PUT THE BIG ROCKS IN FIRST, YOU'LL NEVER GET THEM IN AT ALL.**"

Obviously in this story the jug represents our lives -- which we fill with our various activities, with our values, with our passions, with our relationships --

But most of us don't fill the jug of our lives in the systematic way the facilitator did in the story. For most of us, it's a rather haphazard process. Throw in a few big rocks, some water, throw in some gravel, some sand -- and before you know it, it's full! there's no room to put the other big rocks that you had planned to put in!

And then we say: I wish had spent more time this year visiting my relatives whom I don't get much of an opportunity to see- Whenever I spend time with them, I just feel so privileged to have gotten the opportunity to get to know them. It's definitely a "big rock" for me. but there was no room. So it didn't happen this year.

or: For the last couple of years, I have been meaning to do some volunteer work for needy people in my community. I know it's something I really SHOULD be doing and it also makes me feel wonderful to do it. It's definitely a "big rock" for me. but there was no room. So it didn't happen this year.

or: I've been meaning to devote some time to learning more about my Jewish heritage on an adult level. The synagogue in town has these free introductory Hebrew classes, and introduction to Judaism and adult-bar-and-bat-mitzvah classes -- and I've heard really good things about them. That's really a big rock for me. But there was no room. So it didn't happen this year.

===== So what happens on the High Holidays? Our tradition tells us that this is our annual opportunity to re-assess our priorities - over the next ten days, we each take the jug and we dump it all out on the table And we re-fill it anew.

Now is the time when we articulate to ourselves the priorities by which we want to live our lives next year. And like filling a jug with rocks and sand and water, It's supposed to be messy. If it's not messy we're not doing it right.

But it's a vital task - because we know that while we each have annual opportunities to reassess our priorities, we know that these opportunities will eventually run out. And there is very little that is more upsetting than realizing that one has lived one's entire life according to the wrong set off priorities but that it's too late to change them.

When the Hasidic master Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk was asked, what is the purpose of Jewish prayer? He responded: "to work on yourself."

On these High Holidays, may we each find the opportunity to "work on ourselves" and set the tone for a new year of blessing, health, happiness and peace.

Shabbat Shalom -- Shanah Tovah!