

THE NEW SHUL / Erev Rosh Hashanah 5767 (2006)

Sermon by Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein

This has been a month of dramatic and terrible milestones — the 5-year anniversary of the terror attacks on the World Trade Center, an event that affected our own community so profoundly, and forever; the 1-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, with all its devastation, and its revelation, into the horrid, unacceptable conditions of so many of our nation's most impoverished and neglected citizens.

Terrible events continue, both natural and man-made, as they have since the days of creation. and we must remain as vigilant and brave as ever as we confront the injustice, indifference, and arrogance all around us that serve as the toxins which poison our world. Yet most of us know we must first do the work on our own souls before we will be able to restore spirit, and hope, to the lives of others.

The 10 days of introspection that begin tonight with Rosh Hashanah— the annual, inward pilgrimage that each one of us is mandated to make during these Days of Awe— afford us the opportunity to grow within so that we might gain the wisdom and the strength to act without. As the Bible teaches us, there is a time for everything under the sun, and this is the time to focus internally— both on ourselves, and on our community.

And so, what do we need to work on this year? In what area are we in need of serious growth?

Before we try to answer, I have a question I'd like to pose to everyone here, a question that I think I know the response to: How many of you, by a show of hands, consider yourselves "spiritual but not religious"? Wow—I guess spirituality ain't much of an issue among Jews in America.

But before we examine what is our core problem as we enter this new Jewish year, 5767, let's unpack this concept of "spirituality," and let's see why, and how, it is so often linked with the phenomenon of mysticism. After we've done that, I think it will become very clear where we face some of our greatest and most important challenges.

You know we're in serious trouble when Madonna starts to incorporate sacred Jewish symbols into her stage performances, and Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher get married in Idaho by a "rabbi" from L.A.'s Kabbalah Center.

Welcome to the world of California Kabbalah, where self-help and New Age meet Jewish esoterica. In this weird and wacky cultural climate, anything seems to go when it comes to spiritual expression. While movie stars like Tom Cruise, Nicole Kidman, and John Travolta favor Scientology, celebrities like Barbra Streisand, Roseanne Barr, even Mick Jagger and Elton John prefer to dabble in Jewish mysticism.

This trend has spread far beyond the borders of California. Perhaps in reaction to the dull, ossified Judaism that we see so pervasively around us, our faith today sometimes seems intoxicated with mysticism, and with the fuzzy spirituality it provides— a spirituality of red strings, white robes, magical amulets, and \$ 30 vials of "holy water." Having dealt with some of the snake-oil salesmen who peddle these trinkets and potions, all I can say to you tonight is if you're shopping around for God these days, do your damndest to keep in mind 2 Latin words: caveat emptor.

Our generation's yearning for spiritual nourishment can draw us into some pretty shady enterprises and drive us toward some fairly unsavory characters. But we can—and should—learn from our

mistakes, especially since the commercialization of religion and the appearance of charlatanism are nothing new.

Far from it: Even in antiquity, the Jewish community faced its own false prophets. The problem was so prevalent in Israelite society that pretenders to the holy office of Prophet, or Navi (which translates as “Seer” or “Visionary”) were considered heinous criminals who warranted, and at times received, capital punishment.

In the Bible, there are 2 basic types of prophets: those who are healers and miracle workers (like Elijah, Elisha, and Samuel), and those who serve as the moral voices of their respective societies (like Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah). Some were charismatic, some weren’t; some were itinerant, some were sedentary; some belonged to officially-sanctioned “guilds,” or prophetic communities, and some practiced solo.

What united all of them was the fact that they’d been tapped by God for their various missions, touched by the divine in an unmediated and life-altering way.

It should come as no surprise that the false prophets were mirror images of the real ones. The illegitimate prophets of moral indignation were mostly delusional, since there was little status, and no money, to be gained from their tirades. The real problem was with the so-called healers and miracle workers, polished con-artists who made a living from their amulets, incantations, and supernatural cures./ These phonies and fakes replaced holiness with hollowness, promising the realization of dreams while emptying the purses of innocent victims.

Although some contemporary Bible scholars disagree as to whether the historical Jesus actually viewed himself as a divine being, what is beyond dispute is that in the centuries that followed— not even counting the constant, often vicious attacks by the Christian Church and its proselytizers— Jewish communities in the Diaspora were also plagued internally by a rogues’ gallery of compelling, but ultimately destructive, false prophets and messianic figures. It is a sad and dangerous tradition that has yet to come to a close, a tradition that can lead to shattered expectations, broken spirits, and a damaged faith.

Why do these men continue to attract followers? Some of the most dramatic outbreaks of messianic movements and false prophets have occurred in the aftermath of tragedy. Sabbatai Sevi, the most notorious and insidious of the Jewish false prophets, might never have had the huge impact he did have were it not for the Chmielnicki massacres in Poland and Russia in 1648— massive pogroms that devastated Jewish communities and deflated Jewish spirits, making them desperate (and ripe) for the promise of redemption that only a flesh-and-blood redeemer could provide.

