

=Erev Rosh HaShana 5779 – תשע"ט

Exactly 50 years ago, on Rosh Hashana eve in 1968, Rabbi Joshua Haberman stood before the congregation. It was his first High Holiday sermon as the community's new senior rabbi, and he went on to lead his community successfully for decades, and to share his profound insights each High Holiday season into life, Torah and the world. Even after he retired he continued to give a sermon during the holidays. In 2016, when he was 97 years old, he still drew a crowd of over 5,000 for his annual yizkor sermon on Yom Kippur. His congregation, Washington Hebrew Congregation in our nation's capital, is one of the largest and most influential synagogues in the country. Rabbi Haberman wrote several books, led prayer services in the White House, and in December the thriving city-wide, cross-denominational adult Jewish education program which he started 35 years ago will be renamed in his honor.

Rabbi Haberman's 1st Yahrzeit is later this week - he passed away 4 days after Rosh Hashana last year. It was the first High Holiday season in nearly half a century, that he did not share some special insight into the meaning of these intensely profound and holy days. Rabbi Haberman, whom I called "Grandpa Josh" along with my wife and kids whose grandfather and great-grandfather he was, would discuss topics for high holiday sermons with me each year as I prepared for services with the various communities I've served around the world.

I've missed his guidance this year. On my first Rosh haShana with you, I would like to share with you the timeless message that Rabbi Haberman gave his community on that first Rosh Hashana with his congregation back in 1968.

One of the questions we need to ask ourselves at this start of the year, he said, is the primordial question that God asked Adam and Eve at the very beginning in The Garden of Eden: Where are you?

Now, I know you might be thinking, “Where am I? Well, Malibu. Yes, compares favorably with the Garden of Eden paradise. Boy, the new Rabbi must be really pleased with his new gig...”

Well, yes...but, that is not what God’s question to Adam is all about.

No, to illustrate what the question “Where are You?” is really all about, Rabbi Haberman told the story of a famous Chasidic master from the early 19th century who had been falsely imprisoned in Czarist Russia. One day the fortress commander entered the prison cell of Reb Zalman. The officer, himself a person of some culture, was impressed by the quality of the prisoner under his charge and struck up a conversation about various questions that had occurred to him while reading Scriptures.

Finally, he got to the point that had been troubling him:

“How are we to understand the curious statement in Genesis 3:9 that God, who is supposed to know everything, when looking for Adam in Paradise had to ask, “Adam, where are you?”

Reb Zalman instantly recalled the verse in its context:

“וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶת-קוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים מְתַהַלְלֵךְ בְּגֵן לְרֵיחַ הַיּוֹם וַיִּתְחַבֵּא הָאָדָם וְאֵשֶׁתוֹ מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים בְּתוֹךְ עֵץ הַגָּן: וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶל-הָאָדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אַיֶּכָּה:

Adam and Eve hid from the presence of Adonai the God, among the trees of the garden. And God called out to Adam and said, “Ayecka - Where are you?”

Turning to the officer, Reb Zalman said: “In every age, God calls to every single person, ‘Ayecka -Where are you’ in your world? So many days and years of your life have already passed – how far have you gotten in your world? What have you done with your life?”

Reb Zalman was saying that ‘Ayecka - Where are you?’ is not a question so much as an exclamation, a challenge: Where are you NOW...as compared to where you should be!

Adam and Eve hiding in Paradise must be understood as a parable of the human condition. Humans are always trying to hide from responsibility. We pretend not to hear the demands and claims that are being addressed to us. We turn human existence into a series of evasions, smoke and mirrors trying to hide:

from others

from ourselves

from God.

Yet somehow the call pursues us. Suddenly, a moment comes in your life when the question “Ayecka- Where are you?” finally gets through to you.

I. Hiding From Others

Where are you....with reference to other people: Have you drawn closer or drifted apart? “Where are you” means: Where do you stand with the people in your life?

Many of you remember 1968, and many of you know a bit of history. It was a tumultuous year. Rabbi Haberman surely felt the need in that first sermon in his congregation to address what was most pertinent to the lives of his congregants at that time, what was most relevant to their minds’ concerns and closest to their hearts. He felt that the urgent issue to underscore on Rosh haShana was the observation of the great philosopher Martin Buber, that the conditions of modern life are such that we no longer relate to others, but use them; that all too often the

other person is not a subject to respond to, but an object to be handled and manipulated; that usually we make conversation with - but do not really speak to - other people, heart to heart. We make love but do not love. We answer questions but do not respond to the real need of the questioner.

