

Rabbi Fine  
RH Sermon 1, 5771

One morning Rivka went into the bedroom to wake her son and tell him it was time to get ready to go to shul, to which he replied in a dull voice, 'I'm not going.'

'Why not?' Rivka demanded.

'I'll give you two good reasons Mom,' he said. "One, I'm tired. Two, I don't feel like it."

Rivka replied, 'I'll give you two good reasons why you need to go to shul. 'One, it's Rosh Hashanah, two you're the Rabbi.'

I'm very glad to say that I don't feel like this rabbi. Last year when I spoke on Rosh Hashanah I had been rabbi here for only about a month and a half. It's quite wonderful to look out from the *bima* this Rosh Hashanah and see all your faces having been at Sinai for more than a year. This has been a great year of deepening my relationship with this community, and I feel grateful to share words with you today from a different vantage point.

**Rosh Hashanah. The Head of the Year.**

**Today is the beginning. Today is the headwaters from which the stream of our lives will flow forth in the year ahead.**

Six times during our prayers on Rosh Hashanah we blast the shofar and say *hayom harat olam* - on this day the world was created.

From the perspective of rabbinic tradition though, the best way to put it is not that this is the day on which the world was created, but the day on which the world is created anew for us.

On Rosh Hashanah, God is said to look at us and say, "My children, I

look upon you as if today I have created a new creature.”

While we all left our mother’s wombs many years ago, each year of our lives is another period of gestation in the womb of life, and Rosh Hashanah is the time we are born anew once again.

As long as we are alive, we are growing and changing, and the high holidays is the time more than any other during the year that we give ourselves the space to step back and notice.

There is a power in this day to allow us to begin again with a clean slate, full of possibility, like Adam and Eve back in the Garden of Eden, or a newborn child.

We refer to our spiritual task on Rosh Hashanah as *teshuva*. *Teshuva* is often translated as repentance, but more literally, and more appropriately for our purposes, it means return.

How do we return to the place where God looks upon us as new creatures?

This is the question I want to begin to answer today.

In our tradition, the snake is most renowned for leading Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden. But I believe this remarkable creature can also teach us something about how to get back there.

We can learn about *teshuva* from the amazing way the snake sheds its old skin. Each year, or more often for some snakes, they shed the outer layer of their skin as they outgrow it.

Even those that aren't growing physically anymore shed their worn scales to replace them with a new shiny and healthy layer.

Rosh Hashanah is the time in the year when we Jews also shed our old

skin, so to speak, making room for a renewed vitality.

For us, this is not a physical process but a spiritual process. What we must shed is our old worn-out ideas of who we are.

The way we thought about ourselves last year just doesn't fit perfectly with who we are now; it can't, because none of us is fully the person we were last year at this time.

We have all changed in the past year. If we have learned new things this year, gained new skills, started new relationships and ended others, it has changed us.

If we have lost loved ones, or welcomed new members into our families, it has surely changed us.

If we have started a new career, or lost a job, it has changed us.

If we have searched for our calling in life, searched for love, or searched for community and friendship, it has changed us.

We are not the same as we were a year ago. If we think we are, we are living in the past.

If we have undergone illnesses that have changed our way of life this year, or healed from ailments that were hindering us, we are not the same.

If we have experienced moments of joy or sorrow, anger or love, pain or pleasure, anxiety or deep peace, we are not the same.

A human being who has lived a year has ridden the dizzying rollercoaster that we call life, and has come out different on the other side.

But if we become stuck in our old ideas of who we are, we are like the

snake who has forgotten how to shed -- uncomfortable and stifled, limited by an identity that no longer fits with who we are, and which inhibits us from becoming who we want to be in the future.

The snake makes space through transforming itself. If we want to be vibrant and deeply alive, we too need to turn ourselves inside out.

The snake begins the process of shedding its old skin by rubbing against rocks. For us too, the process is not magic. It doesn't take place automatically, and can't be taken for granted that it will happen at all. It takes place as a result of real and courageous spiritual work.

God can't do it alone. If God is going to look upon us as new creatures today, we too need to come to see ourselves in this way. For after all, whose eyes does God look through, if not our own?

So where do we begin in order to become the new creature God wants us to be on Rosh Hashanah?

