

RH Day 1 -- "Why Am I Coming to Services on the High Holidays?"

One of the highlights on the rabbinical calendar is the preparation of the High Holiday sermons. I don't mean to diminish its importance, and I am fully aware that there are larger numbers of congregants hearing my remarks over these next few days than will be the case over any of the following 50 weeks. I can't help but feel that I should not be investing an inordinate amount of time into the preparation of these remarks as compared to those that I deliver on a weekly basis throughout the year.

Nevertheless, there is that reality of expectations that I still need to respect, for now at least this year.

So like many other rabbis, I began to draft my thoughts over the last month or so with the prospect of developing them into full blown sermonic messages.

But a funny thing happened to me a week or so ago that derailed the subject matter of this morning's sermon. I received an email from a congregant and though I see him in the room, I will not embarrass him by telling you who he is. The email came with an attached magazine article that he thought I might find interesting - and he was right. So right, that it bumped my planned sermon for today into another day's slot.

So let me share with you some of the comments in this article, and for those interested in reading it in its entirety,

I will include the url for the article in my weekly email next week.

The article is entitled, "High Holiday Services Are Boring. Here's How We Can Fix Them." And I'd like to read to you the opening paragraph of the article: "High Holiday services are a slog. All right, not at every synagogue, not all the time, not for everybody. Granted, services aren't meant to entertain us every minute. But which of the 613 commandments prescribe boredom?"

The article went on about the monotony of the prayer services with the long hours of the "often-stilted liturgy" and blaming the synagogue rabbi for this result, due to his failure to explain each one of the once-a-year prayers, and how or why any of them are relevant to the lives of the congregants in the 21st century.

Well, for one thing we here at Beth Jacob anticipated this complaint even before the article came out. For tomorrow's Mussaf service, we will shorten the Hazzan's repetition of the Amidah and explain a few of these once a year prayers, perhaps 2-3 of them depending on the time; and consider their relevancy, or even irrelevancy to our lives. We will also invite you to share your reactions to them, as compared to those of previous centuries, including modern discomfort with the message being sent.

And I would like to thank our Ritual Chair, Joel Etra, for having made that suggestion to Hazzan Fuerstman and myself.

Frankly, I'm hoping that you will find this exercise rewarding . Indeed, I have a dream that

we could implement this on a weekly basis for our Shabbat service. I am not going out on a limb when I proclaim the reality that most of you are unfamiliar with a large swath of the prayers in that service and based on the lack of awareness might be finding that service to be equally numbing.

Returning to the article that I received last week, the author admonished the congregational rabbi to undertake a series of measures designed to excite the crowds.

But as I reflected on the challenges posed by the High Holiday marathon services and this instruction to enliven the services, I began to question the entire premise of the article, and as well to question the basic foundation of our treatment of the High Holiday services, and particularly your ability to handle the length and breadth of this service.

As some of you know, I have been engaged in long distance running for a long time, and have run about 5-6 marathons over the last 15 years. Maybe “jog” is a better word for explaining my pace as I hardly run with the Ethiopians and Kenyans. But even at a jogging pace, there is no way that I can run 26 miles without injury if I don’t engage in a significant amount of training in the months leading up to the race. Thankfully training never requires one to run the full 26 miles before the race. But, the preferred regimen is to experience 2-3 twenty mile runs, and several others close to this distance, to get the body and especially the legs used to the long ordeal. In those years in which I cheated the training schedule, I suffered the consequences with some form of severe cramping in one or both of my legs towards the end of the race that required my hobbling, or in one case walking, the last 4-5 miles to the finish line.

So, as I look around the room today, I might pose a question to you: How many of you have trained for this morning/afternoon’s service? OK, the vast majority of you have not been here since Mike Gere opened the service with the *Birkhot Hashachar* and *Pesukei D’Zimrah* at 9:00 am; and not all of you will be staying through to the projected 1:00 pm conclusion – 4 hours. But a fair amount of you are going to be sitting here for at least a 2-3 hour period; and if you’re having difficulty absorbing the beauty of this service, maybe it’s because you haven’t trained for this service by attending some of the shorter weekly Shabbat services that we offer year round. In effect, you’re not having trained for this service is not unlike my cramping at the end of the marathons that I didn’t sufficiently train for.

