

Rosh Hashana Speech To Beth Chai Congregation  
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L'shana tova.

My talk today is entitled:

### **God, Teachers, Music, and the Number Zero**

Imagine, that you are a teenager or young adult tending a flock a few thousand years ago. Alone, you bring your animals to a stream for water and while they drink, you occupy your mind by picking reeds that grow along the shore. You find they are hollow and putting one to your lips you find that by blowing you make a tone. With some practice, you find that you can vary the tone, puncture holes in the reeds and make new tones, and cut different lengths of reeds to make even more tones. The reeds become your companions.....you can play them loudly enough to reach the ears of another shepard a few hills away....you can make them sound like laughter....like the song of birds.....like the lullaby your mother used to sing to you. Your music becomes your companion lifting your spirits and bringing you peace. It can be so quiet under the dome of sky.....you feel so small....

An instrument is an extension of human voice....its sound reaches through our cluttered differences, pulling an essential unity through, integrating intellect and feeling across the barriers of language. Music is the heart of memory. For centuries Torah was chanted, because the rythm and melody of chant facilitates memory. For centuries, survival and its lessons have been sung. Traveling minstrels connected Jewish communities through the middle ages, singing stories of far away places, cherished values, heroics, and grief. Abolitionists instructed slaves in escape on the underground railroad by teaching songs that could be sung while working in the fields. Song has long been used to organize people and strive for social justice.

Awhile back my daughter Celia and I had the wonderful experience of participating as observers in a master class held by YoYo Ma. For those of you who do not know him, YoYo Ma is, perhaps, the greatest living cellist, and one of the most versatile musicians on the planet. He is also one of the most gifted and inspiring teachers I have ever had the privilege to meet. During a master class, very gifted and advanced cello students each play a polished piece from the cello repertoire, and Ma comments on it. He has no advance knowledge of which piece the student will play.

After a graduate student (someone getting a PhD in cello) had played a movement from a concerto, Ma asked the student to play one particular measure in the middle of the piece. He had been standing in the back of the auditorium, and ran forward, leaped onto the stage, took the student's cello standing up, and played that measure. Returning the cello to the student, she then played the measure. Ma listened in rapt attention and asked the student to play just the first note of that measure. The student gave him a perplexed look, and played the "G". Ma asked the student very seriously, "what were you thinking when you decided to play the "G" that way?" The student looked blankly at him. He said, "You have so many choices. Can you think about how that "G" affects the entire rest of the movement?" The student looked at him blankly. He took the cello again, and played the "G" five different ways. He then demonstrated for each way how different that phrase in the piece sounded. He then explained how he would interpret the piece differently for each of the five decisions. He suggested that there was not one correct interpretation, and asked the cellist which she preferred. Her eyes lit up and she selected one, and then he asked her to play that section of the piece again.

I wanted to share this experience, because it demonstrates something about listening, something about teaching, and something about our choices in life.

None of us in the audience could hear the music, including the cellist playing it, the way YoYo Ma could hear it. In effect, he seemed to be able to stop time.....to take one note as the embodiment of a moment, and to open up that moment to everyone in the room. He then gave the student

cellist a wonderful range of choices she never knew she had. The rest of us were left to wonder at how many choices we might find in any single moment if we could listen or observe for such opportunities. Yo Yo Ma expresses being in awe of the music he plays, struggling to comprehend as much of the experience locked up in the composition as he can grasp, and discovering new things each time he plays or listens. He doesn't seem to experience time as a barrier. His teaching is a kind of sharing, both humble and full of a magical sort of joy that leaves you feeling changed forever

I had a philosophy teacher when I was a freshman in college. Professor Hofstater, near retirement, taught Kant and Hegel. I was then an aspiring 17 year old philosopher. A class of 18 dwindled to 4 as the quarter wore on. We had but 18 pages of Hegel, and 20 pages of Kant to read for the entire quarter, and our only task was to understand what these writers had written. Before each class I would read both essays, and at each class the professor would take one sentence and spend the entire class time discussing its meaning. By the 5th or 6th week, I was in a panic. I had read each essay at least a dozen times and understood less and less. I went to the professor and said.

