

Rosh Hashanah Eve Sermon 2013 – “We Need to Talk”

By Rabbi Moshe Thomas Heyn – Temple Israel of Greater Miami, September 4, 2013

A man got into trouble when his wife informed him that the day had gone by and he had forgotten her birthday. He told her how sorry he was, and said he would do anything to make up for it. She immediately said, “Alright, tomorrow there better be something in the driveway for me that goes from zero to 200 in two seconds flat, or you're in for it.” The next morning the wife awoke early, and looking out her bedroom window saw a small package in the driveway. She was a bit perturbed, as this was not what she was expecting. She went out and retrieved the package and upon opening it, found a handsome brand new bathroom scale! The funeral for her husband took place earlier this week.

This story might seem a bit off color coming right after the solemnity of Avinu Malkeinu, but it does illustrate a central theme of this Holy Day: that our deeds can determine whether we'll be inscribed in the Book of Life – or not.

It also illustrates another point I'd like to make this evening about expectations. Whether we're satisfied or disappointed in our relationships depends on expectations. What you expect from me and what I expect from you. But here's the real point: what we expect from one another should be based on what God expects from us.

In other words, our relationships with one another may be far more significant than we thought, containing far more potential than we imagined.

This evening is the time we begin in earnest the process of *cheshbon hanefesh*, an “accounting of the soul.” It's the process in which we examine our relationships in the past year to see how we've done and how, in the coming year, we might still do better. Since we're together now, I'd like to take a moment to examine our relationship, at least in terms of what we might expect from one another.

I'm hoping that I've met at least some of your expectations over the past year. I'm not sure how much credit I can take for it, but things have been going well here over the past year...and our reputation as a dynamic and inclusive urban congregation is spreading rapidly....

Now, if I were to share one of my expectations, it might be this. I thought that within my first year I would have gotten to know all the members of our congregational family.... If we haven't

connected yet, let's plan to in the coming year. I am grateful for your support "from behind the scenes." I'm not sure if you expect more from me, but I do believe that God expects more from us.

And what is it that God expects of us? The prophet Micah asks that very question then responds by saying: "Only to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God." (6:8)

What a beautiful and profound statement. If you and I strive to do just that, we are no longer strangers; we're definitely partners. As your rabbi, I naturally want to know more about you and about the ways in which you do justice and love mercy. And how do you walk with God? Perhaps we are walking on the same path even when we're miles apart.

And how else might we know what God expects from us? If we survey the world's wisdom literature, as I have, we'd find that philosophers and mystics in all faith traditions throughout history agree that the purpose of life is a process of refining and perfecting the soul. This is practiced around the world in ways that involve contemplation, meditation and practices that engage mind and body. Their aim is described in terms of service to God, union with God, Self-realization, self-actualization, enlightenment. The terms and approaches are many, but their goal and our goal is universally the same.

Whether we understand this in religious or evolutionary terms, it appears that the human animal is uniquely capable of embarking on this path of self-knowledge and self-improvement. Not only are we capable; everything seems to be pointing to the fact that we have no choice but to do better, from personal issues to global affairs. The current situation in Syria, for example, will require the highest degree of moral intelligence and political intelligence. We must rise to the occasion and learn from our past mistakes.

We have a task before us; to evolve; a task that transcends yet includes everything we do. How can we use our relationships, every relationship, to help us wake up, as if we had been dreaming up until now?

Knowing that this is what God expects of us, somehow this changes what we should expect from one another. Suddenly, the function of a rabbi is no longer simply to lead routine services and officiate at life-cycle events. The function of a rabbi becomes that of waking people up from their slumber, reminding them of our common purpose, and walking with them on the path that leads to its fulfillment.

To walk with one another in that process is why we're here and why we have good reason to get to know one another better over the coming year.

On this eve of the Jewish New Year, we have begun the process of *cheshbon hanefesh*, the “accounting of the soul” which is the first step on this path. Tomorrow morning, we will take the next steps and we'll move quickly. Maybe not from 0 to 200 in two seconds flat, but I guarantee that tomorrow's delivery will be much more satisfying than a brand new bathroom scale. Just don't expect a Lamborghini or a Ferrari.

May our partnership in the coming year help bring genuine fulfillment to you, your families and friends, and our people - around the world and in Israel. May the transcendent purpose for which we are all inscribed, infuse our lives and relationships with meaning, strengthening our communities, our nation and our world.

L'shana tova!!