Remember, this was 50 years ago before the depersonalization of communication through email, twitter, facebook and texts. If back then Buber claimed that too many of us fail to open ourselves up to genuine communication with other people, imagine how much more communication – in terms of quantity - we have today and yet how much less quality communication we have, how impersonal and empty that communication has become. We have – in Buber’s terms - I-it interactions and communications rather than I-thou dialogue and relationships.

It’s become “normal” for us to communicate with another person without entering into any kind of relationship with them. I doubt I am the only one who feels triumphant when they overcome an automated answering service at a business and succeeds in getting an actual fellow human on the line! But I also doubt I am the only one who finds themselves emulating those machines in trying to address an email or text as efficiently as possible. Yes, we show respect for other people’s time by addressing their questions directly, though of necessity, impersonally. Is communication-without-dialogue among the reasons that so many in our society are more lonely than ever? In our rush to cope with the sheer mass of our emails, posts, and text messages without truly engaging the other person, without encountering them, without really relating to them – are we merely addressing their words but not listening to their souls? Well, what are we missing out on?

What a different life it could be for all of us, if only we responded to the questioner behind the question, if only we listened to the seeking, searching call of our fellow human who shares this brief moment with us on this earth and who against all probability from among the more than 7.5 billion people has turned to you, now, asking “Ayecka - Where are you?”

Pulitzer-prize winning poet Mark Van Doren tells the story of how he lived at home in Illinois as a student, some 18 or 20 years old. One night he heard his father’s heavy footsteps climbing up to his son’s 3rd floor attic room where he was reading or writing something. Van Doren knew his father was hungry for conversation, for a moment to share. But all he said to his father when he entered the room was an absent-minded “hello” as he looked away from him.

He wrote: “I clammed up. I waited. And he went downstairs again...I didn’t forget that for forty years. I finally wrote a poem about that incident to cleanse myself of it:

He will remember this/ and loathe the hour/ When his fair tongue/
Malingering, stood still.

Think of those in your own house, think of family members, think of those who might be your friends, anyone hungry for your attention, for your companionship. People may live side-by-side and yet are in a different world. How little meaningful exchange of thought and feeling there is so often between parent and child, and even between couples who vowed to be partners in life. Can you hear the silent questions of those around you, of the people you care most about?

Ayecka - Where are you?...Where is your attention? Where is your heart? Where are your thoughts?

II. Hiding From Yourself

In some ways, the most cruel and tragic neglect is not the neglect of others, but of ourselves. The question “Where are you?” is also the pathetic cry of our own soul concerning us ourselves. We become strangers to ourselves. Why?

That little gem of a book, Kohelet, or Ecclesiastes, which is attributed to the wisest of all kings, Solomon and which we read traditionally on Sukkot coming up in just 2 weeks, repeats a characteristic expression:

“I communed with my own heart” (1:60), or “I said in my heart” (21, 15) and again “All this I laid to my heart”. (9:1)

These phrases are indicative of a mind which is constantly searching its own innermost recesses. How many of us truly commune with our own hearts? Is it even possible to examine our own feelings and consider them objectively?

Most scholars think that the author of Kohelet was a person of some years, who had the time and resources to be able to reflect on life. Some of you may be in a similar position, but I suspect that many of us are still amidst the hustle and bustle of our over-active lives, even those of you in retirement. The loss of touch with the core of our own inner being, the malaise of self-alienation, the need to go through the motions of a routine that is distracting, or hectic, pressured, exhausting...is all too insidious and all too real all too often...Ayecka - Where are you? Where are you going? What are your honestly heartfelt goals in life? Is anything you do – or have done – truly worthwhile?

In a moment of self-realization, Dylan Thomas once paused in the midst of aimless drinking and chatting and said: “Somebody is boring me, and I think it’s me.”

He was able at that moment - but not before - to hear the question: Where are you? Kohelet again and again looks into his own soul, inquires of his heart of hearts – but he does not dwell there in every waking moment of every single day. One must be out and about in the world, in the throes of everyday, even while returning periodically – each day I would say, or at the very least on the reflective holidays of Rosh haShana and Yom Kippur – to face the really big questions of your existence.

Don’t wait for a crisis, illness, or bereavement to shock you into a total reconsideration of your life. It is wise to mentally prepare long in advance for the shifting of gears in life. What is there to strive for after you have made your money and won your promotion? What goals remain when you’re no longer needed as a provider of shelter, allowances, and tuitions? What are the possibilities of meaning, satisfaction, and achievement in the latter phases of life? What productivity, what purpose, what passion will you pursue in whatever phase of life you are in right now? This threshold of the New Year is a good point in time to look back and to look ahead: To get ahold of yourself.

