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Rosh Hashanah I

### Living with Holiness

Remember when the idea of teaching self-esteem was all the rage?

The word was, if only we could increase our children's self-esteem,  
we could solve a whole host of problems,  
from academic underachievement to crime to addiction to you name it.

We pretty much went all in on this in the United States.

American students in recent decades have earned ranks like  
15th, 23rd, and 34th in math, science and history,  
not so impressive for the industrialized world,  
but by golly we are #1 in self-esteem!

It turned out the idea was not all it was cracked up to be--  
though we shouldn't be too hard on the promoters.

High self-esteem is in fact correlated with doing well in life.

But it 's more an effect than a cause.

It is the result of doing well,  
not the reason people succeed in the first place.

Self-control on the other hand, turns out to be the real deal.

If you want to do well in almost any area of life,  
the more self-control you have,  
the greater your chance for success and in turn,  
happiness, blessing, and yes, self-esteem.

Which brings us to the Torah.

The Torah says basically nothing on self-esteem.

There is no verse that goes,

“Do this *mitzvah* and you will feel better about yourself.”

The Torah does however, have quite a bit to say about self-control.

There are 613 commandments detailing how to overcome this impulse,  
master this desire, control that craving.

And when the Torah says that this is the path to a fulfilled life,  
it is time tested and proven.

At the same time the Torah teaches that happiness, fulfillment and blessing  
are the byproducts of a life lived with holiness—  
*kedushah* as we say in Hebrew.

Holiness. Yes, I was trying to find a term even less fashionable  
than “self-control.” It is a word almost alien to our culture.

We don't see it on television. It doesn't trend on social media.

We don't use it in the workplace.

But if we intend to live a higher life, we need, at the very least,  
a working relationship with it.

This is true whether we believe in God or not,

whether we believe that God does or doesn't do this, that or the other thing,  
 whether we consider ourselves very religious, not so religious  
 or even anti-religious,

It doesn't matter.

The more holiness we live with, the better our lives become.

We know the religious path can be a difficult sell these days,  
 especially for those who may be a little bit on the outside looking in.

Horrible things are being done in religion's name.

Not only in faraway lands which you don't need me to catalog,  
 but here as well.

Denying women access to reproductive health care for one.

Legalizing discrimination against gays for another.

Disenfranchising the poor and the needy.

Sure, "That's what God would want!"

But even if we set all that aside, it is not easy to have faith in this world.

We see far too much undeserved pain, disease and tragedy.

We can't pretend it isn't there and we can't pretend it's easy to deal with.

Where does this leave us?

Well it leaves me, for one, in pursuit of a more sacred life.

Sure, you say, I'm the one wearing the white robe.

That has nothing to do with it.

Judaism's intention is to create holy people--

as the Prophet Isaiah put it, "a light unto the nations."

We start to become that by making ourselves holy as individuals.

In time, the theory goes, other nations will see how well we do  
 and emulate our best.

This would be a good thing. Why should we win all the Nobel Prizes? ;-)

Seriously, it's not far fetched.

The idea of serving the One God who demands justice and in turn, holiness,  
 began with a small tribe led by a man named Abraham.

It has made considerable inroads since.

For starters there are Christianity and Islam, our daughter religions.

They're believers in the one God who demands justice too.

Today there are also reportedly millions(!) of South Koreans  
 studying the Talmud—our wisdom.

The Dalai Lama meets often with Jewish leaders.

Ask them why and they'll tell you they want to succeed as we've succeeded.

We have in fact been a light unto the nations.

But back to you and me.

Rosh Hashanah focuses on our personal relationship with God.

Again, many people think if you are going to live a life of faith,  
 you somehow need answers for all of your doubts.

That if you don't have satisfactory explanations for

injustice, terror, natural disaster, and all the rest,  
 you are somehow not being genuine.  
 If that were the case, there would be very few thoughtful people of faith.  
 I can assure you there are many.

Author and journalist Julia Baird recently wrote,

“...As courage is persisting in the face of fear...

faith is persisting in the presence of doubt.” <http://nyti.ms/1qxPUzN>

In other words, doubt is not kryptonite for faith.

Doubt is part of the equation.

In fact it is the part of the equation that can lead to sharper understanding.  
 It is a mistake to throw out the baby of faith with the bathwater of doubt.

And I’m speaking personally here, not academically.

Persistence in the presence of doubt is but the beginning.

Living with faith also means believing we are part of something more,  
 something ultimate.

That we are more than just a body that’s taken its share of licks  
 and more than a mind, that try as it might, cannot figure it all out.

Faith is about accepting that we are also a soul.

Yes, soul, that thing we say we see in one another’s eyes.

Philosopher Alan Watts was once asked if he believed people have souls.

His answer, “You don’t have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body.”

Bingo.

It is easy to lose sight of this.

We don’t usually treat one other as souls.

We’re lucky if we respect one other as minds and bodies.

More often we look at our fellow human beings as sources for  
 money, votes, sex, or whatever else we can mine for our own benefit.

One of the reasons we are in the Keys is we appreciate that  
 the beauty of creation, which is right outside our doors and windows,  
 somehow nourishes our souls.

One of the reasons we build synagogues and sanctuaries is we understand that  
 a community without a place devoted to strengthening the soul is incomplete.

One of the reasons we pray, meditate, and need our alone time--our soul time—  
 is we recognize that without it, we lose touch with our very selves.

Our souls are not strengthened by default.

They atrophy by default.

They are strengthened when we commit to them.

The way we commit to our families, careers, health,  
 or anything else that matters deeply to us.

