

THE WORLD DEPENDS ON THREE THINGS

by Rabbi Tom Heyn, Rosh Hashanah sermon 5772/2011
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There was once a Rabbi who delivered the same Rosh Hashanah sermon for four years in a row and the congregation was beginning to talk....

The congregation's senior members decided, after many emails, that someone would have to confront the rabbi about this and they decided it should be the president. She decided to wait until the next board meeting and thought about what she would say; something like, "Rabbi, with the Holy Days approaching, we would love to hear a fresh, new message."

So, when the fourth Monday of the month rolled around and the topic came up for discussion, the president said what she had planned to say. "Congregants are beginning to notice," she added, "and complain that they had heard the exact same sermon now for several years in a row."



The rabbi listened and thought for a few moments – and then looked up at the president and the other members of the board and said – "If that is so, what exactly is it that I've said? What has my message been?"

There were several moments of silence as the members of the board looked at one another, whispering and shaking their heads. Finally, the rabbi broke the silence and said, "I think I'll give it another year."

I learn two things from this story. One is that I probably didn't need to stress out so much about this sermon. If there's any truth to the story, you'll probably forget it by next week, and certainly by next year.

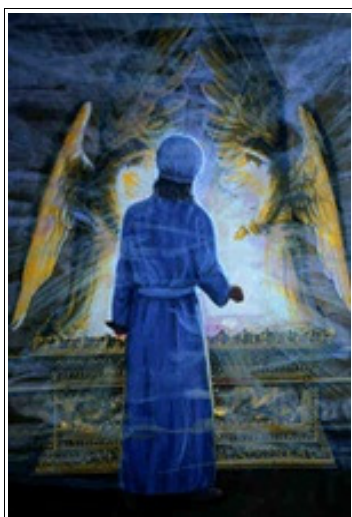
The other thing I learn and bear in mind for this evening is to focus on the message I want to convey. Sure, there are many rabbis who are brilliant, learned, wise, funny, whose sermons are peppered with anecdotes, references to great literature, quotes from the Talmud, etc., etc. I truly admire the many qualities and resources they bring to bear on their work, but I am a relatively simple person and believe my message should be memorable for its utter simplicity.

Incidentally, about a month ago on NPR, I heard about a couple of rabbis in Southern California who organized a workshop for their colleagues on how to write better sermons. They invited, as their instructors, leading Hollywood writers from television programs like *The Simpsons* and *Desperate*

Housewives. I'm sure their sermons will be entertaining to say the least. Memorable? We'll see.

When it comes to writing something memorable, I learned in rabbinical school that it's helpful to arrange your most essential ideas in groups of three. Rabbis have been doing this for a long time. For example, many of you know the song Al Shlosha D'varim. It comes from the classic compilation of rabbinic wisdom known as Pirke Avot – the “Ethics” or “Sayings” of our ancestors, the rabbinic sages of antiquity. It means that the world depends on three things. There are different opinions among the rabbis, of course, on what those three things are exactly, but in the particular version we sing, it's Torah, avodah and gemilut hasadim.

What does this mean, exactly? Torah is obvious, avodah means Divine service and gemilut hasadim are acts of loving-kindness. I know for sure we depend on acts of kindness, especially in the wake of Tropical Storm Irene. So these three ideas are memorable, especially when you believe that these statements are literally true, as the rabbis in the Talmud did. Not just metaphorical or allegorical; no, for them it was literally true!



It's no coincidence that the most important themes of the High Holy Days are also arranged in a grouping of...three. They are woven into the liturgy for the High Holy Days throughout the machzor. You probably recall the verse which goes like this: “On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed...who shall live and who shall die....” It goes on with this overall image of us standing before God in judgment, and being told that there are three things that can temper the severity of God's decree. Do you remember what those three things are? The rabbis felt that, if our lives depended on it, we would remember those three things. They are: teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah.

Teshuvah, often translated as “repentance,” implies a movement of return, as in returning to our truer selves. Tefillah basically means prayer, and then there's tzedakah, which many people translate as “charity,” though it really means doing what is just and right. These three coincide nicely with Torah, avodah and gemilut hasadim, but more on that later. Same basic ideas; just a different formulation, and just as memorable. At least for many of us.

So whereas Christians have their trinity, we have our own groupings of...three that have remained embedded in our collective consciousness for centuries. But it's not only because they are in groups of threes that these ideas are so memorable. There's another, more compelling reason and I'll tell you what it is.

For folks in the pre-modern era who may have lived their lives within these frameworks, the threat of annihilation or divine punishment was serious business and powerful enough to implant these ideas so deeply in their subconscious minds that they could never forget or forsake them. It was literally, for them, a matter of life and death.

For those of us, non-Orthodox Jews living in a post-modern era, the religious images and metaphors we've inherited from our ancestors generally don't exert quite the same power over us. In fact, many people have come to reject them altogether. The images of God as a King or a Judge no longer instill fear and trembling in most Jewish hearts as they once did. These images no longer stir up our kishkas – our guts. We might like the ideas, we might even think they're important, but do they still have the power to penetrate all the levels of the conscious and subconscious mind to the very core of our being?