Where are you O my soul? Where are you now and where are you going? Ayecka.

III. Hiding From God

Finally, if we seal ourselves off from others and from ourselves, we most certainly hide ourselves from God, just like Adam. Yet God calls to each of us, every moment: “Where are you, my child?”

Do you hear that call, ever, even faintly sometimes? It seems to be a signal tapped out by every heartbeat that maintains your wondrous rhythm of life. That call is echoed in every breath of air - *nishima* in Hebrew, a breath - that you breathe into the body in which dwells your *neshama*, your soul. God’s call is in every bit of nourishment you take as required by the physical bodies which host our souls, our existence literally dependent on the abundant and festive table God has set before us.

Don’t look for God like for a needle in a haystack. Nor should you expect God’s voice to come to you in a thunderstorm. God enters your thoughts as you direct your thoughts to God. God speaks in what the Torah calls a *kol d’mama daka* – a still, small voice, a whisper of your conscience, a moment of awe, a sense of the sacred, even just the feeling however vague but persistent that God is with you.

“Thou art with me”, matter-of-factly states Psalm 23, “Thou art with me.” Your life may seem to make little sense in and of itself, but recognizing that you are not alone gives your life context. Whatever meaning your life does have, comes from that context, the bigger picture, your connection with others and with the ultimate Other which is at the same time the most intimate aspect of yourself - God.

IV. Conclusion

I want to conclude with another story about Grandpa Josh – Rabbi Haberman - that I think illustrates the way each of us needs to be prepared at any moment to hear the call from other people, from

yourself, and from God – Ayecka, where are you?...And to answer with all your life experience, talents, and energy: with your whole being, any day and everyday:

When Rabbi Haberman was in his 80s, he led a Passover seder aboard a cruise ship. The day before docking in Haifa, the ship was in heavy seas and his chair overturned. He hit his head but seemed none the worse for the incident. But over the coming days he grew increasingly confused, lost his balance, had moments of incoherence. The family began to think that the challenges of old age were, for the first time, upon us, and God forbid, was this the beginning of the end? Many tests later, it turned out not to be a stroke or a tumor, but only some internal bleeding from the fall from the chair. It was relieved with a minor procedure and health was restored.

Not long after returning from the hospital was 9/11/2001, the 17th anniversary of which we will commemorate the day after tomorrow, on the 2nd Day of this Rosh haShana holiday. Rabbi Haberman was asked by President Bush to join his new roundtable of spiritual advisors, to help lead prayers for the country at a service in the National Cathedral, and to attend the special session of Congress as the President gave a historic speech. Rabbi Haberman's prayer with the nation was for God's mercy, love, and compassion, quoting from the Book of Lamentations:

"The kindness of God is steadfast, God's mercies will never cease."
(Lamentations 3:22)

This faith in God's presence and involvement in our lives is the model for the relationships we need to cultivate with others, with ourselves, and with God: steadfast, kind, merciful.

No, we do not always understand what happens in the world, or what happens to us, nor why. We hope that as we look back on our lives that

we begin to see the purposes God has had for all of us. We never know beforehand when or how we will be needed, by whom or for what, but whether we are now very young or very old, strong or weak, healthy or sick, we too must be steadfastly at the ready: God may yet have a task for us to perform in this world. We are all beings in the service of God to help in Fixing the World even a little bit. Our obligation to life is to be prepared to fulfill whatever task the Holy One needs us to do at any given moment. It may be a task as small as saying a kind word at the right moment, or even smiling to a soul who needs your smile.

Ayecka comes the call – “Where are you?” God says, “I need your help.” The people in your life call Ayecka – “where are you? I need you.” You must inquire of your own self “Ayecka” – where am I? Am I ready?

An answer from our truest selves needs to be Hinneri: here I am.

Where are you in your personal relationships? Are you listening to the needs of others? Are you attentive to your inner self? Are you open to hear God’s whisper in your soul?

The most central statement of our Jewish faith says, “Hear O Israel” – Shema Yisrael: Listen O my People! God calls to you today, calls to you in this New Year of 5779 just as God called to Adam and Eve: Ayecka – Where are you?

Hinneri: here I am, needs to be your answer.

L’shana tova Tikateivu, may you be written for a sweet and good New Year.