RESTORING THE SACRED
Rosh Hashanah 5778
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Elie Wiesel offered a parable about our times:

Man complained to God: "You have no idea how hard it is to be human -- to live a life darkened by suffering and despair in a world filled with violence and destruction, to fear death and worry that nothing we do or create or dream matters. You have no idea how hard it is to be human!"

God responded, "You think it's easy being God? I have a whole universe to run, a whole universe demanding constant vigilance. You think you could do that?"

"I'll tell you what," suggested the Man, "let's switch places, for just a moment. For just a moment, You be Man, and I'll be God, and that way we'll see who has it harder."

"For just a moment?" God considered, "Agreed."

So Man and God switched places. Man sat upon God's throne. And God descended to the earth. After a moment passed, God looked up and said, "OK, time to switch back." But Man refused. Man refused to give up the throne of God.

This is our world -- where Man plays God, and God is exiled.[1]

This past summer I read Yuval Noah Harari's: A Brief History of Tomorrow. In it Harari makes the provocative statement that humanity has finally solved the three fundamental problems that have stalked human existence since the dawn of time: Famine, Plague and War.

It used to be that we attributed these horrible events to God being angry with us. Crops died, people got sick, cities and civilizations were laid to ruin and it was God's divine wrath.

But now we are smarter, now we are more scientific, more sophisticated. We don't look to God's will to explain our fate. We look out upon a reality shaped by politics and economics, by our own choices.[2]

Harari explains that science and technology have given us the God-like power to feed the world and thus end hunger.

Medicine can contain -- and in most cases, treat and cure -- plagues that used to kill tens of millions.

Our military prowess, our massive weapons systems and mutually assured destruction have made war on a global scale obsolete.

God has been dethroned, and for better or worse, we now control things. We sit upon God's Iron Throne, we look out over our kingdom, upon our technology, our advancements, and full of pride we proclaim, "Who needs God?"

In the kingdom where man plays God and God is in exile, we can have air conditioning and ignore global warming.

We can keep adding cars and condos and our brilliance in civil engineering will magically accommodate them.

We can strip money from public education and still somehow expect to raise the next generation of Nobel-worthy scholars, as well as the countless teachers, doctors, engineers and philosophers we need to make a civil society function.

We can place unchecked power in our elected officials and then elect celebrities and extremists to govern.

Rabbi Harold Kushner argues that, "it is so easy to dismiss religion as the residue of childish dependence and medieval ignorance. But if we do that, who will teach us to shudder?" How will we tell the difference between the sacred and the trivial? If we have no ideal, where will we get our ideals?

Maybe the idea of God controlling every detail of the universe was just a myth developed ages ago to explain the seemingly uncontrollable events of the natural world? I believe that. The God I believe in has never been a God that brings floods to punish or helps good conquer evil in times of war. My God is not a puppet master!

But the myth ***was*** helpful, the image was comforting because at its core was a God that held humanity as sacred, that loved human beings, so much so that, like a parent, sometimes that God of myth would punish us to teach us a lesson. *Avenu Malkeynu*, we say Our father, Our King. The ancients could count on God loving them, like a parent loves their children.

So, what can we count on now? If we have no faith in a God of myth, do we place our faith in man?

For all the bad press that religion has gotten, for all the wars that have been fought in its name. Religion asks a question that science ignores. Today, sitting here, in this space created by prayer and tradition, we ask that question:

If you don't believe in God what do you believe in? "What is sacred in your life?"

Rabbi Ed Feinstein writes that, “The sacred is that which we serve with love and loyalty; the [sacred is the] core value upon which we build a life; the ideals which inform a life [lived] with purpose.

“The sacred lifts us above the ego, above the endless desires and drives of the narrower self, to reach a bigger, truer, more generous self.”[3]

The sacred is what you live for, its what, God forbid, you would die to defend. The sacred is what is ***missing*** in our politics, our families and our world today.

Modernity, science, technology, the Internet all are there to liberate us from repression, superstition and authority. But in the process, those same forces, have subverted all that is sacred, all that we believe in, and so, many believe in nothing.

Martin Luther King Jr. once observed, “if you don’t know what you are willing to die for then you don’t know what you are living for.”