- "Look, I'm a very smart person, everyone says so....why can't I understand this, what is wrong with me....haven't you noticed most of the kids dropping your class. shouldn't you, maybe teach us what you want us to know?"
- The professor sighed. "Rachel", he said, "certainly you are a very smart young person, but your ignorance is profound. You see, you must learn how to read."
- "Learn to read?" I said!!!! "What do you mean.?"
- He said, "these men spent many years thinking about how to best convey some very difficult questions. You expect to understand the experience locked in those words by sitting and reading them for an hour a few times (nevermind they were originally written in German, they are much easier to comprehend in English). Have you ever thought about the meaning of the word "understanding". It means "standing under"? Can you put aside your youthful arrogance and be humble.? Try to imagine what it would have been like to ponder these questions in the 19th century? Go back and read."
- So I read, and read again, 20, 30, 40 times....and finally just before the end of the quarter on a Sunday, I woke up early in the morning and picked up my essays and read them again as had become my routine, and this time the words seemed to fit together and all sorts of meaning spilled forth, followed by all sorts of questions. I was ecstatic. I called the professor at home to tell him that I had cracked the essays...I couldn't wait til Monday....He invited me to his home, if I couldn't wait to tell him what I had discovered. I sat in his book lined musty study and told him my insights and started asking my questions.
- He stopped me, telling me the questions could wait til Monday....but he said that I had now learned to read.....and that now that I had learned to read, I would be able to study anything, learn anything.

These stories are about teachers who share their wisdom, and they are about time.....unlocking and exploring time....marking it and preserving it.

I like to think about philosophy, as the love of wisdom, as the mother of the sciences...marked by the point in time when people began trying to understand the meaning of the world through observation and the power of thought as an alternative to trembling in fear before the alters of gods. Go back with me in time again, in your mind, to join the early philosophers (it doesn't really matter which ones) and stand in their shoes. They would make the case that people, through the force of their own minds, can explain, to some extent the **Awe-full** forces of nature..... To those who quake with fear at their seeming smallness and weakness when faced with apparent chaotic and arbitrary swings of fate....they would say "you have a choice". You can, to balance your fear, observe and reason from what you see. To balance your "fear", let us choose to experience "curiosity". If we cannot control something, we can at least try to understand it.

That first impulse....to feel the possibility that we can think our way through some mystery...that is the beginning of science.

So we begin a new year...looking forward. What will befall us? For how much of life's experience will we claim understanding at this time next year. Who will help us make sense of things? Our liturgy, art, literature, and music form a sort of bridge over time, that we can traverse looking for bits

of wisdom to help us along. As we travel this path, we encounter each other, exchange ideas, extend friendship, and are given the opportunity to link into a community.

We come together as a diverse group, some believers in God, some atheists, some agnostics.....On a continuum, I would have to place myself toward the end with the non-believers. But I don't think this is an important distinction. A couple of years ago, a friend of mine, a doctor, told me she could not believe in God, but she wanted her children to have the opportunity to believe in God. In her practice, she saw a lot of life-threatening illness and death, and she thought it would be very comforting to be able to believe in a God. I thought about this a lot. She mourned the loss of belief. In my work on poverty and health care, I have encountered some incredible people who have transformed lives and communities, claiming they draw their strength from a belief in God. Without sharing their belief, I found I could translate the words associated with it-- blessings, prayer, awe, giving thanks--into feelings that fit my own experiences of facing powerful forces beyond my control. Without being a "believer", I do borrow the words of "belief" and use them as bridges.....I can say that I feel "blessed" and it does not feel dishonest.

In the crises in my life, I have found a bit of distraction in science, no comfort at all in religion, and some modicum of comfort in my long philosopher's training that made me accept and live with a lot of ambiguity.....I have learned to kind of like ambiguity, to respect it.....Ambiguity to me, always offers the opportunity to look at things in new ways, to convert fear into curiosity....It only balances the fear and pain, not eradicating it, but it does balance it....making things bearable. There is room to hope in ambiguity.

But we do not live in a culture that trains us to like ambiguity. I am something of an outlier.

About 1000 years ago, we were stuck with the mathematics of counting. People used fingers, toes, beads, knots, notches, hatch marks, strings of Roman Numerals to represent numbers. Human imagination limited reality to what could be counted and anything beyond put us in the realm of gods. The concept of zero, a symbol invented to represent "nothing", transformed both our reality and liberated our imagination. A simple invention, the zero revolutionized mathematics, making it possible for us to create numbers for quantities beyond our imagination, both large and small. It also made calculation easier and formed part of the foundation for many new mathematical ideas that now propel rockets past the boundaries of our solar system, build buildings, power power plants, link vast communication webs, and so forth. Our science now tells us that "nothing" is a more complex idea than we ever imagined. "Nothing" is, in fact, permeated with all sorts of stuff: particles zooming through it, forces warping it, and strings of vibration.

Zero was a powerful invention. Even though we keep discovering that "nothing" might actually be "something" and that everything might be interrelated, we will not easily part with our powerful zero. It works for us. Zero is a human invention that has functioned for the last millenium as a placeholder for "nothingness", or for the point from which we depart in some direction.....something we could not understand completely, but something so important it needed a name.