There are modern manifestations of this impulse. Many Jews still live in the shadow of the Shoah, the Holocaust, with all its epic tragedy and trauma. Combine the fact of that cataclysm with the social and political upheavals that have been with us since the Sixties, the violence and terrorism that roil our world, and the yearning for a passionate spirituality that mainstream Judaism hasn’t been able to provide, and you could have predicted that mystical and messianic groups would start to surface in our own day: Jews for Jesus, Messianic Judaism, the Kabbalah Center, Chabad-Lubavitch.

The status quo, by definition, is satisfied with things as they are. It needs to be pushed constantly— and sometimes aggressively— if it is ever to change. That’s why, over the centuries, it’s often been only in reaction to the misbehavior of rogue figures and forces that Judaism has reshaped and revitalized itself.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, the rogues are back— and it's high time we do it again.

But how do we transform the Judaism of today? By bucking the prevailing trends of our culture and seeking out the true anchors of our great faith. While mystical and other esoteric approaches to Jewish spirituality are compelling and important, what is much more important, though perhaps less sexy, is to 1st have a solid background in the fundamentals: the Hebrew language, Jewish holidays and practices, Bible stories, and the like.

Just take a look at some other disciplines and fields: Picasso learned how to draw conventional human figures long before his bold experiment with cubism; Miles Davis trained in classical music prior to his daring journey into revolutionary forms of jazz.

You don't have to give up your rebel spirits. In fact, the most rebellious and radical of free spirits are almost always well-rooted ones— at least until they're ready to soar.

To give a personal example from a different discipline, I've studied the martial arts for more than a dozen years, and it is only because I have a strong foundation, a black belt in karate, that I now feel free to experiment with other styles and techniques, from tae kwon do, to ju-jitsu, to boxing. You won't be able to perform back flips— or commune with God— until you begin by learning how to stand, kick, punch . . . or pray. In an era when so many of us want quick fixes, this isn't an easy task—but it's the correct one.

When I earned my black belt just after ordination, I'd learned not only a particular set of fighting skills, but a wide array of other tools and lessons that would help me in my vocation as a religious teacher and counselor: humility, discipline, the power of repetition and practice, empathy, patience, knowing how to channel my abilities constructively, and the value of serious commitment. Karate helped teach me how to be a teacher— more importantly, though, it taught me how to be a student.

Most of us aren't boxers or black belts. But if, as Jung argues, within every human being is a "shadow" we must confront and contend with, then in a sense we are all engaged in psychic combat on a daily basis, not just during the Days of Awe— and the prize isn't a title or a belt, but a well-balanced soul. To triumph in that invisible, inner arena, we need to learn patience, commitment, and humility.

Modernity's shadow is its inability to tolerate this hard-to-swallow reality. Our culture seems much more comfortable declaring: *I want it, and I want it now. I don't have to work for it— I'll just buy this new self-help book from a guru I saw on Oprah and read it over the weekend. Nothing is beyond my reach.*

Well, like it or not, some things are beyond our reach— at least in the beginning. When we look for magic bullets, when we skip difficult but crucial steps in our development, we are doing ourselves a terrible disservice. Whether it's in the field of sports, dieting, or finding a more meaningful Judaism, we have to cultivate the virtues I've outlined if we are ever to experience anything in its deepest, most powerful form.

There is no real way to fully understand or appreciate the beauty and majesty of Kabbalah, for example, unless we first have a basic knowledge of Judaism—the spring from which Kabbalah, and all of Jewish spirituality, flows. When a so-called mystical group skips that step, it can do far more harm than good.

It's like when a karate instructor awards a person a black belt too early in their training. That person might swagger down the street with a new-found feeling of strength, but all the teacher has done is given that person a false sense of security, leaving him or her dangerously unprepared in the event of a real-life encounter.

So here is an impromptu, unsystematic litmus test for the overeager Jewish soul. Before you begin your fast-track classes in spiritual exotica, and spend a fortune on books, CDs, holy water, and red strings, try to answer the following nuts-and-bolts questions about your religious tradition:

Can you name the 5 books that make up the Torah, Judaism's most sacred and important document?

Can you list the 10 Commandments?

What is a mitzvah? Give an example of an ethical and a ritual one.

What is Shabbat, and why is it so important?

Does Judaism believe life ends with physical death, or does it believe in a world to come?

If these questions— which are, to me, some of the key building blocks of Jewish literacy— are overly difficult for you, then any attempt to delve into the metaphysical mysteries of a topic like mysticism is, at best, premature, and any teacher who'd encourage you to explore your religious heritage in this kind of reverse order is grossly irresponsible.