As we see people drifting away from organized religion – in many cases, fleeing from organized religion, something tells me that religious claims no longer stir up their kishkas. Sure there are fundamentalists – Jewish, Christian and Muslim – who are very stirred up by religious claims. And at the other end of the spectrum there are atheists like Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens who are also very stirred up by religious claims. But for those of us between those extremes, is there something we can feel so passionate about that we might even call it the “Truth” with a capital T?

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a contemporary rabbi who is known by many affectionately as Reb Zalman, wrote a book he titled, *Jewish With Feeling*. His intention was, and still is, to reawaken the feeling part – what he calls the spiritual part – of being Jewish and he says that a spiritual seeker is a person "whose spirit has experienced – whether the mind knows it or not – that slap that gets the first breath going in a newborn."



That's what we need! Not doctrine or dogma, and not just a nuanced intellectual understanding, but a visceral feeling – in our kishkas. That's what I never found in my childhood experiences of Judaism and that may be true for many of you. So often it was dry and lifeless, when what we needed then and now is something that grabs us in the kishkas or slaps us on the tuchus. What we might be searching for is an inner experience; a living reality. That's what makes an idea stick and that's what makes a sermon memorable. And that's what leads me back to the point I want to make here.

I want this sermon to be memorable, not because of my brilliance or my use of literary references and anecdotes. I want it to be memorable because of its message; a message that will resonate so deeply within you that you will know it is true without any doubt whatsoever, and you will begin to understand its transformative power. Pretty ambitious, huh?

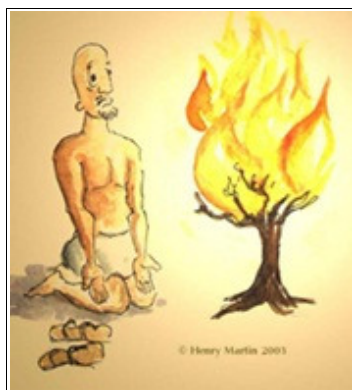
Let me begin by saying that if you want this to be a direct and intensely personal spiritual experience, I'm going to need your help. I'll need you to work with me. Not because I need to convince you of anything. You will instantly recognize and affirm the truth of what I am going to share with you. Where I need your help is in reflecting, in the days ahead, on what I am about to say and recognizing, within yourself, the implications of what I am about to ask you to do.

Am I going to do or say something provocative? Even offensive? That's a good way to stir up people's kishkas, but not in a way I would describe as a direct and intensely personal spiritual experience.

No, what I am going to do is prove that the world does, in fact, depend on three things. We may agree and disagree about a lot of things but what I am about to say, and have you repeat, is an incontrovertible truth that, I believe, is the basis of our religion. No, it is the basis of the human experience itself!

To impress upon you the magnitude of these ideas, I don't really need to assert that the world, or that your fate in the coming year, depends on them. You will come to realize this on your own. And I can assure you that these three ideas or statements have nothing to do with doctrine or dogma because, as you will see, they are universal truths that you, yourself, will be able to affirm from your own direct experience.

Are you ready, then? OK. If you can determine that this first statement is true, I want you to repeat it after me, exactly as I say it:



I AM HERE

Is there anything controversial or questionable about that? Can anyone negate the truth of that statement? If not, I want you to repeat it after me:

I AM HERE

We actually find this statement in our High Holy Day liturgy and in tomorrow's Torah reading. In some machzorim (High Holy Day prayer books, such as in Gates of Repentance) the Rosh Hashanah evening service opens with a prayer recited by the rabbi or cantor which begins with this very phrase in Hebrew, "Hineini."

The prayer basically says, "I am here, painfully aware of my flaws, quaking in my shoes and in my heart..." It's a recognition that you are not somewhere else or someone else. You've come to a point when all you can say is, "I am as I am, here. With all my flaws. With all my imperfections. With all my confusion and uncertainty about life and death." If we take this prayer or statement seriously, there is nothing trite or ordinary about it. Our tradition, with all its symbols and metaphors, is intended to teach us that this simple statement, this simple Truth, is the beginning of wisdom.

Do you know how many times this phrase, "hineini," shows up in the Hebrew Bible? One hundred and seventy eight times, including three times in tomorrow's Torah reading; that painful story of the akeidah, the binding of Isaac. Abraham says "hineini" three separate times: to God, to his son Isaac, and to the angel who stopped Abraham from carrying out his (nearly) tragic plan. In each case, "hineini" is a response to a question for which there is no answer other than to be fully present.

This statement, "I am here," may be the most challenging phrase we could ever utter, precisely because we are accustomed to thinking of it as an obvious (and therefore, meaningless) statement.

