

Temple Sinai
Roslyn, NY

Rosh Hashanah Sermon: *On Reverence*
Friday September 10th, 2010
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Shana Tova! It's such an honor to be standing on your bima once again, sharing with you in these Rosh Hashanah services. I'm so happy to deliver you and yours' special salutations for a sweet new year, along with an extra special greeting from my wife, who is feeling great and looking forward to singing with you once again as her maternity leave comes to a close in a couple short weeks. May this be a sweat year for all of us, and a peaceful year for our world...

[PAUSE]

Recently my grandmother lamented to me that, while in many important ways our world is better today than it once was, young people and indeed so much of our population lack what she referred to as normal and healthy reverence.

"Reverence for what?" I asked.

"Reverence for everything," she answered, "for life, for nature, for community, for possibility, for each other... You know, reverence!"

"I don't know, Grandma," I challenged, "when I think of 'reverence' I think mostly of worship. Why not just say that people today lack respect – that they don't respect their fellow man, nature, community...?"

"Respect?" My grandmother smiled. "Respect doesn't change you. Respect is for the workplace or the sports field. No, what I'm talking about is something that can change who you are, change how you see the world."

Change who you are... Change how you see the world...

As you can tell, my grandmother is a very smart, very cool lady with a lot to say, and indeed a lot on her mind. Thing is, she's right. It doesn't take a scholar's mind or an intensive study of human history to see that she's right. In so many facets of who we are we have whittled away at the ways in which we express reverence. Slowly and surely the formalities and pomp and circumstance that tend to come with reverence have been done away with. We don't curtsy or bow anymore. We don't expect our children to refer to adults as 'Mr.' or 'Mrs.' anymore. And, perhaps with good reason, we adults certainly don't hold our leaders to the same esteem we once might have.

As we have come to understand more deeply our world and universe through the achievements of science we've seen the reverence we might have once felt for the mysteries of the universe chipped away. Once upon a time Abraham looked up at the stars in the sky and wondered. It was through that wonderment that the Abrahamic faiths were born, for it was in that moment that God first spoke with Abraham and said, "Lech

L'cha" – "Go forth from your father's land to a land that I will show you..." Today we look up at the stars in the sky and know so much – and what we don't know, we feel innately that we *can* know, that, through time and study, we will learn.

We can be proud of the way in which we've enriched our culture even as we've ushered away its formalities. But we can't allow the informal nature of our culture to deny the respect we ought to have for our elders, the honor we ought to give strangers.

We can be proud of our achievements. We can be proud of what we've learned. But we can't allow the growth of our knowledge to take away from the sense of awe we can feel when we look to the heavens.

We can be proud of our capabilities. But we can't allow this pride to blind us from the importance of learning in advance how to protect our world as we draw from it, not waiting until disaster to figure out how to deal with disaster.

Indeed there are many reasons to be irreverent.

Despite humanity's knowledge of history, we continue to witness wars and violence around our globe – the leaders of too many nations choosing corruption over the lives of their people, power over honest and benevolent leadership. And in the meantime our leaders at home can seem at times virtually deadlocked in their own political games to the detriment of you and I – regular, everyday citizens who need real leadership and not pandering from one election to the next.

It is any wonder that so many of us feel so irreverent so much of the time? The rise of irreverence in our world did not begin with this generation. It began the first time history remembered a wrongdoing. It began the first time one of our ancestors experienced pain and looked toward the heavens, wondering why, why such pain.

Indeed our tradition teaches that irreverence isn't always bad. The ancient Jewish voice seems to encourage irreverence in certain situations. We celebrate our biblical heroes, such a Moses for example, who respectfully question God's more mysterious and difficult decisions. We are not discouraged from feeling anger toward God during our people's most difficult moments in history, and our own most difficult moments in life.

These moments of accepted irreverence were never meant to undermine the importance of reverence, of being transformed by certain experiences.

Professor of Philosophy Paul Woodruff in his book, Reverence, Renewing a Forgotten Virtue, writes, "Reverence is an ancient virtue that survives among us in half forgotten patterns of civility, in moments of inarticulate awe, and in nostalgia for the lost ways of traditional cultures. We have the word 'reverence' in our language, but we scarcely know how to use it..."

So what is reverence? How can we re-define the usefulness of this ancient feeling in a way that makes sense to us and our modern sensibilities? But most important, how might we allow our experiences with reverence to change who we are? Change how we see the world?

We begin with definitions:

Webster's Dictionary defines 'reverence' as "profound respect and esteem mingled with fear and affection, as for a holy being or place". Dictionary.com defines 'reverence' as a "a feeling or attitude of deep respect tinged with awe [or] veneration."

