

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5876
Cars and Souls
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Shanah Tovah.

I begin with a story I heard from a New York rabbi, Joey Haber.

In his own words: One night I went somewhere with my wife. I parked my car in Brooklyn, next to Coney Island Avenue if you know Brooklyn, and you know how it is. Sometimes it's hard to park in a tight space. So you squeeze between the car in front and the car behind and you get your car in. So I get my car in. I come back an hour later and I see someone leaning against my car, who doesn't look Jewish at all. He says, "Do you see what you did?" What did I do? He said, "Look, you hit my car! I have a brand new mint condition Mercedes CL55. Do you know how much it costs?" He starts shooting me with curses. "You don't understand. Look at the scratch you made! Look at the scratch you made!" I'm trying to see, but I don't see anything. Really anything at all.

He's screaming. He says "Torah is your life. My life is this car! My life is this car!" I'm shaking. I'm not sure what to say.

After the young man calmed down, he goes into his car. I go over to him and say, "I want to tell you two things. Number one, this is Brooklyn, New York. The way we say 'good morning' is we tap your car. And number two: If your car is your life, you're in big trouble" and I left.

Two days before Yom Kippur I got a phone call. I don't recognize the number. He says "Hi. Does CL55 ring a bell? I'm the guy in that car." A chill goes down my spine. I'm envisioning he is going to sue me and put me in jail. He says "I just want to tell you that what you said that day hit me. I'm going to Israel to a yeshiva in 2 weeks."

Two years later he called me saying he's getting married, and he wants me to make a blessing at his wedding.

That's quite a story. "If your car is your life, you're in big trouble." Those words jolted this young man to re-examine his priorities. It woke him up, in a very good way.

Tonight begins Rosh Hashanah and the season of Teshuvah, introspection, when we pause and think deeply about our lives: where we are now, and where we are headed? During the year we are each so busy taking care of ourselves and our things. Our cars,

as it were. But just like the man in the story got a wake up call from the rabbi's words, we too get a wake up call when we open the Machzor and pray on these holy days. And if that doesn't do it for you, there's always the Shofar blast.

If the car should not be our life's focus, what should be? As the comedian Art Buchwald said, "The most important things aren't things." The Jewish tradition also prioritizes relationships over things. It teaches that the person who is rich, for example, is happy with whatever he has - *HaSameach BHelko* - not the owner of a brand new Mercedes CL55.

As we begin these High Holidays, let us first re-examine our relationship with *ourselves*. At this moment in time, are you the person you want to be? What are your core values? Do you live your life according to them? Oftentimes we set out on a path with conviction, but then life events bump us off course. The challenge is to navigate back to the road we want to follow.

Next, we are to take stock of our relationships with *other people*. Who are the most important people in your life? Are you fulfilling your responsibilities to those people and loving and supporting them? The times you have done wrong to other people - and this happens to all of us - have you apologized and repaired that relationship? Saying sorry is a balm that heals relationships.

Third, we should consider our relationships with *the Jewish community*. How much time do you spend connecting to our community? Of course synagogue is one place to do that, and you are all here tonight. But there are other portals into Jewish life beyond this building. Which of those doors do you enter? How does your life reflect that being Jewish is important to you?

Finally, we must take stock of our relationship with *G-d*. If you believe in G-d, does your life actively reflect that faith? How? Are you as honest and ethical as you can be? Is there one more Mitzvah you can take on this year?

Relationships with ourselves, others, the Jewish people, and G-d- *these* should be our life. It's okay to take care of our car; I don't want a scratch on mine either. But let's keep the *most* important things central, not secondary.

The High Holidays are a gift, since we get a jolt that doesn't actually scratch our cars. These days make us focus on what really matters. *This* is what we should be thinking about when we sit in shul tonight and the days to come.

The task of the holidays is to focus on relationships, which is the domain of the soul, the Neshama. Every day we live in our bodies, which are critical, but our focus should not be consumed by them.

There is a beautiful prayer in our Siddur called *Elohai Neshama*, which we never actually say together. It's supposed to be recited *individually*, and *before* the morning service begins. It speaks in the first person singular, which is unusual for our prayerbook, and it orients us to begin our day putting the spiritual before the physical. Originally recorded by the Talmud, it is followed by another prayer *Asher Yatzar*, which thanks G-d for our functioning *bodies*. For the rabbis, the soul precedes the body, in time and in importance, which is why *Elohai Neshama* is recited first. For each of us is more than a body.

It goes like this: אֱלֹהֵי נֶשְׁמָה שֶׁנָּתַתָּ בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא

“My G-d, the soul which You have placed in me is pure. You created it, You formed it, You breathed it into me. You preserve it within me. One day You will take it from me and restore it to me far in the future. So long as this soul is within me, I acknowledge You, Lord my G-d and G-d of my ancestors, master of all creation, sovereign of all souls.”

The first line says it all: the soul which you G-d have placed in me is pure.

With this line, Judaism rejects Christianity's idea of original sin, that somehow our souls are sullied because of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit. Not a Jewish idea. Each of us has a soul that is pristine. Life comes along and we make choices, getting some things right, other things wrong. When we make mistakes and commit sins, our souls accumulate shmutz and dirt, as it were. The task of the High Holidays is to do Teshuvah, repentance, and restore our souls to their clean, pure state. *That* is the return we pursue. As Rabbi Richard Plavin writes, “The point of this prayer is that the sins we have committed are because we have fallen short, not because we were born with a sinful nature.”

Teshuvah, repentance, is the domain of the soul. Which manifests itself in our relationships. They are thus deeply connected.

I began with a story about a car, and I will close with another. First, an aside: if I had scratched another person's car, I wouldn't have gone about it the way the Brooklyn rabbi did, but maybe that's why I'm not a New Yorker. I think an apology was called for, but that wouldn't make for a great story.

Growing up in the Midwest, I saw my fair share of winter snow. I remember a friend's dad told me about the epic winter in Cincinnati about some year before I was born. He said it snowed *so much* that it packed in his white car in its outdoor parking spot for a whole month. He couldn't even open the door. When the snow finally melted, he took it to the car wash because the exterior had changed color. At the car wash, the employee said, "Sir, we will wash it as many times as needed to get it clean. But please tell us the original color so we know when we get there!"

I think a car wash is a wonderful metaphor for our task on these holy days. The car wash removes dirt and gunk from the exterior, restoring and returning the car to its original, pristine shine. So too Teshuvah is the spiritual practice we engage in during these days that restores the shine to our Neshama, that returns us to our best selves.

It doesn't happen by itself. It takes real spiritual work. But we have these hours and days to prioritize what is truly most important in our lives. The ability to reorient yourself - that's the ultimate gift.

Shanah Tovah.