

The Idolatry of Time
Rosh HaShana Morning SERMON 5771
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The scene depicted in the Book of Exodus is both majestic and awesome. There, arrayed about a mountain in the middle of the desert, with their own ears, the Children of Israel heard the first two commandments: "I am the Eternal, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make a graven image or any manner of likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them for I, the Eternal, am a jealous God."

With those words, enshrined in Torah, we discover the true essence of Judaism.

Although Hillel may be remembered for his pithy expression that the whole Torah comes to teach "do not do to others what you don't want them to do to you," Hillel taught that the true essence of Judaism is found in those first two Commandments. In the Midrash known as Sifre, on Deuteronomy 28, we learn "Whoever acknowledges idolatry disavows the whole Torah and whoever disavows idolatry acknowledges the whole Torah." To put it simply, Judaism is the faith that rejects idolatry of any kind. We have no visual or corporeal image of God because by having such an image, we turn that object into something that is not and cannot be God.

The great 12th Century thinker, Maimonides, points out that adoring something which is not God and raising it to the rank of God and enslaving oneself to it, whether in thought or in action, denies all that Judaism represents. But if a person reaches the stage of repudiating idolatry, that person has come to recognize that one cannot attain knowledge of God except by an admission of one's duty to worship God -- a worship in which that person is finally capable of maintaining contact with God. Judaism is a rejection of the pagan faiths which animated animals with god-like qualities. It is a rejection of the Hellenistic tendency to apply anthropomorphic and anthropopathic qualities to the gods. It is a rejection

of those faiths that depict God in human or even superhuman form. And even though the Torah itself is full with anthropomorphisms in which God might be described as having human physical qualities, or anthropopathisms in which God is described as having human emotions like jealousy or anger, Maimonides reminds us that these instances simply reveal our human inability to overcome the need for idolatry and yet holds out the notion that truly the only thing that we can know about God, Maimonides says, is what God is not.

Idolatry manifests itself in a number of forms. Idolatry can simply be narcissism. We create God in our image. We ascribe to God our feelings, our wants, our emotions, our sense of justice, our sense of fairness. Idolatry can manifest itself as magic -- the belief in the power of curses or amulets, magical names or numbers. One might suggest that Judaism manifests those properties. Some might suggest we hang mezuzot on our doors in order to ward off evil spirits or we light candles or we wrap ourselves in talliasim, as acts of magic. But truly these are just things that help remind us of our duties and our human condition.

We have raised philosophy and intellect and worshiped it in an idolatrous manner. For the most part, Judaism has successfully taught that our rejection of idolatry must be complete and total. Many of you have heard me say, over and over again, that nothing in Jewish life is inherently holy. Things only become holy when we make them such. Friday night comes along and if we go to the movies or a restaurant, that's not Shabbat. It only becomes Shabbat when we make it so. I, in my station as a rabbi, do not marry a couple, I just make sure they do the things that serve to make them holy in each other's lives. Many times I might place my hands on the shoulders of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, or an infant and evoke a blessing, my words are merely the expression of our communal hopes. I have no magical powers -- and the words, though awe-inspiring, are simply the collective wishes of the entire community as the Bar or Bat Mitzvah or the infant enters adulthood.

So Judaism is, in its very essence, the faith that accepts God as being *yotzei min clal* (above all else), and anything less is not deserving of worship.

However, there is one form of idolatry, that, for the most part, we in this community have yet to conquer. It is the idolatry of time. We live our lives by iPhones, Blackberries, Palms, and even for those “old-school” filofaxes, watches and clocks. We say, “I can’t do that because I don’t have the time.” And as the minute hand revolves around the clock, demands are placed upon us that we feel unable to reject. And yet time is truly a human invention. Our friends in the animal kingdom only live in the present and though they may manifest patterned responses based upon experience, no animal reflects on its past or plots its future. But we do. From the very beginning of our people’s corporate folklore, we imposed time on the very story of creation.

