



“Personal Reflection”

Erev Rosh Hashanah Alternative Service Sermonette

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Tonight begins a ten day period of self-reflection – *aseret y'mei t'shuvah* – the Ten Days of doing T'shuvah. “T'shuvah” is often translated as “repentance,” but at its core, it means “return”. T'shuvah is a multi-stepped process that includes reflecting on our lives and thinking about where we've “missed the mark,” admitting that we've made mistakes, apologizing to others and to God, and acting in a better way. Through t'shuvah, we're returning to God through ethical living, we're returning to the best of our authentic selves, we're returning to a deeper understanding of our place in the world, and, we're returning to the synagogue – at least for those who haven't been there for a while. Why do you think they call it the “hi” holy days?

However we define “return,” we can't do t'shuvah unless we begin with meaningful reflection. The prayers of our services help us towards that end, but can we really reflect meaningfully on our behavior from an entire year?

On a certain level it is possible. We can take a cue from the election rhetoric and ask ourselves, “Are we better off now than we were a year ago?” We can assess our relationships with those we care about and ask ourselves if we're doing enough towards *tikkun olam* – repairing the world around us.

Here's the catch, at least for me – I can't remember what I had for lunch yesterday, let alone the myriad of interactions I've had with people over the past year. Was I selfish, mean spirited, not caring enough, or not giving enough? Probably at one time or another, but to actually remember the times I have stepped up and the times I've missed stepping up is not very realistic. Our self-examination on this day can be superficial and lead to complacency.

The answer to bringing meaningful self-reflection to our lives is simple, and yet most people seem to be resistant: Make self-reflection a regular part of your life.

Perhaps composer Stephen Schwartz was overwhelmed from his High Holy Day reflecting when he wrote the song “Dancing through Life” for the show *Wicked*. The character Fiyero compels us to learn to live “the unexamined life” as he sings, “Life's more painless for the brainless. Why think too hard



when it's so soothing dancing through life?" Of course he's mocking Henry David Thoreau who wrote, "The unexamined life is not worth living."

It is so easy for life to just pass us by as day rolls into day as we go about our daily routines. We lose track of time entirely and it becomes easy to also lose our values, connections with others, and our sense of self-worth. Here are three benefits that a regular reflective practice can bring to each of us.

- 1) Personal reflection enables us to see ourselves clearly, as we are, who we are.
- 2) Personal reflection brings our unique strengths to the forefront so that we can build on these. At the same time, it helps us to manage our weaknesses or slowly chip away at them.
- 3) Personal reflection allows us to make more thoughtful decisions about our actions. With the insight we gain, we can deepen relationships and chart a path towards better living.

The important work of reflection and renewal cannot be jammed into a few days in the fall. This is not to minimize the value of what we are doing tonight. But reflection needs to be incorporated into the daily, weekly, and monthly rhythms of our lives.

Judaism actually provides that structure. On a yearly level, we have the month of Elul leading these Ten Days of Return. We ask the hard questions of ourselves and confess our sins as a community.

Each month we have Rosh Chodesh – a celebration of the new month. It is a Jewish tradition on erev Rosh Chodesh, the day before the new Hebrew month, to reflect on the month that has passed and to think about what we'd like to do differently in the new month ahead. In the 16th century, this practice was expanded, and called "Yom Kippur Katan" - a mini-Yom Kippur, with fasting and prayers. There is something compelling about the idea of connecting our lives to the cycles of the moon and feeling closer to the rhythms of nature. Celebrating or even just acknowledging Rosh Chodesh gives us that opportunity. At TRS, we have an active Rosh Chodesh women's group that meets monthly - a program that includes ritual and reflection.

Of course we have our weekly, built in opportunity for reflection – Shabbat. Shabbat is one of the greatest gifts we've given to the world, but is it a gift you give to yourself? The Israeli poet Achad Ha'am taught us, "More that



Israel has kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept Israel.” Shabbat is the easiest way to slow down, let go of what you need to let go of, and find time for reflection. Shabbat reflection allows us to reconnect with our values and look at our relationships and our connection with the world. If celebrating Shabbat is not already a part of your weekly practice, you’re missing out on an essential opportunity. I’m not referring to the home ritual with the lighting of candles and a big dinner, or even about regular worship, though these are both wonderful and helpful. I’m talking about finding a time for Shabbat rest and refreshment sometime between Friday evening and Saturday evening. We need those moments to quiet ourselves, without the pull of the past or future, without a reminder of the 20 things we still need to get done. We need a time for being and not doing.

