**Central Reform Temple 2023/5784**

**Erev Rosh Hashanah**

Be-Longing and Be-friending

I am delighted to be conducting my first High Holyday services here at Central Reform Temple. I have been fortunate to have spent a whole year with the congregation and yet now I come to what is considered the holiest time of the Jewish year as we celebrate together the turning of a New Year. I have come to know this community as warm, welcoming and full of friends. One that worships with sincerity and seeks to find meaning in our ancient traditions and liturgy and it’s modern adaptions. It is a congregation ultimately devoted to searching for truth and beauty in prayer and justice and equity in action. This congregation is a part of a greater whole as we meet and worship in a sanctuary housing two religious faiths – Jewish and Christian under one roof. As the Prophet Isaiah declared, “Let my House be a house of prayer for all peoples”. We are a part of a whole and we rejoice in our lot.

The Mishnah code of Jewish law and teachings from the 2nd century CE offers us a teaching about being part of a whole. Ben Zoma said, Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone. Who is mighty? The one who is slow to anger and Who is rich? The one who is happy with his lot. In Hebrew, *Ha’samach b’helko. samach* means happy. The Hebrew word *helek* meaning lot or portion indicates that there is a greater whole and to be enriched is to be happy with the portion ascribed to us. We here at Central Reform Temple rejoice in being part of a greater whole at Emmanuel Church with which we have– a relationship of Brit - a Covenantal relationship. And we delight in our Jewish sabbaths and festivals, lifecycle ceremonies, social action activities and always always always good nosh! We are happy with our lot. And that is what apples and honey and honeycake are all about!

The word for portion—in Hebrew and in English—has a dual connotation. Our portion refers to our particular destiny in life, the blessings and burdens that we have received. It is particular to us, and in this sense it is, by definition, partial. We are only part of a much larger picture.

We all know how human it is to have difficulty fully rejoicing in another’s good fortune. There are things that get in the way. A sense of scarcity – perhaps there is not enough to go around, perhaps someone else’s blessings will somehow diminish my own. Or, a sense of jealousy – I see the blessings in someone else’s life, and I cannot help but wish for a bit more of what they have, particularly if things in my own life are hard.

But my portion implies Abundance. More-than-enough. We also have a quality of big-heartedness. There is more than enough room in our hearts to truly rejoice in the blessings of another people

But there are consequences to be only part of a whole. It is to recognize that there is a bigger picture, that others have a different point of view, that we are but a piece of the puzzle and that we cannot see the whole until all the pieces fit together. A powerful midrash suggests that when God proclaimed the Revelation on Mt Sinai, everyone there heard it differently. As Rabbi Sharon Cohen-Anisfeld teaches:

It’s an image that is both beautiful and a little heart-breaking. It demands tremendous humility—a true acceptance of my own partialness, of the limits of my own perspective.  And yet, beyond humility, there is also the promise of something else. There is the promise of a greater whole, of something larger than any one of us or any one community or faith or People.

Brene Brown in her book Braving the Wilderness says:  
   
"Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in..But true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world. Being ourselves means sometimes having to find the courage to stand along, totally alone.... Belonging to ourselves means being called to stand alone- to brave the wilderness of uncertainty, vulnerability, and criticism....

This is the dual message of Rosh Hashanah – to rejoice in the blessing in our lives year on year that are necessarily partial, imperfect and uncertain and yet also to seek to see the oneness and wholeness in all life that is eternal and beyond simple knowing. To do so is to remove the divisions that permeate our everyday lives.

According to John Powell, Director of the Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, Western culture has for the last several centuries built a society founded on three strong separations: our separation from ourselves, our separation from the other (or the person we call the other), and our separation from the Earth. But the reality, says Powell, is that we're not separate. We’re deeply connected to each other. Our challenge is that in order to emerge from the existential crises we face, and to birth a far more humane, just and environmentally responsible civilization, we now need to look deeply at ourselves and our social structures to overcome the separations that have been inculcated into us for so long, and rediscover our fundamental connection to each other and the entire web of life.