I want to suggest 4 essential elements to successfully taking this spiritual journey.

The first is what I call sacred curiosity.

As some of you have heard me teach before, according to the great theologian Rabbi Avraham Joshua Heschel, holding certain beliefs is not at the heart of what it means to be a religious person in Judaism. To be a religious person is about much more than faith in certain ideas, it is about a fundamental orientation towards life that Heschel called "radical amazement" – to "stand in rapport with the mystery of reality."

We read in Proverbs -- *reishit chochma yirat Hashem* – the beginning of

wisdom is awe of God. Awe is always a beginning point, a starting point for a new way of looking at things.

Awe is more important than belief in Judaism, because when we hold a belief, we think we've reached the end of a process of figuring things out.

When we are in awe, it's just the opposite – we admit we don't know everything, we are amazed that things are as they are, and we become curious to learn more about what we don't know.

There is nothing more important to apply this teaching to than our own self. On Rosh Hashanah we are challenged to let go of our fixed beliefs about who we are, and become truly curious about ourselves again.

We may think we already know who we are. We invest a great amount of mental energy, whether we realize it or not, in maintaining our sense of self. After all, a solid sense of identity allows us to feel secure in the world. But it also can get us stuck in the past.

I heard a very humorous example of this, about a student of meditation who realized something as a result of her contemplative practice. The woman said that for years she had been buying French cheese because she was simply the kind of person who bought French cheese. It was all the fad.

But one day, she was eating French cheese and she realized that she actually hated French cheese and always had.

This woman's actions had been motivated by an idea of who she was, not who she actually was. She discovered that she was doing something she hated only when she became truly aware and curious about herself.

Unfortunately, we do things much worse than eat fancy cheese as a

result of holding on to old ideas about ourselves.

If you think you already know everything about yourself, I challenge you to look more closely. Whether you are 9 or 90, I have no doubt that there is something you have yet to discover or understand about yourself.

Thankfully, we Jews are used to living with curiosity. Our tradition has always valued the importance of a question as least as much as an answer.

We like questions so much that we like to answer a question with a question.

Once a congregant asked me, “rabbi, why do we Jews always answer a question with a question?”

I answered, “why not?”

Seriously though, questions have gotten us a long way.

The Nobel Laureate in physics, Isidor, Rabi was once asked, “why did you become a scientist, rather than some of the other professions immigrant kids in your neighborhood took up?”

He answered, “My mother made me a scientist without ever intending it. Every other Jewish mother in Brooklyn would ask her child after school: ‘Nu, did you learn anything today?’ But not my mother. She always asked me a different question. ‘Izzy,’ she would say, ‘Did you ask a good question today?’ That difference – asking good questions – made me become a scientist.”

I don’t think Izzy’s mother was perhaps as unusual as he thinks. From at

least the time of the Talmud, questions have been prized rather than shunned in Judaism.

This attribute of open inquiry has been central to our longevity as a people. It has allowed us to be open to change and growth and to continue to thrive as a result.

Likewise, curiosity can help us as individuals stay young at heart. But don't take it from me, take it from Ruth Hamilton, the world's oldest blogger. I stumbled upon a video of this 109-year-old woman discussing what kept her going.

This is what she said about life:

“I think it's wonderful, and I keep asking how much longer? I want to stay here. I want to see who the next president is going to be. I want to see what's going on in schools - I'm very curious. I think that one of the best qualities you can have in your life is to be curious about everything.”

When you are curious like that, Ruth asks, “how can you get old?”

Our job today is to turn that curiosity inwards, in order to begin the process of shedding our old conceptions about who we are that are no longer helpful.

True spiritual masters over the course of history, whether in our tradition or others, have had in common deep curiosity not only about life around them, but life within them. They have been navigators of the self.

Who am I?

Every thought we have, every emotion we feel, every action we take, is an opportunity to examine this question.

In what ways am I no longer the person I used to think I was?

How have my life experiences this year changed me?

The snake begins to shed by rubbing its nose against a rock.

We begin by applying this attitude of curiosity towards ourselves.

As we do this though, we won't get very far without the second element that is essential to becoming like a new creature on Rosh Hashanah: honesty – *Emes* – truthfulness.

I want to share a story from my life that captures the central importance of raw honesty in the process of transformational growth.

