

1st day Rosh Hashanah sermon

1 Tishrei 5761 (Sept. 30, 2000)

Rabbi Robert Scheinberg, United Synagogue of Hoboken

Shabbat Shalom! Shanah Tovah!

This has certainly been the year of the "building" for us at this congregation! After so many years of dreaming, planning, dreaming some more, fundraising, negotiating, and finally building, this year our community created a dazzling legacy for future generations in our Kaplan Family Learning Center building, dedicated this past April. And now our community is embarked on a campaign to restore this building, nearly 100 years old, to its former glory -- and you probably saw some of our work in the lobby.

Now obviously, our building is far and away NOT the primary aspect of our community. Our buildings are only the shell. The *neshama*, the soul of this congregation, is its membership; its educational and social action programs; its religious services; the warm embrace of its community. Ours is a community where the focus is very clearly on the spiritual rather than the physical -- as is appropriate for a synagogue. But so often, the beautiful physical objects in the world serve as metaphors for us, helping us to understand the spiritual truths we hold dear. And so, inspired by the architects, artists, painters, decorators, restoration artists, and other creative leaders who have put such an important stamp on our community this year, I have a story to share this evening, to inaugurate the new Hebrew year of 5761.

It's a traditional Jewish story about a king who was exceedingly wealthy. He built an enormous palace with numerous rooms and halls. When the palace was complete, it was time to set about the task of interior decorating, assigning artists to beautify each room. The palace had one grand hall that was larger than any other -- a narrow hall, with very high ceilings -- and he wanted this room to be the most extraordinary of all. So he organized a contest. All the best artists in the country were encouraged to send samples of their work. And the king and his advisors narrowed it down to two finalists -- two artists who were above all the rest. These two artists would be the ones to decorate the grand hall.

So the king brought the two finalists into the grand hall and gave them their instructions. "You," he pointed to one artist, "will take this wall, and you -" as he motioned to the other - "will take the opposing wall. You each have ONE YEAR from today to create a mural on your assigned wall. Naturally, I will pay for all of your expenses and all the assistants you need; you will live for this year in my palace in royal accommodations. And one year from today, we will re-convene in this grand hall, and I will evaluate your work. Whichever of you I judge to have done a finer job, I will reward you with tremendous wealth and fame."

And so the two artists got to work. They each spent the first several days making detailed sketches and plans. And after a couple of weeks, one artist had already hired a crew,

built some scaffolding, and was starting to put some of his designs up on the wall. The other artist seemed more thoughtful and introspective, as he continued with more and more preliminary sketches. And a couple of months went by.

The first artist's work was now beginning to take shape -- most of it had been outlined on the wall. And the second artist was still staring at a blank wall, still making sketches, sometimes looking over his shoulder at his rival's progress. And then seven months passed. nine months. eleven months. The first artist's wall was beginning to look extraordinary -- Small portions of the wall were completely finished, and they demonstrated that this was a work of true genius. And the second artist continued to stare at his blank wall.

And at eleven months and twenty-nine days -- the day before the conclusion of the contest -- each of the artists was instructed to cover up his work with curtains. And there was a tremendous celebration in the grand hall, and the king announced: tomorrow these curtains will be removed, and we will see which one of these two artists deserves the distinction of being the finest artist in the kingdom. Early the next morning, the two artists arrived and removed the curtains over their walls -- and the king walked in to the room. And he looked at the mural of the first artist. And he was astounded by its details - its composition -- its colors -- one look at the king's face made it clear that he was dazzled by this mural and had fallen in love with it. And then the king turned around to look at the other wall. And he was astounded to see: it looked absolutely identical to the first, in every detail. Except that right in the middle of the mural, the king saw --- himself. He thought a moment, then ran up to the wall and touched it -- and it was smooth and cold. His suspicions had been correct. It was a perfectly polished mirror, reflecting the beautiful images on the other side of the hall. The room fell silent. The king began to announce the results of the contest.

And I'll share the conclusion of the story with you - in just a few minutes.

