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There is a long list, spread between multiple files on the computer, stained index cards in my purse, crumpled one-sided 8 1/2 by 11 pages on my desk, and a running hard drive in my brain, of topics for High Holiday reflections, messages and sermons this year.

At the top of the should-do list is, of course, what I did, and what I learned, on my sabbatical. Following that is the large and ever-expanding grab-bag of general topics I think I *should* address -- the political issues of the day from a progressive Jewish perspective; the concept and experience of *teshuvah*, from personal and theological perspectives; what's going on in our *shul* community, in liberal Judaism in general; where we are situated in the American Jewish scene and whither the Jewish future is also on my list -- and I think and read about that one a great deal. Israel is on my list -- Israel the political entity that will turn 60 years old this new year, as well as Israel or Zion the concept and how it impacts our identities as Jews in the Diaspora, particularly liberal Jews with an overall progressive orientation.

The jumble became even thicker upon my actual return to the bimah over the past few weeks. Tangled up with thoughts about these issues were the preparations for recent and upcoming synagogue services and events, meeting new members, excitement

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about and concerns for the life of our congregation – membership, growth, financial stability, outreach, programming, planning, and all other manner of things that a rabbi ought not necessarily talk about from the pulpit on the High Holidays, but which have otherwise consumed a great deal of my sermon-thinking and mulling-over time.

What *is* a contemporary rabbi on the *bimah* supposed to examine, on this eve of the new year? The singularly personal, or the all-encompassing political? The freshly-experienced moment, or the mulled-over and matured reflection? The tightly focused consideration of one piece of liturgy, one passage of prayer, or an overview of the schema, the grand themes and their resonance for the current zeitgeist? And whence the pressure, both on lay leaders and their clergy, to do so much in such a compressed period of time at this time of year?

The puzzlement is highlighted by the contrast between the pithiness of the greeting formula, and the massive wordiness of the holiday's liturgical proceedings. Earlier, I greeted the community and welcomed us all to 5768 by simply considering what we say to each other in greeting, and in the closing of our central prayer. In

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between the greetings and the *amidah*, we say a great deal to each other, in each other's presence, these ten days of *teshuvah*.

As morning services in particular stretch into their third hour, and even fourth, one wonders: *what* were the ancient rabbis thinking?

Regardless of the language of prayer, regardless of the denominational approach, the liturgy of the *yamim nora'im* is undeniably logogenic – hyper-verbose. How many words can one absorb with meaning, utter with intent, sing with feeling?

Even as a child who loved *shul*, who chose to attend services, who went to synagogue on my own, I would be overwhelmed by the number of pages to get through before we were to finish a given *yontif* service. Could we really get through it all in a meaningful way? I know that I did not voice, or fully comprehend, my unspoken concerns in this way at that time, yet the question was there.

Even the burghers of Ashkenaz, and the merchants of Fez, not praying in *their* lingua franca, had questions about how to render our word-filled services with meaning. Hebrew literacy, Jewish knowledge, and the capacity to pray with a sense of authenticity

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has been a challenge to the Jewish people through its evolving phases of history.

My colleague Richard Hirsh, author, commentator, experienced pulpit rabbi and director of our rabbinical association, wryly called these days “liturgical marathons.” In identifying barriers to holiday holiness, he calls us to be on the alert for “spiritual brown-outs, followed by a series of individual burn-outs” lest the power people bring to services for collective illumination “goes off-line.”

But we are here, uttering pages of ancient formulas and foreign phrases far, far less pithy than our simple greeting, *shana tova*, and, right now, observing the time-honored custom of listening to a spiritual leader offer ... more words. We all organize ourselves, with great effort, to observe these holidays. My sabbatical was timed so that I would not be absent for these services either last fall or this, and I spent time working and present with the community this past spring, in part, in order to prepare for these days.

All this to say: at the core of what we do as a prayer community is prayer, yet prayer is only one of the purposes of any *shul*, regardless of denomination, or era.

How much more absurd would our struggle be if no Jewish learning were to take place as a core enterprise among our synagogue observances and events? Even though we don't all gather every Shabbat or holiday, a *shul*, even Beit Tikvah, without Shabbat and holiday services wouldn't make sense. Yet any *beit tefilah*, a house of prayer, is also understood to serve as a *beit midrash*, a house of study.

A familiar teaching, from the Talmud:

A heathen approached Shammai and demanded, "Take me as a proselyte, but on condition that you teach me all of Torah while standing on one foot." Shammai responded by beating him off with a stick. When he approached Hillel, the reply was, "What is hateful to you, do not do to others; this is the entire Torah; all the rest of commentary, now go and study."

- B. Talmud Shabbat 31a

At least half – and I would suggest even more than half – of *teshuvah*, the spiritual work of the days of awe is *beyn adam lehavero*/ person to person. The other component is *beyn adam lamakom*/ between the self and God.

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I'm literally in the midst of another type of *teshuvah* these days of awe, that of the return to the midst of the community of Beit Tikvah, and to serving actively as your rabbi, actively seeking to make my *teshuvah beyn adam lehavero* as well as *beyn adam lemakom* meaningful and active for me, and a model for you.

Very little is more important to me as a person, a Jew and leader among you than the two directives Hillel offered his challenger – the essence of Judaism is to treat others well, and to perpetually engage in learning it. And our tool – mine, ours, our tradition's – our means at this hallowed moment of the cycle of our seasons, is to engage in as full and meaningful an experience of *teshuvah* as possible. “The goal is *teshuvah*,” Rabbi Hirsh reminds us, “not to finish every word of the prayer book.”

I did learn one thing on sabbatical about *teshuvah* that I will offer this evening, before concluding. It is, not surprisingly, about time. I learned that there is always time. Time is not a finite resource. We never run out of it. It never runs out. And while we may plan to do too many things with or in it, *it* is truly infinite. All I had, in a sense, for nine months, was time. Time was the gift you gave me, and I learned its manifest capacity.

To return to you in time for *teshuvah* together is just right.

A teaching from the Midrash:

How do we find our Parent who is in Heaven?

By good deeds and the study of Torah.

How does the Blessed Holy One find us - through love, through fellowship, through respect, through companionship, through truth, through peace, through bending the knee, through humility, through more study, through less commerce, through the personal service to our teachers, through discussion among the students, through a good heart, through decency, through No that is really No, and through Yes that is really Yes.

-Midrash Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 23

Let us commit ourselves anew, personally, and as a community, to *gemilut hesed*/good deeds, to *talmud torah*/the study of torah, that our *avodah*/all our praying. serve the highest possible purpose.

Good deeds. Study of Torah. And all the rest is commentary.

Shana tova umetukah – have a good, sweet year of change. And may its impact rebound and multiply, for you, your kin and friends, for those whom you encounter, *ve'al kol yoshevey tevel*/for all who dwell on earth.