Love of country, is that sacred? Our politics have become so corrosive and so stridently partisan. And not just here in Canada, where I will grant you we are better than most. Will we be able to avoid the divisiveness of what is happening to our south in the next election?

Fidelity to religion, is that sacred? If our politics are divided, our Jewish tent is equally divided, if not more so. The only place that Jews cannot openly pray in the manner they choose is, guess where… in Israel! “Who is a Jew?” Has become, “What is a Jew?”

Sacredness of family? “Once upon a time, we saw family as sacred. But research at the University of Michigan found that North American children today spend about 20 hours a week interacting with their parents, but more than 30 hours a week, outside of school, in front of a TV screen or a cell phone.”[4]

When you check your cellphone before you check in with the person sleeping next to you, or your child running up to you, ***something*** is broken.

So, what is sacred to you? What is your core value, what is your purpose? Why are you alive? We are all dying every day of our lives. What are we living for?

I’ll tell you what I see, I see “people so hungry today for meaning, for the sacred, they embrace all sorts of belief systems. It was once imagined that as science progressed, all closed systems of belief would disappear in the face of scientific skepticism. The opposite has occurred. As modernity has progressed, fundamentalism has thrived. No matter how irrational, intolerant, authoritarian, people run to embrace fundamentalism because it fills the deep hunger for the sacred.”[5]

I won't list the examples. They are on the news every day and Twitter a few thousand times a day. We know them, we are troubled by them, but we can't turn away from them because, lacking faith in something greater, we place faith in what ***appears*** to be great.

When you pursue the sacred you have questions, you have doubts, you are in service to a higher ideal, you're trying to live up to God. You are **not** trying to ***be*** God.

The fundamentalist seated upon God's throne has no doubts. The fundamentalist has certainty, has absolute truth.

Even if the fundamentalist is sexist, chauvinistic, domineering, abusive, even if the ideology is primitive and prejudiced -- at least the fundamentalist believes without qualification or condition. That provides a kind of security. Standing in the presence of unqualified faith, we are granted a momentary reprieve from the spiritual emptiness of modern life.[6]

Maybe that's compelling, but it's false.

Why then are strongman leaders in ascent around the globe? Because when nothing is sacred we practice idolatry and build the faux sacred out of loud and shiny things.

Fundamentalism today is growing because the human soul craves the sacred, even if it is twisted. And if we can find nothing sacred, nothing to serve, we live with a hole in the soul. And that hurts. So, we run to fill that hole with something to numb the pain. Drink and drugs, shopping and acquisition, sex, pornography, exercise, fantasy, food, obsessive work, and the fetishizing of leaders who promise to make things great again.

Karl Marx once condemned religion as the opiate of the people, but it's the other way around. Today, opiates in their many forms are the religion of the people. "Addiction fills in the hole where the sacred once lived."[7]

When I served as a Rabbi in Los Angeles, my congregation was up the street from that of Rabbi Harold Schulweis (z'l). Rabbi Schulweis, who died four years ago this December, was one of the great theologians of our time.

He taught a theology of Godliness. Struggling as we all do to find God in the ashes of the Shoah, Schulweis argued that if we can no longer find the tradition's sacred values in an old and seemingly irrelevant narrative about God, let's turn the process around, and root a new narrative of God in our sacred values.

The goal of Judaism, he argued, is not to make us believers in a God above. It never was. The goal of Judaism is to make us vessels of divine holiness here on earth. It's not about God, but Godliness. **Godliness is what you do, not what you pray to**.

I've shared this teaching with you before, in the twelve-step world of addiction and recovery they teach that G.O.D. is an acronym for Good Orderly Direction, God is the path toward the sacred, a lifetime of steps.

This idea has been in Jewish tradition from the beginning. Don't discount yourselves as Reform Jews. Don't buy into the narrative that we are remaking Judaism on our terms, that we aren't kosher.

Open Maimonides. The greatest book of Jewish philosophy ever written, the majestic *Guide for the Perplexed* begins with the same dilemma we are all struggling with: where do you find the sacred in the modern and the mundane? How do you make sense out of a world that at once is spinning out of control, and at the same time appears through science and technology to be fully within our ability to control?