In the Hebrew language there are a number of words that may be translated with a connotation toward reverence. We think, for example, of the phrase: *Da lifneh mi ata omed* – know, or fear, or revere before whom you stand. *Kibud av v'em* – respect, honor, revere your father and mother.

In the ancient Jewish tradition these expressions of honor, fear, and reverence were all intertwined and part and parcel of the same thing: They were the beginning of faith, the beginning of philosophy, the beginning of morality, the beginning of knowing.

So important is reverence in our tradition, for example, it at times supercedes the most commanded of ritual obligation. *Kibud av v'em*. Revere your father and mother. How powerful is this reverence? The Talmud teaches that were your father to ask you to desecrate the Sabbath by kindling flame or traveling, you are commanded to do what your father wishes. Thus, your reverence for your father has overridden your obligation to the Sabbath.

Why are teachers so revered in our tradition? The Talmudic Rabbi Phineas ben Yair teaches, "Study leads to precision, precision leads to zeal, zeal leads to cleanliness, cleanliness leads to restraint, restraint leads to purity, purity leads to holiness, holiness leads to humility, humility leads to fear of sin, fear of sin leads to saintliness, saintliness leads to a holy spirit, [and] a holy spirit leads to life eternal..." In our ancient wisdom, our potential can only begin to be achieved when feelings of reverence toward our teachers move us towards lives of study. The ancient Jewish voice, therefore, believed that everything important begins with reverence.

And from our time, Rabbi John D. Rayner, once an esteemed professor at the Leo Beck Rabbinical School in London, has a quote in our High Holiday prayer book on page 13. He writes, "From year to year the need becomes more urgent for a religion that teaches reverence for life as its highest principle. Judaism is such a religion. The God it worships does not require the death of sinners, but that they may turn and live. It is a religion which teaches that to destroy a single life is to sustain an entire world ... whose toast is *Lechayim*, 'To life!' ... It is a religion whose New Year is a celebration of life and a plea for its continuance: 'Remember us into life, O King who delights in life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, O God of life.'"

The Jewish message is clear and remarkable: From reverence springs everything good.

Yet, as Paul Woodruff points out, reverence isn't faith. He asserts that differences between reverence and faith can be glaring. He writes, "Reverence requires us to maintain a modest sense of the difference between human and divine. If you wish to be reverent, never claim the awful majesty of God in support of your political views ... In fact, by claiming that God votes with you, you have effectively opted out of political process altogether ... All too often, believers in any religion set themselves against reverence. We often see a powerful religion, without a scrap of reverence, stamping out its more modest rivals in one crusade after another."

Reverence can be found in faith, but it is certainly not assumed. In fact, reverence can be found in many places. Where do we experience reverence? We experience it in big moments and in small moments.

Live long enough, and we've all had these big moments. The death of a loved one. News of an accident or illness. A wedding day. The birth of a child.

This past summer, my wife and I had one of these big moments. On July 4th, at 10:27am, our second daughter Maia was born. Named for my grandfather who died a year and three months before she was born, as well as my wife's maternal grandmother, who died when Gabi's mom was only twelve, Maia Hermina was born happy, healthy, and surrounded by love. As my wife continues to heal and gather her strength for another year serving this beautiful congregation, we have watched Maia grow and begin to interact with the world around her. We have watched her big sister accept and embrace the role of big sister. We have felt amazed looking at ourselves in the mirror, realizing that while *we* were once kids, we are now parents of two children, and responsible for so much. A certain combination of awe tinged with fear gives us incredible pause. And it is in those pauses that we experience the reverence of big moments.

July 4th, later in the day, it came time to introduce our oldest daughter, Noa, to her new sister. It was a few hours after Maia was born. Gabi was in a holding room adjacent to the OR and Maia was in the nursery, getting attended to by the wonderful nurses of North Shore LIJ. I found Noa sitting with her grandparents in the Maternity Ward waiting room.

"Do you want to meet your baby sister?" I asked her, holding out my hand.

"Sure daddy," she responded, her voice quiet as a whisper.

Hand in hand, we walked down the long maze of hallways and corridors to the window through which we could see Maia, sleeping in a crib beneath a heat lamp. I picked Noa up and held her so she could look through the window. I whispered in her ear, "You see that little girl sleeping over there?"

She nodded yes.

“That’s your little sister Maia. She’s the most important person in your life.”

Together we stared at the newest addition to our family, each of us reverent in our own way, mesmerized by the holiness of that moment.