And the reality is that for many Jews of the liberal bent, and by that I mean, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist denominations, the High Holiday service is the only time that the Synagogue can reliably expect your presence. While this does not come as a surprise to me, this year for the first time I questioned why?

Do you believe that your being here during the High Holidays will result in the gates of your life staying open for another year? I know that this is the overriding theme of these 10 days, and I certainly am just as guilty as everybody else in parroting that line – but can I really give you reassurance that your efforts just during these 10 days and let’s be realistic, we’re talking about 2-3 days – is that going to be enough to get you over the finish line?

As a rabbi I often get questions put to me about God. And sometimes, I even answer them. Take for example, the studies that we pursued over the last year slogging through the Kabbalistic texts of the Zohar in which we read about accounts describing the Divine existence – what God does, what God thinks, what God feels, and so on. I hope that notwithstanding the apparent certainty of those accounts that no one walked out with an assured knowledge of God’s life.

Seriously, the wise men who wrote Kabbalistic texts about God’s life – they never met God any more than you met God. I’m not diminishing the value of these teachings as long as we keep them in the context of their constituting beliefs, reflections or imaginations of God’s existence – but not knowledge in the sense of scientific understandings the way that you can explain the inner processes of a combustion engine.

So, it is with that disclaimer that I approach the questions put to me that include the Divine reaction to our conduct. Indeed, one of our members asked me the following question two weeks ago following Morning Minyan: “If we repent, truly repent, during the High Holidays, will God forgive us?” And that question was followed up from another member that went like this:

“Isn’t it true that if we repent at any time of our lives, that God will forgive us?”

I know the Jewish conventional responses to these questions, and I was prepared to give my two questioners the reassurance that they sought. But the “lawyer” inside of me overtook my response, and responded, “I really don’t know.” I know what our tradition teaches us, and what our beliefs are; but the questions posed to me that morning seemed to be demanding an answer that I couldn’t give them.

Afterwards I reflected on the various Jewish approaches to God’s existence, to God’s reaction to various acts or thoughts that we perpetrate over the course of our existence, and tried to put some understanding to the manner in which these God-describers came up with their teaching of the Divine existence. I thought of the kabbalistic weavings, the philosophical enlightenments, and the rationalists’ justifications for God’s actions.

But to be honest with you, these approaches to understanding God and Her ways can be quite difficult to understand and certainly do not commend themselves to an off the cuff response to the inquiry of whether coming to the High Holiday services will suffice to get your ticket punched for another year of life.

So, I tried to come up with an easier way to examining the Divine response to our actions, and particularly to this question that has to be appealing to your motivation for coming to these services in this season. And in a way, I’m not sure if the foundation of my approach differs so much from that employed by the great Jewish thinkers of all stripes, although my humility demands that I do not put myself in their class.

We read in the first chapter of Genesis: God created man in God’s image. This does not makes us equal with God, but it certainly allows for the suggestion that God’s reactions may have some human-like qualities. So, to guess as to how God would react to a certain situation, perhaps

we can envision how a human would react to that or a similar situation. With that as my background, please join with me to analyze God's possible reaction to the customary thrice a year days of repentance.

God invites us to pray to God three times a day every day of the year – all of which by the way, include opportunities for repentance; 4 times a day on Shabbat and holidays, and 5 times on Yom Kippur. This comes out to roughly 1000 times a year because of combined services that are held on various days. And given the fact that we have multiple services on the high Holidays, we can raise the response rate from 3 days to about 10 prayer services. So, do the math: the High Holiday services represent about 1% of the year's total.

Consider a corresponding human relationship. Imagine a friend that invites you to her home multiple times a year; or requests you to join him for a night at the movies on several occasions throughout the year. And these invitations were repeated year after year. Over the years, you respond favorably to your friend about 1% of the times that your friend beckoned – How strong would your relationship be with your friend?

And extrapolating from your friend's reaction, then how do you think that God reacts?

Now I know that for virtually all of us, God's 1000+ invitations a year for prayer may be viewed as challenging. But I don't make the ground rules with regard to God's demands for a relationship. I am only asked to guess at God's reactions to our response rate that borders on 1%; and based on the only framework that I can employ, the human response, I have to tell you that this is not likely to be viewed as a successful strategy.