When I was 16, I went on a trip to Israel for the summer, and I became very close with a girl who I'll call Suzy. I slowly came to realize that Suzy was anorexic. I was the first person she was able to admit this to.

In fact, I don't think she had fully admitted it to herself before our friendship. She had a thick shell of denial, protecting her from the harsh truth.

Over time, I saw an amazing and difficult process take place. Through our conversations, her shell of protection began to breakdown, and she would open up and cry with the painful truth that she had an eating disorder.

At first, she would shut back down again quickly, putting up her walls of defense as if nothing had happened. But our conversations would lead to her unfolding once more, allowing herself to be vulnerable and see the truth.

This cycle went on, until eventually she was strong enough to bring her realization into her daily life. She could bear to know the truth and still hold her identity intact. This was, thank God, the beginning of a path of healing for Suzy.

Like my friend, some of us may have truly painful things about ourselves that we hide from, things that are just too hard to look at during our daily life. Perhaps we aren't even aware of them, even though we suffer on a daily basis as a result.

But even if we aren't hiding from anything as debilitating as Suzy was, we all have truths about ourselves that we shy away from seeing.

Coming to see and acknowledge those truths is essential if we are to move our lives in new positive directions. As we ask questions about ourselves with curiosity, we will only get so far on the inward journey if we just listen to the answers we want to hear.

A number of weeks ago on Shabbat we discussed the command to the Israelites in the desert to appoint *shoftim*, judges, at all of the gates of their cities. We are told that the most important characteristic of these judges is that they need to be honest and fair in judgment – not willing to take bribes.

I shared the perspective of our mystical teachers that this verse is actually giving a spiritual command to each individual. They teach that each of us needs to appoint fair and honest judges within ourselves.

We need to examine who we are and how we act, with honesty.

This isn't easy, because as a congregant mentioned during our earlier discussion on the subject, there is something within us that likes to try to bribe the inner judges.

It's name is Mr. or Mrs. Ego. Mr. Ego really really loves to make sure the outcome of any self-examination comes out how he wants it to. He's got a lot of power and influence, and he's very smart about how to get what he wants.

For example, if we think of ourselves as generous, and we do something greedy or selfish that doesn't match up with this idea, we tend to want to hide it from our inner authorities. Without even noticing it, we often convince ourselves that we'll feel so much better if we pretend that we didn't do anything selfish.

After all, if we're generous good people, how could we possibly have done something that doesn't match up with that idea of ourselves that we hold so dear?

We all have the capacity to be defensive - its how we hide from the truths that we don't want to see.

But God commands us not to take bribes; to judge ourselves with honesty. As we attempt to reflect on our lives honestly, part of our challenge is to notice when our defenses arise, and see if we can bring our curiosity there as well.

What are my defenses trying to protect me from seeing about myself?

Defensiveness is a sure clue to discovering parts of ourselves that aren't in line with our conception of who we are.

For most of us, our defenses are most obvious in our closest relationships. If you are having trouble thinking of any such situations, ask your family, I'm sure they will be willing to help – with kindness of course.

It's very important to note that honesty isn't only about seeing the things that are imperfect about ourselves. There is another side to the coin.

We also tend to judge ourselves unfairly in a different way. We judge ourselves harshly.

If we have low self-esteem, we may think things we've done are terrible, or that we aren't smart, or we aren't good enough, or whatever it may be, when it isn't true.

We get stuck on certain ideas of who we are that are negative and self-destructive, and we don't allow ourselves to see the truth about the good aspects of who we are.

An honest judge doesn't just see the bad but also the good.

If we want to succeed at letting go of old, outdated self-conceptions and see who we really are today, it is absolutely fundamental to be honest with ourselves.

But as we all know, it isn't always easy to do so.

That is why the third element in the journey of introspection on the high holidays is so essential -- courage.

In the month of Elul leading up to the high holidays and through Simchas Torah, we add psalm 27 to our prayers. The psalm ends with the exhortation – *chazak v'yaamez libecha, v'kave el Hashem* – be courageous and strengthen your heart, and hope in God.”

We often think of courage as being strong, impenetrable, even macho. But here we speak of a deeper courage. It's a courage to be vulnerable, to be wrong, to be imperfect, to face truths we have hidden from for a long time.

