

## **“The Word That Changed Everything”**

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EREV ROSH HASHANAH SERMON – 2012 / 5773

We've come together in this sanctuary on Erev Rosh Hashanah; a time when we might expect something within *each* of us to change. We all know that the problems and issues we'll face when we walk out of here tonight are very real. Many have concerns about finances, employment; there are enormous economic and social problems, locally and globally, that demand our attention and our problem-solving skills now more than ever. When we walk out of here tonight, we need to somehow be better equipped to face these issues and address them. There are many other places you could be spending your time right now, but there is something about this time of year and this place that is unique and that can change you, the way you think, the way you live and work, the ways you spend your time and money, and the way you relate to others.

That kind of change happens on a very deep level, and I believe there is one word that can help to bring all of us to that place and bring about that change I'm talking about. Now it's a word that has been used many times, and abused many times. It's a word that brings up many associations for people – both positive and negative. In fact, because it's a word that has become so problematic for so many people, they've pretty much given up using it in any serious way. In fact, it's a word that the religious right have made an effort to claim for their own use and purposes, but it's a word progressive Jews should not be afraid to use because we have the power to infuse that word with new meaning, just as it has the power to infuse our lives with new meaning. That word is “God.”

I want you to notice your reactions to that word. A conversation like this causes many people to feel uncomfortable. But before I go any further, I want you to keep an open mind because you don't yet know what I'm going to say about this word.

A long time ago there was a woman walking through an open air market.<sup>1</sup> There were merchants selling their wares, their produce and livestock. There was one merchant selling

fresh flour. And there behind his stall was a mill made of a large round millstone resting vertically upon an even larger horizontal round stone, referred to by millers as a “bedstone.” There was an ox tied to the axle that pulled the millstone round and round a central pivot crushing the grains of wheat that were strewn across the etched ridges of the bedstone.

So there was this woman walking through the market place and she stopped in front of the miller's stall and began to cry. Passersby kept walking, either not noticing her tears or remaining indifferent since they were just there to get their shopping done. After a few minutes, the miller noticed this woman just standing and crying in the middle of the thoroughfare while people kept walking past her in both directions. So he stopped what he was doing and went up to her to see what was wrong. As she was unable to bring herself to speak as she wept, he brought over a stool on which she could sit. He tried his best to console her, but to no avail. So he stopped a passerby who happened to be a doctor. He assessed if this woman was in physical pain and she indicated that she was not. A parent stopped to ask if she had lost her child, but that was not the case either. A political consultant to a Presidential candidate stopped to ask if she was disturbed by a particular political issue. No...that was not the case either.

We'll soon come back to this woman in the marketplace, but my point at the moment is this: a stranger's tears can mean so many different things that their meaning can only be discerned by contextual clues. And our capacity to understand what tears mean will depend on our own sensitivity, emotional intelligence, and the depth and breadth of our own experience.

What caused this woman to cry? We don't quite know yet, do we? Now what if, instead of crying she were to have simply said, “O God?” Would the meaning of her utterance been any more clear to us than the meaning of her tears? No. Just as with tears, to understand what a person means when he or she says “God” depends entirely on contextual clues, on our own spiritual sensitivity and the depth and breadth of our own experience. Could it be that the prophets, mystics and sages who repeatedly spoke to us about God meant *something* by it we have not yet fully come to understand?

Anyway, this woman in the marketplace paused from her weeping as she caught sight

of someone in the distance who was approaching; a man who was tall and radiated an exceptional degree of serenity. It became apparent that this man was a rabbi. It's interesting to note that he walked right up to this woman, looked around for clues, then spoke gently to her, saying, "My dear, is it the millstone grinding the wheat that disturbs you so?"

As she thought about it, the woman replied, "Well, yes, that is the reason. I didn't even know it myself until this moment. And as I think about it now, I realize that all of the grains of wheat made me think about all the people walking about in this marketplace. And the millstone goes round and round, like the angel of death, eventually claiming us all. We may be able to evade its crushing weight for a little while by moving things around this way and that, but in the end there is no escape. It is only a matter of time before the millstone reaches me and I am seized by the fear of this existential reality."