We begin, “In the beginning,” and mark the passage of time by the setting and rising of the sun, the movement of the moon and stars and sun. We think about things that happened before, appreciate the events of the now and anticipate the surprises and plans of the future. And as our technology became more sophisticated, so did our control over time. Whereas once our ancestors marked the day by the rise of the sun -- the sun at its high point and in its setting -- we now fractionalize time in hours and minutes and seconds and even, nano-seconds. And we account for all of that time. We practice idolatry when we reference our calendars and we have become slaves to our own invention. Our technology continues to advance. What once took days for the Pony Express to deliver in writing can now be beamed across the world in a nanosecond on the Internet.

Many of you know that my full-time gig is as the Vice President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism – the umbrella of Reform and Progressive congregations in over 45 countries. I live in multiple time zones. My chairman lives in Northern California, so I am always thinking 3 hours behind. My colleagues in our World Headquarters are in the heart of Jerusalem and so I always aware of being 7 hour ahead. The members of my Management Committee, with whom I work on a regular basis, are made up of a Vice Chair and a Treasurer who live in Great Britain (6 hours ahead) a Vice Chair in Melbourne (14 hours ahead) and a Secretary in Houston (2 hours behind). I can sit at home with my laptop computer on my lap and carry on a video and audio conversation over Skype with my colleagues in Israel, and staff members in the former Soviet Union. Office memoranda that used to take a day to distribute now pops up automatically on our desk tops. Computers shoot written texts across telephone lines and what is printed here is printed there seconds later. And, as much as I

hate to admit this publicly, as a 54 year old male, I regularly get up at 2 am (which is 9 am in Israel) – as I pad my way to take care of my 2 am needs, I grab my Palm Pre and check my emails from the Jerusalem office which is just coming to life – AND I RESPOND TO THEM. Even Shabbat has felt the impact in my life – As I try to remember for whom Shabbat exists and for whom it is already over. All this, I sometimes falsely believe, allows me to be more productive and able to accomplish more in less time. And I am not alone (I can see you twitching, and some nodding knowingly).

I have become enslaved to time. And our enslavement to time and our worship of the ticking clock increases. But it is time that we overthrow the tyranny of time and we learn how to do this from our own tradition. And that is through the practice of suspending time on Shabbat.

The great teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote in his landmark book, published in 1951, entitled The Sabbath, “He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil. He must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness and fury of acquisitiveness and the betrayal in embezzling his own life. He must say farewell to manual work and learn to understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of man. Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth. On the Sabbath, we especially care for the seed of eternity implanted in the soul. The world has our hands but our soul belongs to Someone Else. Six days a week we seek to dominate the world. On the seventh day we try to dominate the self.”

We have become so desperate to be productive, to meet all the demands that have been placed on our shoulders, or that we place upon our own shoulders, that we behave as slaves. And yet Shabbat comes to remind us that it is our duty to overthrow the tyranny of time and cease **doing** and discover simply **being**. By learning to simply “be” we rediscover our humanity and we can begin to concentrate on our connection to God. When we raise our cups and pronounce the Kiddush, our words of prayer do not change the contents of that goblet of wine. We cannot turn a glass of Maneshevitz into a glass of Petrus. No religious alchemy takes place. What changes is our perception of time. That glass of wine reminds us that we are most human when we are most at rest.

One can take these words that I am preaching and say “he’s giving us a prescription for vacation time or an afternoon nap,” and I’d be the last person to argue with anybody over the efficacy of taking a vacation or even a little snooze now and then, but the demand to practice Sabbath rest is a demand to discover what is most important in our lives: family and friends, community and faith. We substitute the glamour of running from dinner to the drudgery of housework for soaring melodies of song and prayer, words and thoughts that make us ponder and grow, time to enjoy the goodness that still exists in creation. The poet Marcia Falk wrote: “Three generations back my family had only to light a candle and the world parted. Today, Friday afternoon, I disconnect clocks and phones. When night fills my house with passages, I begin saving my life.”

And through Sabbath rest we, too, can begin to save our lives. On Sabbath we sing the words to V’shamru: “The People of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath in every generation as a covenant for all time. It is a sign forever between Me and the People of Israel. For in six days the Eternal God made heaven and earth and on the seventh day God rested from labor.”