In the 12th century, Maimonides set about developing a radically new idea of God and religion. The ultimate goal of human life, he taught, is to perfect oneself so that one can know God. Moses is Maimonides' model of the most realized human life, and Moses' ascent up Mt. Sinai, is his metaphor for the journey of human perfection. But one important fact of Moses' story vexed Maimonides: Having achieved perfection, and standing face to face with God, Moses turns around and descends the mountain. He returns to his people, and all their troubles.

Why doesn't Moses stay on the mountaintop with God?

Only on the very last page, the very last paragraph of the Guide to the Perplexed does Maimonides gives the answer: "the perfection in which man can truly glory is attained by him when he has acquired knowledge of God, and God's Wisdom, … Having acquired this knowledge, one will then be determined always to seek kindness, justice, and righteousness, and to **imitate** the ways of God."[8]

Do you hear that? Achieving intellectual perfection and knowing God is NOT the ultimate objective. The real goal of human life is to EMBODY God's justice and loving kindness in the world – to live God, to do God. The last line of Maimonides is the first line of Schulweis. Godliness, [the pursuit and stewardship of the sacred] is the goal of humanity, it is the purpose of our existence.[9]

In your hearts, you know this. Rabbi Ed Feinstein, a colleague and friend whose sermon on this subject served as a framework for my own, shared with me an illustrative example. He explained that the fundamental building block of Jewish prayer is the *bracha– Baruch ata Adonai Eloheynu melech ha-olam*. Every Bar or Bat Mitzvah boy or girl, everyone who has ever been to a seder knows that.

But if the purpose of faith is to express belief in a God above, then the *bracha* should have stopped there. That says it all: Praised is God, Ruler of the Universe. Period. Why say anything else?

Rabbi Feinstein points out insightfully that we don't stop there, because Judaism doesn't stop there. Because the sacred is not in praising it is in ***doing***. "We continue -- *Ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz; borei pri ha-gafen, Shehechianu V'keemanu* because the real purpose of the *bracha* is to build a vocabulary of sacred values, to identify what in life is sacred," and then seated as if we are on God's throne, to act with Godliness, in pursuit and defense of the sacred things in life and our society.

So, how do we at Temple Sholom "walk the walk"? How are we pursuing sacred values in our lives?

Pursuit of the sacred is why we sponsored two Kurdish-Syrian Refugee families.

Pursuit of the sacred is why we stand on the front lines in defense of women's rights, gay rights, human rights in Vancouver, in Canada, in Israel and around the world.

Pursuit of the sacred is why we need a new Machzor, so that the words on the page match the words in our hearts, filling the hole in our soul.

Pursuit of the sacred is why Temple Sholom, led by the heroic work of Rabbi Bregman, Cathy Bregman, Jordana Bregman and the whole team at HillelBC is the first to stand beside them as they fight BDS on campus and work to build bridges of dialogue where others would put up walls.

Pursuit of the sacred is why in the New Year Temple Sholom will join with other faith and labor based organizations in the Metro Vancouver Alliance to effect real change at a local level in our city's policies and priorities.

This congregation as a whole, and each of you through your tzedakkah devotes time and resources to our 60 Plus Group, Sisterhood, Men's Club, Religious School, East Side Jews, Jewish Information Class, Temple Teens and Next Generation. Because those populations and many more within our community are sacred, they are an expression of what we live for, what really matters.

What is sacred? **Sacred is what we do. Faith is only real when it is translated into action.** We must continue to do all of those great things we are doing, both as individuals and as a congregation, and we must also do the most important act of all. In this New Year let us remove God from exile and bring the sacred into our daily lives. In this New Year, let us translate our faith into actions that truly reflect our beliefs.

[1] "Who Needs God", Rabbi Harold Kushner p.58-59 as retold by Rabbi Ed Feinstein, "Rescuing God" September 2015
[2] Rabbi Ed Feinstein, "Rescuing God". Rabbi Feinstein's sermon of this title served as framework for this sermon and is referenced frequently.
[3] Ibid.
[4] ibid.
[5] ibid.
[6] ibid.
[7] ibid.
[8] Guide to the Perplexed, Moses Maimonides
[9] Rabbi Ed Feinstein, "Rescuing God"