One of the liturgical themes of Rosh Hashanah is *malchuyiot* – God’s Sovereignty. We pray Avinu malkenu – Our Father, our King. We say, ‘Praised be you, King of all the world’. We talk about God’s Kingly throne that exhibits mercy rather than strict justice as we seek atonement. In a Republic with a bad history of monarchy, this is a hard concept to grasp. It would be easier in England! And yet, *malchuyiot* is simply an ancient description a vision of completeness. A life unified, without division, without separations. A world to seek and to build.

And so on Rosh Hashanah in order to celebrate that we are happy with our portion this past year while at the same time seeking to build a better world without separation, we do the strangest thing. We blow a ram’s horn!

The Shofar too is an instrument that everyone hears differently. The blessing we recite before the blowing is *lishmoa kol shofar* – that we are commanded to hear the blowing of the shofar. That is, the act of hearing the sounds is the important part. Thank goodness we are not all commanded to have to blow it!

Blowing the shofar reminds us of our ancient past, the times we have been redeemed and the call to wake up to our responsibilities in the year ahead

The Torah marks this day as *yom teruah[[1]](#footnote-1)* – the day of blowing on the 1st day of the month of Tishri which we now call Rosh Hashanah – Head of the Year.

The collected notes of *tekiah, shevarim and teruah*  is the thing we hear. They sound ancient and primordial. They are not musical or melodic. You don’t hum along to a shofar blast. But they are there for us to hear the call. To wake up to our responsibilities and our actions. To be stirred as our ancestors have, to the gathering of the tribes and to the presence of God. The notes sound staccato, broken and disjointed but they are part of a whole adding up to 100 notes altogether.

The shofar calls us to listen, “incline your ear and your heart and you will hear the sound that you perceive to be the message of this Rosh Hashanah. Your sense of this season of being happy with your lot and conscious for not yet being in a world that is whole.

The Hasidic rebbe Reb Pinchas of Koretz said[[2]](#footnote-2): Cry out with a full throat and don’t hold back. Raise your voice like a shofar![[3]](#footnote-3) The strange sounds are wordless, they are mere breaths blown into a ram’s horn but they say many things to all of us who hear it with intention. I invite you to dig inside and find one thing that you are hoping to wake up to this year. What is it that you cry out for? How can you give words and meaning to these inexpressible sounds in the coming year? How will you raise your voice like a shofar so that they will have an impact.

Listen to your heart and to the bent ram’s horn through which human breath becomes a summons, a call, an awakening. What will we hear? What words can we put to the *tekiah, teruah shevarim* sounds. Think of that impulse that moves you to action and determination and let the sounds of the shofar this year pierce your heart and soul so that it will reverberate inside you for a long time to come.

In order to hear the sounds of the shofar, we need to come together as a community. This is where we are part of the whole. I am delighted to be able to participate with you in our High Holyday services. I recognize and acknowledge all the devotion and dedication that is put into making these services available and accessible to all, members and guests alike. I am aware that the leaders of this community have spent years building up this special congregation with love and befriending for each other. I invite our guests today to consider becoming part of our community and bring your true selves into the larger frame of community. A place where we can all be-long and not just fit in. Belong in English can be divided into two: being and longing.

We pray as a community at this New Year because it is essential to celebrate our portion and to know that we are but a small part of the whole. We long to make that connection in our lives and in doing so we become greater than the sum of our parts.

The story is of the man who told the rabbi that he had not been in synagogue for years. The rabbi said, Come to our community for Rosh Hashanah, we would be glad to have you. The man said, “look rabbi, whatever I have to ask of God, I can ask from here”. The rabbi said, “that’s true but maybe God has something to ask of you”! The man thought it over and said, “I never thought of community that way”.

We are present here on Rosh Hashanah happy with our lot, aware of the greater whole to which we seek and continue to build. That is why we need our community, to remind us of the greater whole, of the many varied voices and the intimations of the ultimate whole for which we will continue to seek and build in 5784.

1. Numbers 29:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Hasidic Anthology, edited by Louis Newman, p.335 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Isaiah 58:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)