**Returning to the Path of My Rabbinate**

**Rosh HaShanah Day 1 – 5776 (2015)**

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This Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of my tenth year in the rabbinate as well as the beginning of my tenth year here at CBI.

As I look back at these past nine years I am filled with joy and trepidation. Over this time period we’ve shared many joyous occasions and overcame important challenges. Naturally, these years also had moments of pain, loss, and struggle. What might we draw from our experiences from the past – the great and the not so great – that might guide our way into the future?

At this time, I wanted to express my utmost gratitude to each one of you. Over the years, you, as individuals and also as a community, placed great trust in my leadership. You expressed love and support towards me and my family, and you showed continued willingness to grow with me as I took my first steps as a spiritual leader, and as I continue to do so today.

My rabbinate is stamped by the soul of this community and it is sealed by the deep connection I feel towards each and every one of you.

This past summer, as I eagerly anticipated the beginning of this tenth year, I was compelled to look back even further in time and reflect not only on these past 9 years, but also on the very journey that lead and inspired me to become a rabbi.

Rosh Hashanah is commonly known as *Yom HaZikaron* – the day of remembrance. On a technical level, Rosh Hashanah challenges us to remember our misdeeds, to reflect upon them and mend our ways.

On a deeper psychological level, Rosh Hashanah invites us to remember who we are and who we were meant to be – to examine the path we have yet to take through the lens of our original starting point. In this sense, Rosh Hashanah calls for an existential Teshuvah, literally, a return to personal authenticity and one’s true mode of being in the world.

In this spirit, this morning I would like to do Teshuvah – I would like to return to the roots of my rabbinate and share some personal reflections with you. In particular, I will focus on three personal experiences that fundamentally shaped my choice to become a rabbi. Through this act of remembrance, I hope to invite each of us to recall the beginnings of our own spiritual journeys, meditate on the paths we have already crossed, and commit anew to the ways we must still traverse.

My earliest and perhaps most formative religious experience goes back to my maternal grandparents’ home.

As many of you know, I grew up in Israel until age ten in a somewhat traditional, albeit non-observant, home. During those years, my family lived just a few blocks away from the home of my nono and nona, my grandfather and grandmother, who were religiously devout. As a young boy, I was blessed to spend almost every Friday night at my grandparents’ home. Right before the Sabbath Kiddush, my grandfather would chant out loud the priestly blessing, which parents traditionally bestow upon their own children on the eve of Shabbat. At the end of the blessing my nono would always rest his hands on the head of his most mischievous grandchild, for that youngling was in most need of God’s graceful blessing and protection. And sure enough, more often than not, I found myself most deserving of that blessing.

In my child’s eye, it was a home filled with love, warmth, and sanctity.

There is one particular memory that remains most vivid with me and continues to inform my rabbinate to this day.

Oftentimes, in the mornings after sleeping over at their home, I would find my nono and nona praying Shacharit, the morning service, together. Seated across each other in the living room or balcony, they would sip Turkish black coffee between psalms and sections of prayer. This image captivated my attention, not because it was extraordinary. To the contrary, it captured my soul because it was so plainly ordinary.

For my grandparents, religion was and remains an integrated part of life. As such, it was only natural for them to have a cup of coffee with God every morning.

Recalling this formative experience confronts me with a difficult question. In my own personal path, be it as rabbi or family-man, have I succeeded to seamlessly integrate religion as a natural and organic part of life?

To be sure, I certainly feel like my life is steeped in mitzvoth. Thank God, from morning to night. At the same time, living in the modern world, in the diaspora, in Berkeley, as someone who maintains close relationships with all types of Jews, and also non-Jews, I sometimes find myself getting pulled in different directions. The simplicity of my grandparents’ religiosity is at times missing from the fabric of my own way of living, and definitely, thinking.