But first, let us note how this story serves as an allegory for our lives today. We have each been given the gift of a year. And now is the time that we must account for it. Each year on Rosh HaShanah, God asks us, "What have you done with the year I have given you?" And I think we are each a little like the first artist and a little like the second artist. There are times when we live our lives with a passionate mission. We clarify our vision and our goals, and we live a year that qualifies as a masterpiece. But all too often, we are like the 2nd artist. For whatever the reason, despite our best efforts, we find we can't live our own lives. So we put up a mirror instead. And we reflect the vision and the goals and the values of others - and of our society - we live their lives rather than our own. Maybe it's because we're nervous -- we're intimidated by the enormity of the task, to transform just a few hundred days into a masterpiece of life. Maybe we're afraid of failing. Maybe it's just because we're busy -- in between doing our jobs, and our commutes, and answering our cell phones, and responding to our e-mail, and spending so much time on mundane tasks, and fulfilling the visions of others, we often find that we don't have time to nurture a genuine vision of our own. Maybe it's sheer exhaustion!

For whatever the reason, we lose our focus on what is genuinely most important in our lives. So we take the safer route. We put up a mirror. And we live someone else's dream, rather than our own.

There is one of the Hasidic masters that I find I associate most closely with the holiday of Rosh HaShanah. And that is -- Rebbe Menachem Mendl of Kotzk, known as the Kotzker Rebbe, who lived in the early 19th century. Maybe this is in part because the Kotzker Rebbe was so different from all the other Hasidic masters. In a period when most of the Hasidic Rebbes were characterized as loving and affectionate mentors, the Kotzker Rebbe was a somewhat prickly character -- While most of the Hasidic masters tended to be affirming, the Kotzker Rebbe was challenging -- he refused to shy away from life's most difficult questions. He wasn't afraid to prod people if he felt they weren't working hard enough at knowing and nurturing their own souls. And perhaps this approach is what all of us need every year on Rosh HaShanah. I know I do. And it seems to me that this story of the king and the artists is one that the Kotzker Rebbe would have appreciated.

The Kotzker Rebbe used to tell his followers, who would come to the city of Kotzk to study with him: "Remember: you may think you came to Kotzk to find God. But why would you think you need to find God? We **know** where God is! God is everywhere! If you want to find God, you might as well stay at home. You may think you came to Kotzk to learn Torah. But there are other places to learn Torah. The real reason why you came to Kotzk is -- to find yourself -- to gain a glimmering of God's plan for your life -- to figure out your character, your dreams, your destiny. That is why you came to Kotzk."

And similarly, that is one reason why we join together in prayer and meditation on Rosh HaShanah. God may be everywhere - but we are not the same everywhere. We carve out these hours each year to focus on the facets of our lives that really matter. to ask the hard questions of ourselves about what could have been different about last year. And to work on the preliminary sketches for next year's chance to create a masterpiece.

On these Yamim Nora'im, these days of Awe, We gather together for prayer -- but as many of us know, the Hebrew word le-hitpalel - which is usually translated as "to pray," is more literally translated as "to judge oneself." And this is our major task for the next week.

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So I promised you I would tell you the end of the story: The king made his announcement: "I must commend both of you for your extraordinary creativity and great skill. Because the two opposing walls of this grand hall EACH have the most exquisite images that the world has ever seen. And for that reason, I must declare this contest to be a TIE! The king summons his servants and they bring out bags and bags of gold and pile them on the floor right by the first mural. And the king announces to the first artist, "To repay you for your work, all of these riches and more shall be yours! Now go and bring beauty into the lives of others as you have brought beauty into my life.

And then the 2nd artist meekly addresses the king and says, "your royal highness, didn't you say that this contest was a tie? Doesn't that mean that I also receive a prize?" And the king responds, "Oh, yes, I nearly forgot. You see that mound of gold in the mirror? That's your prize. That's the prize you deserve."

During this holiday, when we are asked by God to account for our year that has past, may we find that we have so much to show for it. And in the words of our teacher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, may we each remember that the secret to life is to learn to live life as if it were a work of art.

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah!!

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