Or maybe we should just give up with answering this question. As we read from the Torah this past Shabbat in *parshat Netzavim*, Torah has been given to us, and its meaning is not beyond the seas that we need to send someone on an expedition to retrieve it for us. Nevertheless, the Torah reading continues, there are "some secrets that belong exclusively with God," and that knowing how God will respond to our actions, including the amount of times we commit to prayer service attendance, falls within those secrets.

OK, so let's take God out of the equation. Maybe, we can conclude that it is impossible for us to predict God's response to the question of whether three times a year suffices. So let me suggest another approach to the overall question.

Each of you has joined Beth Jacob synagogue and I assume that part of the reason for doing so is to be a part of the Beth Jacob family. Well, Beth Jacob invites you to about 100 or so Shabbat and holiday prayer services a year; and about twice that amount during the weekdays –

--What's your percentage response rate?

--And how do you think that Beth Jacob should care?

--Or do you think that Beth Jacob should care?

I want to share with you an interesting incident that arose during the course of the negotiations that resulted in the recent renewal of my contract. After we speedily agreed on all of the important terms, I raised a very intriguing proposal to add to the contract. I pointed out that other than paying my salary and certain expenses, Beth Jacob was not obligating itself to do anything under the contract. My duties were carefully articulated; but when it came to Beth Jacob, other than paying money, there was nothing. I'm not minimizing the money aspect and I appreciate it, but there is nothing about what Beth Jacob is agreeing to do in response to everything that I was to do.

Truth be told, there really wasn't anything "legal" that I could have proposed that would have been acceptable. So I proposed a wishy-washy provision that would commit Beth Jacob to some targeted benchmark – say like percentage of attending prayer services or classes that I lead. Or committing itself to supporting various Jewish or other community programs to help those less fortunate. Your lead negotiator resisted even this, probably recognizing that even if we agreed that the provision wouldn't be enforceable, it might create negative reactions from the client – i.e., the Board of Directors as well all of you? It was one thing to commit your money, but to commit your time – Whoa – Especially when you were not even part of the negotiations.

And even if she did come back to you and polled each and every one of you on the issue, would she be able to enlist unanimous support to even the most minimal commitments along these lines.

Well, we finally concluded that I wasn't going to get my wish and we just wrapped up the agreement without trying to tackle that one.

As I reflect on this experience, perhaps it was wrong to reach this result along the structure that I was proposing. The error in my thinking was in devising a plan in which I, the rabbi, entered into an agreement with you the congregants, obligating you to various benchmarks. The reality is that rabbis come and go in every congregation. But congregants potentially stay for their entire lives.

With that in mind, I'd like to suggest a different approach: each and every one who has joined the Beth Jacob family define exactly what the nature of your relationship with the Synagogue each year, and the High Holiday service is the perfect opportunity to do so. Just as my contract with the Synagogue details my responsibilities to the Synagogue, shouldn't Beth Jacob be accorded the same respect from each of its members in knowing how they view their responsibilities to the Synagogue.

Let's give up in trying to predicting God's reaction to your response rate to Her invitations to pray. Let's conclude that we just don't know the answer, that it's one of those secrets of Torah.

However, there are other things that fall within our knowledge and ability. Anticipating how Beth Jacob could, or better should, react to our actions, falls within that knowledge base. Thus I'd like to rephrase the question that was posed to me two weeks ago, as follows: Instead of asking whether coming to Synagogue three times a year will satisfy God's requirements, the better proposi-

tion that each of you ought to raise with yourselves would follow this pattern: Over the last year, I have attended ___ prayer services, or alternatively, I have attended or helped out on ___ social events - or any other yardstick that you want to devise. And after you honestly quantify your response, ask yourself: Is this enough to make my Beth Jacob family happy with my performance over coming year; and if the answer is no, what will you do to generate a more positive response.

As with your private prayers with God, this is one that need not be raised in verbal conversation with an officer or leader of the congregation. But the sincerity of this question ought to play a significant part in the *teshuvah*, the repentance prayers that you begin to undertake with the ensuing *Mussaf*. And if I can borrow one more High Holiday metaphor, envision what it will take in the ensuing year not only to keep the gates of your life open and fulfilling, but as well: what it will take to keep the gates of Beth Jacob open and spiritually rewarding to all those who want to enter those gates.

Shana Tovah U'Metukah!