One of my favorite Shabbat activities is to go to Great Falls, go for a walk and then find a quiet place to sit for a while, preferably with a river view, up on some big rock off the regular path. These moments are even more profound when I add a meditation. Always, it turns out to be an important time for self-reflection.

A daily practice of reflection can be simple and quite beneficial. To enter into a moment of meaningful reflection takes only a few steps and not much time. There are many ways to do this – you can find lots of ideas on the internet. Go for a walk, meditate, journal or find a quiet moment to focus.

I’d like to encourage you to do this at this time. I invite you now to do a short meditative reflection that is easy to duplicate and only lasts a few minutes.

- First, just simply relax. That should not be difficult at this point in the service. When you’re at home, it is important to have all your attention on the process. Turn off the TV and the computer.
- Now, take a few deep breaths and center yourself. Let go of your list of things to do. Let go of anything else that comes to mind. If something comes up, notice what it is, save it for later and come back to this time that you’ve set aside for reflection. What we want to do is connect with our subconscious mind, since that’s where all the connections and our best work takes place. Take one more cleansing breath and allow your body to relax.
- A reflective process focuses on asking yourself questions. Take a couple minutes now and think about 2 or 3 people you encountered today or yesterday. Picture each person individually and ask yourself



the question, "How can I be more supportive of this person?" or "What can I do to deepen my relationship with this person?" Take a few moments now to do this.

- We'll end this reflection with three more questions for you to ask yourself. See if you can come up with quick answers to each. Ask yourself:
 - What did I do well today?
 - Today, where may I have fallen short of being my best?
 - What is a blessing that I carry with me today?

So how was this taste of a daily reflective practice for you?

Ending by reminding ourselves of our blessings is a great way to gain perspective on those things that are most important to us. The idea behind self-reflection is to make your observations, then, let... them... go..., not to obsess on them. If you'd like a list of additional questions for self-reflection, I'll post it next week on our website as part of this sermon.

John Dewey taught at the beginning of the 20th century, "We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience."

Imagine what it would be like to enter these High Holy Days, without the baggage of the last 12 months, having made the most of the daily, weekly and monthly opportunities for self-reflection and action.

May our reflective practices at this time and throughout the year lead us to deeper self-knowledge, to meaningful action and change, and towards more fulfilling lives. And may our combined efforts bring love and healing to this world.

Kein y'hi ratzon – may this be God's will!

Additional Questions for Self-Reflection

Pick a few that are meaningful to you.

For Daily Reflection

- What special moment would I like to remember or celebrate?
- Was there a moment when I experienced life fully?
- How did I treat myself today – did I take care of myself in terms of nutrition, exercise?
- Has there been a spiritual moment or can I still create one with the time remaining?

- How can I make more time for myself and my family?
- Did I relate to others on a deep, feeling level?
- What is a personal strength that I brought to the world today?
- Was there anything that I was critical or judgmental about? What could I have done differently?
What am I most proud of today?
- Have I expressed love today? With whom could I express more love and deepen connections?
- When today was I living to your highest or deepest self? What was I doing or who was I with?
- What have I noticed in others' reactions to me today?

Shabbat – a Time for Bigger Questions:

- What do I really, really want?
- What are my most important values?
- What does it mean to choose? To live proactively?
- Who am I at my best?
- Who am I at my worst?
- Who am I becoming?
- What am I avoiding or resisting?
- What is the lie I tell myself?
- Who do I give my power away to?
- What would I do if I were ten times bolder?
- How can I get more energy?
- What am I most grateful for?
- What am I settling for?
- If I knew I would die a month from now, what would I do?
- What is my gift to give to the world?
- What did I learn last week?
- What was my greatest accomplishment over the past week?
- Which moment from last week was most memorable and why?
- What is one thing I need to accomplish this week?
- What can I do right now to make the week less stressful?
- What am I avoiding that needs to get done?
- Is there anyone I've been meaning to talk to?
- Is there anyone that deserves a big "thank you"?
- Who can I help this coming week?