We have all had moments when even tears could not express the depth of feeling we experienced in our hearts. We could each call to mind moments of fear; the bitterness of grief. We may also recall moments of awe, of joy, of love. These are moments when there are no words that can fully express what we're feeling. Yet the experience, even if it becomes a distant memory, stays with us and continues to shape who we are.

I have had spiritual experiences that have stayed with me and continue to shape the way I understand what people say. So that when someone cries or speaks to me of God, I don't assume I already know what is being said. Instead, I enter through the threshold of not knowing which requires a relinquishment of preconceived notions. It is there, in the proverbial *midbar* – the desert wilderness, where I recall my own experiences of fear and awe and love. I must remind myself to be careful not to rush to conclusions; not to form opinions and attitudes about what they share with me which may be, in the end, not only inaccurate but harmful.

During these High Holy Days, known as the *Yamim Nora'im* – the Days of Awe, I invite you to think about another three-letter word; the word "awe." If you say or hear this simple word and don't connect it with an actual experience you might have once, the word could become meaningless. If you say "awe" and have no experiential frame of reference for it, how could the word have any meaning beyond what people told you it meant?

The same is true for the word "God." I want you, for a moment, to clear away all the

associations you may have with that word and begin again with the simple idea that *God is a Reality to be experienced*. Reading and reciting the word “God” in our prayerbook – without having some internal, experiential reference points, is like reading a menu but not actually tasting the food. It's like looking at a map of someplace you've never been and have no intention of ever going.

We can talk later about questions and issues raised by theology and theodicy and the history and sociology of religion, and there are many questions and issues to be worked out. But for now, I want us to imagine we had just opened our eyes for the first time and had no words to express the awe and wonder of this moment. This is the experience that informs my understanding of the word “God.” And using this experience as a primary point of reference changes everything for me. And, I believe, it can change everything for you and for us as a community.

So here I stand here and say that when we come to know God as a mystery yet a Reality that is to be experienced, the prayerbook becomes a useful guide because it points us again and again to that experience. If you come away from prayer and didn't feel like you got anything out of it, ask yourself what you brought to it. How open were you to feeling anything?

For the woman in the marketplace, it took only something as simple and unexpected as the sight of a millstone grinding wheat to cause her heart to burst open. But it also took a wise rabbi to help her identify the experience that found expression in her tears.

Yes, it was fear that found expression in her tears, but it was not just a fear of death for she went on to say this: “I fear, perhaps more than anything, a death of the spirit; a lifelessness caused by drifting aimlessly across a horizontal plane, as it were, with nothing solid or grounded to grab hold of, nothing of which I can say, “THIS IS REAL.”

The rabbi then spoke these words to her, saying, “There is one way to escape the sense of drifting back and forth which leaves you exposed and vulnerable and at the mercy of random forces that lead to this spiritual death. Look closely at the mill. Do you see how there are a few grains of wheat that landed so close to the central pillar that they fell into the crevice between the pillar and the millstone? When you adhere to the central pivot, around what is REAL, around which everything revolves, you will know it when you feel it. When you reorient yourself around what you feel and know to be REAL, then you will find your bearings and can

understand everything else in relation to that.”

If you change your relationship to that one thing; that one central point of reference around which all this revolves, everything else changes too. This central point of reference is the word “God.” If we begin again in this New Year by wiping the slate clean of all the baggage and associations we may have with that word, I am certain it will change the way you think, the ways you live and work, the ways you spend your time and money, the way you relate to our Jewish community, the way you relate to our Temple, and the way you relate to prayer.

As you go your way out into the world in the new year, on this new day, you will remember that this was the moment; this *is* the moment; this was and is the place, and this was and is the word that changed everything.

(The story is attributed to an early 16<sup>th</sup> century *bhakti* poet/saint of India, Kabir.)