These experiences with reverence during big moments – they do so much. When we allow them, these experiences can truly change who we are, change how we see the world.

But think for a moment of the doctors who brought Maia into this world. They do hundreds of deliveries both natural and C-section a year, thousands in their career. A big moment for us is a small moment for them. After all, when all is said and done they won’t necessarily remember our little girl born on July 4th at 10:27am. Does that mean that they don’t experience a type of reverence for the ordinary day? That they aren’t in some way, transformed by their ordinary experiences? Maybe, along with the reverence that can be experienced during the bigger moments in life, there is a certain amount of reverence to be found in those smaller moments.

I think, for example, of Gabi’s OBGYN. In the case of a C-section, the soon to be mother is brought into the OR for pre-surgery prep before the husband is allowed in. The pre-surgery prep is the hardest part for Gabi – certainly the most painful. The fact that I’m not allowed in to comfort her at that time is, to say the least, discomfoting.

When Gabi’s doctor saw how nervous she was, he instinctively reached out and took her hand, comforting her until I was allowed in. An every day moment. Yet, a feeling of reverence for just how important such a moment can be. A soon to be mother should be comfortable. A doctor recognized that and, humbly, offered a hand.

We all experience reverence in small moments. Maybe you experience feelings of reverence at the sight of natural wonders – a sunset, a rainbow, a waterfall... Or maybe in human creativity and ingenuity – the marvel of a skyscraper, the harmony of music... Or, maybe you experience reverence in moments of human connection – the hug of a child, the kiss of someone you love... Or in personal achievements – success at work, the completion of a project... Maybe you experience reverence in moments of personal challenge – a test grade that wasn’t as high as expected, a missed business opportunity...

In all of these moments, reverence has the power to transform us – to make us better people by reminding us how important everything is.

Reverence, in other words, comes only when we open ourselves up to it – when we allow it to be felt. And when we do, we find ourselves immediately changed, and changed for the better. For reverence reminds us to take deep breaths, to be patient for the stranger, kind to the needy. It reminds us to get to know our neighbors, to spend time with our children, to be thankful for the blessings we have. It also reminds us to stand up for what we believe in, to stand against those who attempt to undermine what we believe is right. Above all, reverence reminds us that life is special – life is a gift that, no matter what we

believe, none of us really understand. Life is infinitely finite, and awfully specific. The best thing for any of us to do is to never take life for granted, to live every moment as if it were our last – exhibiting nothing less than the best we have to offer.

Of course, we know that's not really possible. All of us are human. We all make mistakes. We all live through moments that, frankly, are not reverent at all. How can we allow ourselves to feel reverence for a life and world filled with so many unholy and terrible things?

In our sense of doubt, the ancient voice of our tradition calls out to us: Think of Shabbat, it whispers. Even if you don't celebrate Shabbat in any way, the philosophy found there might be helpful. The philosophy of Shabbat teaches us that there are really only two types of things, two types of experiences in this world. There is *Kadosh*, or, holy; and *chol*, that is to say, everything else.

Kadosh are the big and small moments in life through which a deep sense of reverence is achieved. The death of a loved one. The news of accident or illness. A wedding day. The birth of a child. A sunset. A beautiful piece of art. A great conversation. A slow walk on a summer's day. An awesome achievement. A frustrating challenge. All of these things remind us who we, in our best moments, are always striving to be.

Chol is simply everything else – not just unholy, but everything else. The regular moments that pass us by or the terrible moments that plague us, change who we are for the worse.

On Shabbat we say goodbye to *chol*, we do our best to not allow anything regular or unholy into our lives. During the rest of the week we experience *Kadosh* and *chol* together. On Shabbat we experience *rak Kadosh*, only the Holy.

That *Kadosh* can exist on its own without *chol* may be understood as a dire warning that *chol* can exist on its own without *Kadosh*. We just don't want to imagine such a world. When we search for moments of reverence in our daily lives, we can actively remind ourselves how to be the best that we can be during moments of *chol*. But more than that, we can move our world that much closer to the perfection we attempt to emulate through the practice of renewal found on Shabbat and, indeed, during our High Holidays.

May we, on this New Year, find the courage to use this time for what it's meant: asking ourselves important questions about how we can become better people; making promises to ourselves to stay true to our highest potential. May we find the strength to make the changes in ourselves we know we have to make. And finally, may we find the wisdom to allow that feeling of reverence to remind us just how important it is to live in a purposeful way, guided by our strongest sense of humility, humanity and morality.

As my grandmother said, when we allow it, reverence can change who we are, change how we see the world.

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Kein Y'hi Ratzon. May this be God's will. Shanah tova.