Too often, it seems to me, we lead bifurcated lives. Too easily, we compartmentalize and categorize the sacred and profane, failing to see that God's presence touches upon all areas of life. Unknowingly, we restrict religion to specific times and spaces. We are deeply religious at shul, hardly religious in the street, and partially devout in our homes. Furthermore, we inadvertently ritualize the practice of mitzvoth at the expense of naturalizing lived experiences. We refrain from fully offering our lives to religion and in turn our religion is at risk of being rendered lifeless.

As I mark my tenth year in the rabbinate, I wish to return to the memories of that home and better aspire to my grandparents’ integrated religious approach.

This year, what must I do, what must we all do, to cultivate greater integration of life and religion? This year, how might we introduce a more organic or holistic approach to the way we lead our lives religiously?

My second formative experience comes from my teenage years.

As some of you know, during this period of my life I became increasingly more observant. Prayer became a steady part of my week, I attended shul regularly on Shabbat, and slowly took on different aspects of the practice of Shabbat as well. At the same time, as a teenager I did not profess faith in God or even think of myself as a believer. To the contrary, in many ways the question of God’s existence weighed heavily on me, both emotionally and intellectually. To a certain degree, at that time, belief in God was cause for embarrassment – deemed as a mark or sign for one’s lack of cognitive sophistication.

When I was sixteen, I was fortunate to go on the March of the Living – an international trip for High School students that visits major Shoah landmarks and memorials in Poland. The trip also culminates with a visit to Israel. During the entire trip, I kept a journal of personal poems and reflections. When I arrived in Israel, I shared some of my writings with one of my uncles. Without judgment in his voice, my uncle, who showed considerable appreciation for what I had shared with him, noted: “You have deep faith in God.”

His comment was both surprising and illuminating. It was surprising because the vast majority of the poems I had written in Poland expressed deep anger in and profound disapproval of God. At the same time, it was illuminating because it rang true. My questions about God, my frustrations with God, and my anger at God all pointed towards a deep belief in God as well.

This experience, more than others, stands out as the point in which I began garnering the courage to own and express my personal faith and belief in God.

Recalling this formative experience confronts me with a difficult question. In my own personal path, be it as rabbi or family-man, have I succeeded to outwardly express and model my personal faith?

Too often, it seems to me, our children and even we encounter a world that readily mocks and scorns the possibility of experiencing God’s presence in our midst. Each of us can easily think of countless times in which our religious reflections, experiences, and or worldviews were met with raised eyebrows or subtle sniggers. Indeed, from the moment we are born, in open as well as in subtle ways, our society rewards our rationality and suppresses our spirituality.

To be very clear, I am not speaking about a stable and constant faith. I have always felt that the image of the angles on Jacob’s ladder descending and ascending expressed the idea that faith ebbs and flows, that our faith strives towards the heavens and then gets grounded in earth again. And yet, even within this framework, each of us is graced with moments of ascent, times where spiritual meaning defies rational explanation. When those moments occur, and they do occur, they challenge each of us to garner the courage of faith to simply utter the ancient words, “our God and God of our ancestors” without pause for a philosophical preface or need for theological citations or justifications.

As I mark my tenth year in the rabbinate, I wish to return to that time of religious realization and aspire anew to deepen the faith of my youth.

This year, what must I do, what must we all do, to cultivate greater faith in God, without shame or embarrassment, without rationalizations or over sophistication? This year, how might we embrace a bolder belief in our personal God?

My third formative religious experience comes from my early 20s and my initial encounter with the study of traditional texts.

As some of you know, as a teenager I was fortunate to attend a Jewish High School in Montreal that instilled great Jewish pride in its students as well as a deep love for Israel. Sadly, at the same time, the school fell short in imparting traditional learning skills to its students. Though my proficiency in Hebrew gave me a clear advantage, my abilities as a Talmud student were greatly limited by my lack of experience and exposure.