But with a bit of curiosity and insight, it could be the most profound thing you've ever said and, more importantly, felt. Say it with me again:

I AM HERE

Incidentally, from a kabbalistic point of view, the Hebrew word for “I” is closely linked to the word for “nothingness” or “No-thing-ness.” Simply transposing one letter changes the word “ani” to “ain,” representing an extraordinary paradox. I could talk about this for hours but let it suffice to say for now that the statement “I Am Here” has the most immediate and profound implications. You can say it or think it at any time and it is as true as it was for Abraham, for Jacob and for Moses when they said it. For an added measure of awe, I like to say it like this: “Oh my God, I am here.”

OK, are you ready for the second statement? I want you to discern from your own personal experience, whether or not it is true. If it is true, then I want you to affirm that by repeating after me:

YOU ARE HERE

Now this can be a little tricky because I'm not defining who it is I'm referring to as “YOU.” It could be you, it could be me, it could be the person sitting next to you. It could even be God, if you believe in God. It doesn't really matter. What matters is that we recognize that we are not alone. Instead, there are other beings around us who are not just there to serve our purposes. Martin Buber makes this much clearer in his seminal work, *I and Thou*, basically saying that we relate to many things and creatures and even people in terms of “I and It.” The word “You,” however, implies a mutuality, a common bond.



Distinctions and definitions may exist, but on a different plane. In saying “YOU ARE HERE,” we simply open within ourselves the capacity to recognize in some other being an affinity that might express itself as reverence, appreciation and accord.

Here again, this is a challenging statement, because all too often we use that word “YOU” without recognizing what it means in all its fullness. Religion, with its symbols and metaphors, is intended to awaken in us a fuller understanding of what that word “YOU” really means. It doesn't matter if you believe in God or not, but if you do, such a belief can help bring sacred overtones to the word “YOU,” enough to make your hair stand on end. Here again, for an added measure of awe, I like to say it like this: “Oh my God, You are here.”

And now for the third and final statement. Again, I want you to determine if it is a true statement and if so, I want you to affirm it and repeat after me:

WE ARE HERE

This may be the one statement that our tradition has made its primary focus, more so than the other

two. Yes, say it with me:



WE ARE HERE.

This truth is the completion of the other two. Like a three-fold benediction, they go together. If you get the other two right, then you get this one right. But without a sense of “WE,” there remains a chasm between the “I” and “You” in our previous statements. Here there is cooperation, partnership, and unity.

There is much, much more that can be said about this statement, but I want you to go home and think about it on your own, and discover what it means for you and for us. Here again, for an added measure of awe, I like to say it like this: “Oh my God, we are here.”

Now, in a moment I will ask you to turn to someone next to you or behind or in front of you and say with me these three things together and see if you can know and feel as deeply as you can, the truth of these statements:

I AM HERE. YOU ARE HERE. WE ARE HERE.

These simple statements are anything but trite; they are like primary colors. If any single one is off or distorted or lacking in any way, it changes the entire spectrum of colors that emerge from it. Like the ingredients necessary for baking a round challah for the New Year. If any single ingredient has gone bad or is missing, the final product is not what it should be – not what it could be.

There are many problems in our world I could have chosen to talk about tonight. But if we trace any problem to its source, we find that there is, or was somewhere along the line, a distortion or perversion of one of these fundamental truths. The degradation of the environment, the collapse of our economy, the conflict in the Middle East. On the most fundamental level, there are distortions that manifest themselves as a sense of exclusivity and entitlement, as injustice and all the other sins we will recite tomorrow as we stand before the open ark. We can discuss and debate the details later if you wish, but for now I want to put it in the most simple and direct terms. The world does depend on three things – three truth fundamental truths, which you yourselves have affirmed. It is now up to you to choose when and how you'll come to terms with them.

In closing, I will say that the cultivation of a religious consciousness or a spiritual experience does not depend on years of study, the mastery of Hebrew, or even a belief in God. It does not depend on any doctrine or dogma or any beliefs whatsoever. All that is required is the capacity to understand, on a deep feeling level, what these three statements mean, each by itself, each in relation to the other, and all three together. If these simple statements are able to stir your kishkas, bring tears to your eyes, or make your hair stand on end as they have for me, then it was a genuinely spiritual experience and, most likely, a memorable one.

So what is my message? That the world does depend on three things and that we, as a people, are here to learn them, to take them into our hearts, and to live them in the world. This, I believe, is the purpose and the essence of our religious tradition.

Al shlosa devarim – The world, our loved ones and our own lives depend on three things. For some it may be Torah, avodah and gemilut hasadim. For others it may be teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah. I would say that these are two different ways of saying the same thing. When we take seriously the three most fundamental truths that shade and color all our experiences and relationships, then simple pronouns will become sacred syllables from which will flow wisdom, blessings and peace in the coming year.

What exactly is it that I've said? What has my message been? Simply this:

Oh my God, I am here.

Oh my God, You are here.

Oh my God, We are here.

Please help me to know you, to love you, and to serve you.