By entering Shabbat, we enter into God’s presence. By entering into Shabbat, we try to be like God rather than making God like us. By gathering together with family or community we elevate ourselves and we sublimate time and we reject the servitude that has been placed upon our shoulders during the rest of the week. We call Shabbat “holy” because it is a slice -- a segment -- out of the regimentation of time. And Shabbat was given to us for sanctity and rest -- words that we repeat each Shabbat morning when we pronounce the blessing over the Haftarah reading. If one experiences a weekday worship service, the greatest section of prayers, known as the Amida, begins with three blessings and ends with three blessings (around 13 additional *vakashot*, requests). On Shabbat, the Amida begins with those same three blessings, concludes with the same three blessings, but our requests are quieted and replaced with a declaration of the importance and the holiness of the Sabbath day.

We learn from our tradition that Sabbath is an entire day of light and brightness, even Shabbat evening. Our ancestors who lived in the town of Tzfat (Safed) likened the entrance of the Shabbat to the anticipation that a groom feels as his bride processes down the aisle to join him under the

chuppa. We often begin our Friday evening services with the singing of L'cha Dodi – Come, My Beloved. Come, we greet Shabbat.

The importance of Shabbat is underscored by the way we count the days in Hebrew. Each day is simply another day leading up to the conclusion of the week with Shabbat. We count the first day of the Sabbath, the second day, the third day, the fourth day. Each day during the week our anticipation grows stronger for Shabbat is the gift that we are given in order to remember our humanity. The day we celebrate today -- Rosh Hashana -- is known in our tradition as Shabbat Shabatot -- the Sabbath of Sabbaths. And I pray that you all have felt the glory of rest and rejuvenation by hearing the soaring melodies and reading prayers of profound meaning and becoming emboldened by the presence of such a large, warm and welcoming community.

And so it is that we in this community must reclaim Shabbat as our own and reclaim the gift that has been presented to us. We have noticed the growing number of people who have joined with us on Friday evenings and we pray that those numbers continue to grow. For we strengthen each other when, as a community, we overthrow the tyranny of time in order to just **be**.

I once heard a story of a couple who, as a wedding gift, received a washer and a dryer from the bride's grandfather. And as he was thanked for this generous gift, he stopped and said to the couple, "I want you to know that I happen to have purchased a Jewish washer and dryer." Curious, they said, "What makes this washer and dryer different from all other washers and dryers." He said, "Ah. This one doesn't work on the Sabbath."

Abraham Joshua Heschel continues: "To set apart one day a week for freedom. A day on which we would not use the instruments we have which have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction. A day for being with ourselves. A day of detachment from the vulgar. Of independence. Of external obligations. A day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization. A day on which we use no money. A day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow men and the forces of nature. Is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for man's progress than the Sabbath? The solution of mankind's

most vexing problem will not be found in renouncing technical civilization but in attaining some degree of independence of it.”

We often speak about the word *kadosh* – holiness. The very first time the word is used in our Torah occurs at the ending of the story of creation: “And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.” The very essence of holiness emanates from the Sabbath and if we seek to attain holiness in our lives we must learn the discipline of freeing ourselves from the strictures of time and discovering the holiness inherent in Sabbath rest. I pray that when you walk out of here at the end of today’s services, each and every one of you will walk out refreshed, restored, reminded that we are part of a sacred and holy community, given things to think about and hearing melodies that enliven the soul. We give you this opportunity when you join with us at one of our Friday night services. And whether you join us here or gather around your own dining room table, Shabbat can free us from our idolatry of time and our enslavement to our calendars.

This day, this Sabbath of Sabbaths and every Shabbat gives us the opportunity to join together and reaffirm our basic humanity and find the contentment, wholeness and peace that comes with Sabbath worship, prayer, study, song and life. We need to heal. We need to escape the mundane drudgery of our work-a-day week and we need a respite from the challenges of life that are daily thrown in front of our feet. That’s what the Sabbath offers us. I pray we accept this gift and find our spirits elevated and our lives ennobled. May God’s love and healing shower upon us and may we find the warmth of community and the peace that comes when we join together, not just on this day, but week in and week out -- a respite from our enslavement to time.

Shana tova umituka. May each and every one of you have a warm, sweet, healthy and better new year. Amen.