Rosh Hashanah Sermon 2016: Outline of Matters in Need of Improvement
Among Jews Part 1 - The Tyranny of Tradition

The Tyranny of Tradition
Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 2016
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In the year 1819, a Jewish German university student named Leopold Zunz published a scathing critique of European Jewry entitled, Outline of Matters in Need of Improvement Among Jews. In it, the young reformist listed no less than 40 aspects of traditional Jewish life which deserved reconsideration in the post enlightenment age, from clinging to superstition to holding a skepticism towards science to the abuse of tyrannical rabbis. This document would eventually frame many of the policies which emerged as Reform Judaism.

Now that I have been honored to serve Temple Beth El for all of two years, with trepidation, I would like to utilize these High Holy days to outline two of my own prescribed Matters in Need of Improvement Among Jews. I will comment on the first today and then the second on Yom Kippur. I hope that such critique may be accepted in the constructive and loving nature in which it is meant and that my words might foster conversation.

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This morning, the telltale signs of the High Holidays are ever present. Reading the Torah. Blowing the shofar. Dipping apples in honey. In a word, tradition.

Tradition is a funny thing. It grounds us, centers us, structures time in a way we can understand. Tradition connects us to our past and ensures that these behavioral patterns will endure into the future. A Rosh Hashanah void of such traditions as blowing the shofar would feel empty and lacking in substance.

At the same time, overly strict adherence to tradition can be dangerous. Tradition can restrict, stultify; and suffocate creativity. Tradition can bolster rituals long after they have eclipsed their original meaning, until we come to celebrate the calcified remnants of ritual itself. Blowing the shofar without thinking about the deeds of the past year. Lighting shabbat candles without pausing to share a moment of blessing from the past week. Tearing a black shiva ribbon without understanding or communicating the anguish it represents. Another rote ritual endured for the sake of posterity. It is this tyranny of tradition which I wish to address this morning.

Consider this paradox: Every ritual we recognize as “tradition” first arose as a new idea. A minority voice introduced an original concept. Slowly, this idea gained traction, moving from the periphery to the center. Over time, the concept became normative to the point of assumed practice. Voila - a tradition is born. This is the story of each and every ritual of our heritage. Each holiday we celebrate, every item of judaica we own owes its inception to this process. Each page of the prayer book you hold in your hands features the original thought of an unnamed author, now fossilized in text.
The danger of this paradox, however, is that the clout of the accepted idea often comes to stifle the very spirit of innovation from which it arose. A new idea becomes practice which becomes tradition which becomes a barrier to future new ideas. This is the tyranny of tradition.

Let me offer this example: Two thousand years ago, the Jewish community faced complete chaos as a result of the Roman destruction of the ancient temple in Jerusalem. Suddenly, a “tradition” centered around political sovereignty and animal sacrifice was upended. Into the void stepped a fringe group of thinkers who began to introduce radical new ideas: the synagogue, lighting shabbat candles, reading the Torah, the vocation of Rabbi... But for argument’s sake, let’s focus on one specific innovation: the Passover seder.

These innovators were long familiar with a Roman “tradition” adopted from the Greeks, called the Symposia, which consisted of a meal in which questions were prompted and debated throughout the night. This group, calling themselves rabbis, appropriated this model and introduced the idea of an annual dinner in the Jewish calendar, in which a foundational narrative would be shared over food. However, this dinner would differ from the Symposia in several ways. First, the bourgeois affair was democratized, mandating that the poorest be allowed to participate. And second, the focus was moved from adults to children by utilizing questions, prompted by unique foods and rituals. And so a gastronomic-pedagogic tradition was born in the Passover seder, something which is never described in the Torah. Like all rituals, the seder served as a means to an end, in this case, the participative sharing of the story of Jewish redemption. But over time, certain aspects of the seder gained authority. The four questions. The seder plate. Elijah’s cup. Even matzah ball soup and brisket. You know, “tradition”. Certain readings and liturgies gained traction and were recorded, eventually becoming the haggadah.

But as the tradition of seder gained legitimacy, the tyranny of tradition reared its head. Today, open discussion and debate are often ceded to the rote reading of page after page of the sacred, “traditional” text. The innovation of engagement through playing with our food is often lost to rote procedure. The focus on children can be completely overlooked, at least until they are brought in and forced to sing the four questions. Ultimately, the seder remains but the questions are all but silenced. We curb our creativity in the face of timeless repetition, as though Moses on Sinai personally proscribed that we must serve the boiled eggs only after everyone has finished the matzah ball soup. We are left worshipping a shadow.

I use the example of the Passover seder due to its ubiquity. But the same cautionary tale may be directed towards every facet of Jewish life. Remember, each and every ritual presents a means to an end. The process loses all meaning when the ritual becomes an end in itself - when we do these things simply because that’s what Jews do. And even worse - when we feel an obligation to perform these rituals in the exact same way, year after year, devoid of improvisation or creativity.

At this point, the tyranny of tradition threatens the very entity of Judaism. As a rabbi, what do I spend my time worrying about? That unqualified obedience to our hallowed
traditions will denude our heritage of its creative spirit, leaving behind the forgotten remains of monotonous ritual. The death of religion will come not through atheism but rather, through tediousness and boredom.

The 20th century philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel opens his book, The Sabbath, with the following prophetic words:

“It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion - its message becomes meaningless.”