Some of you know that my son occasionally hosts a sports talk TV show in California. Naturally, I watch it—thank you internet. Part of the show's ongoing shtick is that the on air talent makes fun of the producer. Not to worry, everyone is in on the joke. Anyway, once they asked the producer about a big meeting he attended. He backed away from any responsibility. "I was just there," he said. One of the talent cracked, "That's what they're going to say about him when all is said and done, "He was just there."

Let's leave the shtick aside and focus on the spirituality of that. None of us want to go through life and have it said about us that we were "just there." What do we want said? Hopefully that we were a source of love and joy, comfort, friendship and assistance; that we made a difference. Maybe even that we uplifted others.

But without a spiritual life, without an inner life, without a life that at least partially recognizes that we are a soul that has a body and not the other way around, it is way more difficult. Faith gives us a language for holiness. Religion is how we translate it into reality—and we'll get to that in a moment.

Holiness also gives us a way to respond to life's mysteries. No matter how religious--or not--we consider ourselves to be, we all marvel at nature, we all stand speechless at the miracle of new life, we are all moved more than we can say by beautiful music and breathtaking works of art; we are all uplifted by love and devastated by loss.

How do we make sense of all that? Science and technology, for a change, doesn't give us language for this. We are in the realm of the spiritual, the holy.

For starters we can be mindful of Watts' distinction between what we have—a body--and who we are—a soul.

From there we can accept that faith is always about growth, about new ways to face the questions that lie at the heart of every life. Christian Wiman of Yale, in his book *My Bright Abyss* (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2013) wrote, "If you believe at 50 what you believed at 15, then you have not lived...you have denied the reality of your life." Rabbi Hillel put it similarly two thousand years ago, "If you do not increase (in understanding), you decrease."

Which made me think, rather ruefully, about one of our US Supreme Court Justices who recently proclaimed, with pride no less, and I quote, "I ain't evolving!" How wonderful that a member of the highest court in the land can brag that he's got it all figured out and has no need to expand his horizons any further.

My *bubby* would say this is *narishkeit*—foolishness—and along with Hillel she'd be correct. In any discipline, if we are not increasing we are decreasing. Whether

our field is law, medicine, finance, sales, music, teaching, auto mechanics or fishing, we need to be increasing—always. It is the same with faith.

One of the ways we can increase our faith is by trying to live in ways that the Creator loves. As Jews we believe we can better understand what those are by learning that leads to practice.

In the words of columnist David Brooks, “[the idea is] to turn moments of spontaneous consciousness into an ethos of strict conscience; [by] using effervescent sensations of holiness to inspire concrete habits, moral practices and practical ways of living well.” (“The Subtle Sensations Of Faith”, NYT 12/22/14) <http://nyti.ms/1AZTTfG>

Marx said that religion was the opiate of the masses. That may have been the case 150 years ago but today I would disagree. The opiate of the masses is the screen--the ones in our hands, the ones on our desks and the ones on our walls. Reality TV, online gaming, social media, surfing the net, the National Football League, is there any question? Second place goes to actual opiates and related substances.

Religion? According to Wiman, it is about finding and “feeling the ultimate existence within our daily existence.” That is not opium. That is quest--for a life of higher meaning and yes, holiness. Yeah, I’ll take a hit of that.

Wiman also writes, “You can’t really know a religion from the outside. No matter how much you learn about it, it remains “mere information, so long as your own soul is not [in the game.]” He’s right about that too. Our souls need to be in the game.

Science and history teach that there is no such thing as absolute knowledge--at least not yet. Anyone who claims to have it, be they politician, scientist or believer, is a danger to himself and others. In the words of Bertrand Russell (d. 1970), “The whole problem with the world is that the stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubt.”

If we accept this, and I’m guessing most of us do, however we may see ourselves politically or socially, we are liberals religiously. We live non-orthodox, non-fundamentalist, question-filled Jewish lives. This is a good thing because it gives us freedom of inquiry as we try to get our souls in the game. It is a challenging thing insofar as it requires us to find our higher path in a largely non-spiritual world.

The new year is the time for us to renew that search. It is the time to ask, “What is keeping me from pursuing a life of greater holiness?” (The name of another person is not an acceptable answer.) The High Holydays are spiritual “me time.”

**“What can I do to make my journey more elevated this year?” Take some time to think about it. You have 20 seconds. Go.**

**Hopefully that was enough to start. If I might add a few suggestions, this year I am going to be slower to anger, more empathetic, kinder, quicker to forgive. This year I am going to eat healthier, maybe even kosher-er. This year I am going to do less indulging of myself and more serving of others. This year I am going to treat others more like I want to be treated myself. This year I will make an effort to know my faith better. This year I will take it to heart that I don't have a soul—I am a soul.**

**Give it all you've got. It will take self-control. It will build self-esteem. And the foundations of a life of holiness at the same time.**

**Our faith holds that people can change. Perhaps not entirely or all at once but incrementally, significantly. Just look at Caitlin Jenner. Seriously, the Rabbis taught that when we attempt to live with even slightly more holiness, it elevates the quality of our own life as well as the lives of those around us. They also taught it is never too late. And they were right.**

**At the new year we reflect on the fact that everything changes constantly, from the universe's grandest galaxies to our bodies' tiniest particles. We cannot step in the same river twice and we are not the same people we were a year ago. To say nothing of seven Rosh Hashanah's ago since, according to some biologists, every cell in our bodies has been replaced since then.**

**We can change and we do change. Not only in body, but also in soul. We are all evolving. It is just a question of how. May it be with holiness in the new year.**

***L'shana tovah.***