We humans, name things, ideas, and people.....as one step on the long road to understanding. We name our children and then watch their lives unfold. We name them, teach them, and love them. But we don't control them. When we name ideas, the naming does not confer control or ownership.....we let them loose, free in the world. Ideas are passed around transforming and being transformed by the minds they pass through.

My hypothesis is that "God", is a name we use as a placeholder for mystery beyond our understanding.....mystery so mysterious, in fact, that we can't even locate or name the mystery to "stand under" it using our mental tool kit. Just as zero is a sort of limit to what can be represented by other numbers, so God, as an idea, a human invention, represents the limit of what our powerful minds, our science and philosophy can explain. I would argue that no matter how much our science reveals, these limits will always exist. They will just move as we understand more. Just as the concept of infinity is needed in mathematics, the question "why?" will always push us toward the limits of our understanding, and we will be faced with a need to cope with what we meet there--at that edge---fear, ambiguity, our own limits, frailty, mortality, and the magnitude of our ignorance.

At one time in my life, I was visited by fear a lot. Fear was interfering with my life, and I decided it was going to be me or it. I played with the idea that “fear” was either external and a real threat, or “in my own chemistry, driven by the way I thought about things”. I would be awakened nightly by fear. So, I started waking up and talking to it (talking is something I’m good at), explaining to it all the reasons it should leave me alone. I got mad. “Go away and leave me alone”...I said night after night....I gave it lectures to bore it to death and put myself to sleep.....And after some months, one night I slept through the night and realized that I had my life back.....

Fear left me for many years, only returning when my daughter had leukemia a number of years ago. But this time, Fear appeared more as a sympathetic friend.....almost a partner. “Yes” it said, “this too will not make any sense”....”this too, is beyond your ability to reason your way through to an answer.” “I will stand by you until it is time to go.....and there will be a time when you will not need me”.....” But I will always be there for you”.

Now, I never felt the need to name “fear” “God”. I just named it “Fear”.

This last year, I found myself struggling with another strong emotion, “anger”. I have treated it in a similar manner. I knit it into 5 afgans, cross-stitched it into 2 pillow covers, wrote it into a few hundred journal pages, argued with it into the wee hours of the morning, and vented it with family and friends, some of whom are in this room. It has been a battle to channel the voice of anger into something constructive....a challenge to write anger into the book of my life as a set of lessons.....an effort to bend anger as a voice, to inform my actions rather than to drive them. As this new year begins, I think I have almost reached the point of making friends with my anger.....almost.....I’m shooting for Yom Kippur....

We all experience emotions that can seem overpowering: fear, anger, love, awe, grief, pride. Each has the potential to drive us in destructive or constructive directions. Sometimes we zig-zag. When these feelings come over us, we dig deep into our resources and experience for any wisdom that will help us to balance and to choose. I think that for some people, naming God, gives them a kind of a doorway that helps them take the next step and make a choice. You are faced with a wall. You look for a door through the wall. When you find one, you have a choice to make. If you can’t find the door, you stand still, bewildered, possessed by the emotion....its slave. Faced with the door, you make that choice, through the door or stay where you are.

I think what brings us together with the possibility of community is not whether we are believers or non-believers or on the fence, but whether, when we find a doorway, whatever we call it, we step through it.

I have described Beth Chai to my friends as a “congregation without walls”. As we all face this new year, I hope we will resist the temptation to live with too many walls: that we help each other find doorways through the walls of our busy, noisy and distracting lives....

- to listen the way Yo Yo Ma would teach us to listen...
- to read the way professor Hofstater would have us read...
- to find ways to open up and explore a moment each day, and share its contents with a friend, a child, someone you love, or just someone who you can share with....
- to speak out to each other: giving praise for kindness, and standing up to prevent harm....
- to respect the silent spaces in our lives, the rests in the music that define and connect its phrases.....
- to make time to think...
- to clear a pathway through all our many things and our affluence to invest in wisdom.

Today is the 18,605th page in my book of life. This afternoon, my daughter and I will take our annual tashlich walk by the river, and we will apologize to each other for yelling and being naughty and for being willful and impatient. We will throw breadcrumbs into the river...as is the tradition.....throwing away what we regret from last year.....and making plans for the year ahead. We’ll sing along to emotional Jewish music in the car, adding our voices to those of many strangers who wrapped their powerful

emotions in those glorious melodies. The music connects us with others in webs that extend backward and forward in time, crossing oceans and cultures. We'll go to sleep wondering who will be our teachers this year? Who will help us number our days and get us hearts of wisdom.

L'shana tova.