I remember first reading Heschel’s words and feeling equally inspired and challenged. He so articulately described so much of the Judaism I knew. I have included this quote in the supplement in your prayer book in hope it might foster conversation.

The point of tradition is to offer us prompts, beckoning a response. Every word, act and ritual of the High Holy days stands as a question awaiting an answer. We may choose to attend hour upon hour of services. But if they do not motivate us to engage in honest reflection and even more importantly, transformative action, then the ritual becomes an end in itself and little is achieved. Each holiday custom, each page of the siddur represents a flashing cursor, a sentence waiting to be completed. The rituals and liturgy of the high holy days can offer us all of the prompts. But the nature of the response is entirely in our hands.

To clarify, I am not advocating for the abolishment of Jewish ritual. When properly utilized, tradition creates the vessel in which our emotions, hopes and fears may be recognized and acted upon. Tradition constitutes the delicate artifice by which we navigate a chaotic and random world.

But the very same spiritual entrepreneurs who invented the Passover seder were keenly aware of both the power and danger of tradition. In the Mishna, dating almost 2,000 years ago, the rabbis debated the merits of establishing a fixed liturgy and creating a prayer book. After all, when Moses prays in the Torah, he does not open to page 2 and start “Baruch Atah Adonai…” He just speaks what’s on his mind. The second century Rabbi Eliezer writes, “He who offers prayer in a rote or tedious fashion, does not offer meaningful reflection.” (Brachot 4:4) Two scholars of the following generation comment, “Whomever does not add their personal prayer to the set liturgy has not prayed at all.” (Brachot 29b) These early rabbis recognized the potential tyranny of tradition and mandated improvisation and personalization. If they were alive today, they would warn us - Attending services does not alone constitute prayer. Reading the words on the page does not constitute piety. Lighting candles alone does not constitute
reflection. In each of these incidents, there is a missing ingredient: us. Tradition provides only the vessel. We must decide how to fill it.

Perhaps this dynamic is no more apparent than the act of fasting on Yom Kippur. This tradition began as a vehicle towards self denial and a pragmatic step to allow for concentration on personal atonement. By avoiding the need to locate and prepare food, so the idea went, people would be able to focus squarely on repentance.

On the contrary, let me know if you have heard this advice: You should attend the late Kol Nidre service so that you can eat a late dinner. You can then attend the late Yom Kippur morning service, so you can sleep in as late as possible, thereby shortening the fast. This leaves you with only a few hours to kill in the afternoon until the break fast. Sounds familiar, right? I know because I used to practice this sequence too. Now think about this - the tradition of fasting, which was introduced as a means towards spiritual assessment now often serves as an impediment to this exact goal. “I don’t have time to reflect because I need to shorten my day to avoid hunger.” Or, some fast with a spirit of machismo - “Look at how long I was able to fast” - again, completely contradicting the very spirit of the ritual!

So allow me to offer this humble suggestion, as a Rabbi, on the bimah, on the high holy days. Unless the “tradition” of fasting supports your ability to reflect on the past year, then when you come back ten days from now, perhaps consider eating something. Really, if the choice is between sleeping away as much of the day as possible or pausing for a snack - go have a Cliff bar. Then find whatever way works for you to engage in reflection. Join us here at the synagogue. Then maybe take a long walk in nature. Maybe sit down with a journal. Maybe have an overdue conversation with a friend. Whatever it is - make it yours, and don’t avoid it for fear of hunger.

I challenge each of us this High Holy Day season to reclaim the creative and innovative spirit of Jewish tradition. Worship of the past creates its own form of idolatry; the false god of tradition. Similarily, we ought to avoid what Arnold Eisen characterizes in his book, Rethinking Modern Judaism, as “Nostalgic Judaism” - performing a ritual only because Bubbie and Zayde used to do it, in exactly the same way.

I’d like to close with a story. The Schwartz family held the recipe for the most delicious brisket. This recipe had been handed down from the old country, from generation to generation. And now, it was being passed on to the youngest member, Mira. The recipe instructed the chef to purchase a 14 pound brisket, take it home, and then cut off and throw away two pounds from one side and two from the other, before seasoning and cooking it. Mira was baffled by this instruction. Why buy fourteen pounds of brisket only to throw away a portion at home? And so Mira asked her mother. “Why do we make brisket this way?” “I don’t know,” she said, “That’s just what the recipe says”. And so Mira asked her grandmother. Grandma, why do we make brisket this way? “Who knows? Maybe the inside of the meat cooks better this way. That’s just how we have always done it. Why bother with something that works?” And so finally, Mira turned to her elderly great grandmother, who had come to Ellis Island all the way from the old country. Bubbie, why do we make brisket this way? “What way?” she responded. “Why do we buy a 14 pound brisket and then cut off 2 pounds on each
side?” “Oh, that’s easy”, she said, “Back in our shtetl, the butcher would only sell a 14 pound brisket. But we could only afford a pot that held 10 pounds. So we would take the brisket home and cut off the sides until it would fit. Why, you aren’t still doing this, are you?”

Today, as we enter into the new year, I urge all of us to let go of our ten pound briskets and reclaim the innovative spirit of Jewish life. We owe it to ourselves to pursue the wonder and meaning of the myriad of prompts around us, left like clues, awaiting our redemption. To worship at the altar of tradition is to say that a thousand years from now, heaven forbid that Judaism should look any different. Today, we respond, heaven forbid that it should look the same.