This past year I was leading a lesson with my confirmation class on the Ten Commandments. As we were making our way carefully through the list we arrived at a commandment that puzzled both student and teacher. We read, "Thou shalt not take God's name in vain." I asked the class what they thought this meant. One student replied, it means that we shouldn't say 'God darnit', or some close derivative of that. Another student replied that it meant we shouldn't say 'Oh, God' at this a few other students followed with slight variations on the same theme, until one from the class asked, why should saying 'Oh, God', or 'God darnit' be on the same list as Thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not steal, no other Gods, and keeping the Sabbath?

I thought it was an insightful question, certainly more insightful than the answer I offered at that moment. But it did prompt me to give this commandment a bit more thought and a lot more credit than I previously had. I will admit to you that for much of my life, including some of which has been spent in Rabbinical school I pretty much accepted the commandment not to take God's name is vain at face value. I believed that it meant we shouldn't throw God's name around lightly, and that was about the depth of it. Maybe I am not the only one who understood the commandment in such a way. I remember my Sunday school teachers cautioning me every time I invoked God's name as part of a complaint about an assignment. For most of my life I wrote the name of God, G - d, because I believed that to write the name out in full was contrary to this particular commandment. And it because none of these prohibitions seem equal in importance as those against murder, stealing and adultery that I was enticed and

intrigued by the student's questioning of this commandment being list among the Top Ten.

I studied and I read and I found that this commandment that once appeared so obvious, so simple was far more complex than I ever gave it credit for being. In its simplest interpretation, what Rashi called the *pshat*, my confirmation students were right, it does mean that we shouldn't throw God's name around loosely or with insincerity. But in a larger, perhaps deeper sense the commandment instructs us not to attribute to God that which is not God's. Not to say that God did this or that when we don't know it to be true, and like wise not to invoke God's name in support of our position or agenda when we don't know for sure that God's would be in support of our actions. Ibn Ezra, a great Torah Scholar of 12th century Spain, observed that this single commandment is in fact more important than all of the prohibitions that follow it. He wrote, that murder, adultery and theft are circumscribed by opportunity, but the misuse of God's name, once it becomes a habit, will grow like a cancer and in the end one's every assertion will be proceeded by invoking God's name. What our society gets when this happens, is not only the sins of murder, adultery and stealing, but these acts being performed in the name of God. So that one day a young man with a dangerously skewed view of Judaism can walk in to a square in Tel Aviv and shoot the prime minister of Israel, and forever erroneously link God's name to his murderous act.

I look at our society, I watch the news, read the paper and I am profoundly troubled by how many awful things human beings are capable of doing to each other.

We all are. But the disgust I feel when I read or learn about these acts, is nothing compared to the rage and outrage that burns inside of me when some heinous crime against humanity is committed in the name of God. How dare someone link the God of the Shema and the V'ahavtah, the God that made Sarah life at child birth, or that comforted Jacob on his death bed, how dare that God be called upon as the impetus for murder, crime and violence.

I submit to you on this Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of our New Year the greatest danger our society faces, are not senseless acts of violence, and random acts of hatred but rather acts of violence, hatred and bigotry that are committed with expressed intent. Acts of violence and racial hatred that are undertaken through some misguided application of the teachings of faith.

These actions frighten me most of all because they are not senseless, they are not random, but instead they come from a school of religious thought, a system of faulty interpretation of text, that if not checked will grow and spread throughout our nation. In the process eroding the sanctity of religion. A crime committed in the God's name is most dangerous because it not only hurts people but it chips away at societies moral compass. If religion becomes entangled and intermingled with violence and hatred then what will remain to set society back on the course of peace and understanding, the course of community and fellowship.

The third commandment was written to prevent this from happening, it was written so that the racist, the criminal, the murder, the person just intent on hurting

people would not have a reason for doing so. So that religion could not be used as an excuse to ignore the teachings of religion. We are commanded not to take God's name in vain, because it is not for us to say what God wants us to do. It is not for us to attribute to God things that we do not know for sure to be God's will.

The great Rabbis of the Mishnah instruct us to set walls around the Torah to protect it from loosing its sanctity. This wall that the Rabbis instruct us to create has a particular Hebrew name, it is called a ÒŸÈÀ,. A ÒŸÈÀ, is a hedge or a low fence used as a warning barrier when you about to cross over into territory or behavior that is forbidden. The ÒŸÈÀ, is not an impassable wall, it is not a strong fortification that physically prevents you from proceeding on your chosen course. It merely provides a moment of pause, an opportunity to turn back before you proceed carelessly with actions or conclusions that will lead to a transgression.

With regard to the Torah these walls are the rituals we have instituted for the proper treatment of the Torah scroll. Placing it in an ark, at the front of our congregations and adorning it with precious cloth and metals. We set up these slight barriers so that we are never so crass as to suppose that it is just another book, another story. That we never get so accustomed to its presence in our sanctuary that we take it for granted, treating it as a possession or art work instead of the most sacred of books.

Similarly the third commandment, not to take God's name in vain is a ÒŸÈÀ,, a warning fence that was created within the framework of the ten commandments, to caution us before we proceed with actions or behaviors that will

lead not only to transgression, but to transgression committed in God's name, a transgression with a reason.

God does not prohibit us from walking right up to the ÒŸÈÀ,, examining our intended actions and then turning away. We can come right up to that fence, look right over the top of it and contemplate what we are planning on doing. But all to often in our society and in our daily lives, we justify the action we are about to take, we stand looking over that low fence and we reason this or that for why leaping over it should be okay, just this once, only for a moment, and so on. And sometimes in our society, people stand right up on top of that fence right in the middle in that grey area between Mitzvah and averyrah, between keeping the commandments of the Torah and shunning them. It is when we stand on top of that low wall that we are most in danger to giving into the justifications in our mind.

On this Rosh Hashanah, as we begin the sacred task of reviewing our past year, the things we have done, both Mitzvah and aveyrah, the things that we are proud of and those we regret, let us take an extra accounting of those transgressions that we committed based on a justification. The times that we said I am going to do this, I know that it is wrong, but under these circumstances, and these conditions it really isn't wrong, in fact it is a necessary evil. I submit to you that their is no justification for transgression. And that when we try and make one, when we find a reason to do something we know is wrong, then we involve God in our choice to transgress. We may hear a silent okay in our mind, or feel that for the moment God won't notice or see what we are about to do. And when we do that when we make God our scapegoat, our coconspirator then we have taken God's name in vain, attributing something sinful to God when it is not God's doing or God's but our, and ours alone that has brought us to this place.