Right before the snake finally sheds, the underlying new skin is soft and

vulnerable to damage while the outer layers prepare to slough away.

Preparing to let go of old ways of thinking about who we are is hard because we feel raw and vulnerable, sensitive and unprotected. It takes courage to allow ourselves to open up in this way.

For Suzy to face the painful truth of her eating disorder took tremendous courage. She couldn't have been honest with herself and changed her life for the better without it.

### **Hazak v'yaametz libecha.**

Strengthening your heart doesn't mean to harden it like Pharaoh did in the story of the Exodus from Egypt, but just the opposite. It means to have faith in the strength of your heart – to have the courage to let it feel the emotions that come along with the truth.

These three elements, sacred curiosity, honesty, and courage, can help us travel a great distance on the journey of introspection. But in order to reach the depth of renewal that we are seeking, there is one more element that is absolutely essential -- **rachamim** - caring.

In our deepest prayers on the high holidays we cry out to a God of compassion. “*Hashem Hashem, El Rachum v'Chanun*” we call out in front of the ark – God, Compassionate and Merciful God.

We sing together, “*Avinu Malkeynu, chaneinu v'aneinu*”, - Our father our King, have compassion upon us and answer us.

The word for Compassion – *Rachamim* – comes from the same Hebrew root of the word for womb – *rechem*.

Just as our mothers' womb nurtured us and sustained us so that one day we could emerge into the world, so too this attribute of God is what

ultimately allows us rebirth on the high holidays.

If we want God to have compassion for us, we need to discover the ability to have compassion for ourselves.

The humorous author Anne Lamott once wrote the following:

“A friend of mine has cautioned me away from the standard God of our childhoods, who loves and guides you and then, if you are bad, roasts you: God as high school principal in a gray suit who never remembered your name but is always leafing unhappily through your files.

If this is your God, maybe you need to blend in the influence of someone who is ever so slightly more amused by you. . .Gracie Allen is good. Mr. Rogers will work. . .It may help to remember this great line of Geneen Roth’s: that awareness is learning to keep yourself company. And then learn to be more compassionate company, as if you were somebody you are fond of and wish to encourage.”

My teacher Rabbi Ebn Leader shared a beautiful teaching this past Saturday night at Selichot on this same subject.

He talked about the *vidui*, in which we strike our chests, *ashamu bagadnu* – confessing our mistakes and imperfections. We usually do this with our fists closed. But a friend of his taught him another way to do it – with an open palm.

When we ask questions about who we are, facing the answers we find with honesty and courage and making ourselves vulnerable, we are left with two options.

We can close back down out of fear of the unknown, of the reality that we aren’t who we think we are, or we can hold ourselves with caring, welcoming ourselves into the daylight.

To have compassion on ourselves doesn't mean to avoid our faults, or to preemptively forgive ourselves and let ourselves off the hook. It means to bring an attitude of caring to every aspect of who we are, especially the parts of us that are imperfect or hurting.

To be compassionate towards ourselves is to notice the emotions that we feel as we reflect on our lives, whether they are joy, sadness, anger, confusion, or apathy, and not to turn away from what makes us feel those emotions, but instead to turn towards those parts of ourselves as a parent turns to a crying child.

We must embrace who we are.

Sometimes we can't do this alone. Sometimes we need other people to see us with compassion before we can begin to embrace ourselves. That, my friends, is why we're here together. That's why we need community.

I have focused today on the personal rather than interpersonal aspects of *teshuva*.

But even in this very personal work of introspection, we support one another just by being here together. And if we are sincere in our individual work of reflection, it will naturally lead us to make amends with those whom we need to forgive or ask forgiveness from.

I offer this as a *kavannah*, an intention, for our prayer space together this high-holidays. I have seen over the last year how Temple Sinai is a welcoming, caring community; a warm extended family. On the high holidays, together we can build a prayer space that is a space of openness and caring.

May we all merit true curiosity and honesty, courage and compassion this Rosh Hashanah.

May our spiritual practice allow us to shed old conceptions of who we are that are no longer helpful, freeing us to grow in new ways and change our lives for the good in the year ahead.

May we all allow God to look through our eyes and see a new creature this Rosh Hashanah.