When I graduated university at age twenty I finally decided to take some concrete steps on my path towards the rabbinate. To begin, I met with Rav Neria, an Israeli *shaliach* (messenger) in Montreal, who served as the head of a local Religious Zionist Kollel. With some trepidation, and certainly a measure of audacity, I told Rav Neria that I wished to become a high level learner of Talmud and Torah. That same day, Rav Neria introduced me to one of the Kollel’s instructors and guided him to divide my learning into the study of Mishnah, Talmud, and Halakha. The following year, I continued my studies at a yeshiva in New Jersey where my entire time was devoted to the study of Gemara.

Those first years of traditional text study were thrilling. And yet, in retrospect, I must admit that the content itself wasn’t necessarily religiously or spiritually inspiring in any significant way. In truth, I spent most of my time grinding my teeth on Aramaic words that made little sense to me and deconstructing Talmudic arguments that seemed far from logical. During those early years, I filled notebooks, not with inspired religious poetry, but rather with copious notes on Talmudic debates and long lists of Aramaic words with their proper translations.

And yet, every day I drew great inspiration from simply knowing that I was becoming increasingly more proficient in the founding texts of our tradition. In time, I also realized that I owned a greater share of that tradition as well.

Torah study, coupled with the critical belief that anyone can become a student of Torah, was and remains the cornerstone of my journey to the rabbinate.

Recalling this formative experience confronts me with a difficult question. In my own personal path, be it as rabbi or family-man, have I succeeded to impart the centrality of Talmud Torah, the study of Torah, to myself and to others?

Too often, it seems to me, our studies of Torah get disrupted. Too many of us too easily restrict Torah study to a particular area of interest. Some of us, shy from the study of Halakhah, lest we come across a matter that might force a change in our life. Some of us have long given up on ever learning how to read, understand, or speak Hebrew. Still others, simply don’t make any time at all for any sort of Torah study.

On a personal level, I know that while I dedicate considerable time for class and sermon preparation, it seems like through the years, my own time for personal study has been greatly diminished.

As I mark my tenth year in the rabbinate, I wish to return to that invigorating period of learning of my life and aspire anew to grow once again in my knowledge of Torah.

This year, what must I do, what must we all do, to cultivate a greater commitment to Talmud Torah, to the study of Torah? This year, how might we introduce a more consistent and systemic approach to our personal and communal approach to Jewish learning?

These three memories, among several others, paved the path that led me to the rabbinate. I believe that they have guided my leadership of our community and I pray that they will continue to do so in the future.

As you know, once I became a rabbi my memories all begin here, in this shul, with you. It is this memory too that I wish to share with you today.

When Frayda and I moved here nine years ago we were both in our mid-twenties. To a certain degree, we had little experience in the real world. Neither one of us worked a full-time job before, we were married for just one year, and to a certain degree we were still children. And yet, despite all that, you embraced us lovingly and you placed great trust in us and in our leadership.

During that very first year, whenever I was asked about enacting some sort of change in the community, I repeatedly responded with these words, “This year, I am the change.” Initially, this sentence was just a throwaway line, but in time, I came to appreciate how true it was.

Our time together, even that very first year, brought about great change. It changed me. You changed me. And yes, it also changed us.

In retrospect, you as a community demonstrated a profound capacity to take risks for the sake of change, to trust change, and to embrace it. In other words, you as a community demonstrated your great capacity to change.

Recalling now this formative experience, I share my deep prayer that we continue to grow and yes, change together. On the beginning of our tenth anniversary, on this Rosh Hashanah, may we be blessed with that very gift of change.

This year, may we take greater risks for change as we aspire to lead more integrated religious lives. We did it before, we can do it again.

This year, may we trust more change as we aspire to cultivate a bolder belief in a personal God. We did it before, we can now do it again.

This year, may we fully embrace change as we aspire to adopt a consistent approach to the study of Torah. We did it before, and yes, we will do it again.

May the memories of our shared past guide our path together for the sake of change, for the sake of continued growth, and may it be a blessing for each and every one of us.