Abraham Maslow claimed that human beings have a hierarchy of needs, an ascending "ladder" from the most basic (food, sleep, sex) to the most advanced (love, wisdom, fulfillment) that we must follow in a logical progression if we're to work our way to the top rung of self-actualization. But I think there is also a hierarchy of knowledge, including religious knowledge. Who'd want to be treated by a cardiologist who'd never taken a class in Biology 101? and who'd look to a rabbi for spiritual guidance who knew all about mysticism but who couldn't instruct us about the Bible, conduct a service, or console a mourner?

This progression idea applies to us as learners, too. All we do when we sidestep the fundamentals is construct a house of cards— something without a true foundation and sound only in appearance. It might look pretty, but even a gentle breeze would collapse the entire structure.

So how do we learn the basics? The first and perhaps most difficult step is to acknowledge our ignorance. Humility, like honesty, is a virtue, but it is a virtue that will give us the strength and fortitude to begin the hard work that is involved in the acquisition of real Jewish knowledge. Once we've humbled ourselves and conceded that we simply can't go it alone if we truly want to explore our faith, the next logical step is to seek out the help of others.

We have been raised in a highly individualistic culture, one that tells us we don't need to rely on anybody or anything for our own growth (Jack London, Jack Kerouac, Amelia Earhart— you get the idea.) Solitude can be seductive. But what takes real strength, and what is ultimately more enriching, is our interaction with other human beings. ----- Historically, we rabbis have been our community's primary educators of Judaism for adults, and this year I will be teaching a diverse range of classes for our own shul's members and friends that I invite you to attend.

But you can find a Jewish teacher in other ways. Depending on your particular situation and stage, maybe what you need isn't a rabbi, but a peer, a fellow learner. In classical Jewish education, a

hevruta is your pedagogic partner, the person you study, discuss, and debate Jewish texts and ideas with. Your hevruta is the person you learn from as well as the person you teach, the companion on whom much of your religious knowledge— and, I would argue, your spiritual life— in large measure depends.

A true hevruta is like an army buddy, and the 2 of you are engaged, consciously or not, in trench warfare against 2 adversaries: Jewish illiteracy and a narcissistic culture. Religious education isn't like its secular counterpart; you don't just sit down in an armchair and read on your own. You dialogue, you argue, you interact, you wrestle— and none of these things are possible in a vacuum of the self. With a hevruta approach, the roles of teacher and student are in a state of perpetual flux. We have hevruta-style study planned for Sunday, and I hope many of you will attend and participate.

Our tradition states that God is present whenever 2 people study Torah together. Jewish learning, therefore, is much more than the acquisition of data— it is a sacrament.

Listen carefully to the words from the Sh'ma prayer, Judaism's quintessential expression of monotheism and a pathway to authentic spirituality: "Take to heart these teachings with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise up." It is only through regular, daily study and practice that we can ever hope to realize our goal of creating a knowledgeable, revitalized, and truly transformed Jewish soul. ----- In Judaism, learning for its own sake (lishma) is a religious duty and a spiritual virtue. We're judged not by the quantity of our knowledge, but by the quality of our commitment. Yet how seriously we take our study is a reflection of that commitment. Consistent Jewish study provides us with the religious knowledge requisite to living a rich and rewarding Jewish life, even as it deepens our devotion. That same learning will also enable us, depending on our dispositions and receptivity, to open new doors to the divine— Communion follows commitment.

So let your soul take root before it takes flight—you'll fly higher, you'll soar farther, and your aim will be more true. ----- Forget the red strings and the bottles of holy water— pick up a book, take a class, and learn the basics about Judaism, for your own sake as well as that of your kids. If what they learn at school isn't reinforced at home it will disappear, faster than you can imagine. Take our "Tree of Knowledge" brochure with you when you leave services tonight— we have so many great adult ed offerings this year that I'm sure there will be something for everyone.

Spirituality is an absolutely vital part of religion, but it means nothing unless it is anchored in knowledge—a knowledge that is itself anchored in community and shared connections. * As I have done for the past 3 years in a row, I want to give each of you a gift— a Days of Awe homework assignment. Between now and Yom Kippur morning, I want every person in this hall to think about the single, most pressing question you have, or have ever had, about Judaism— and then, I want you to do a little research, either on your own or with a partner, and try to find the answer. Whether you go to Google or to the library, all I ask is that you go somewhere, that you demonstrate some sincere effort toward building your own Jewish foundation, your own anchors of Jewish life and connection. You might be pleasantly surprised, not just by what you learn, but by how rewarding the exploration itself can be. Your verbal reports are due in this room in 10 days.

And so, with your task in mind, let me conclude my remarks tonight with the words, and the wishes, of the late journalist Edward R. Murrow: "Good Night, and Good Luck."