

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING
Erev Rosh Hashanah, 2016 / 5777

Shanah Tovah!

It's hard to believe that this is the 10th time I stand in this pulpit to wish everyone a Shanah Tovah – a good and sweet year. I continue to feel unduly blessed to be here in this historic and wonderful community, and to be called “rabbi” by a congregation I've come to care deeply about.

We are here tonight for different reasons, and each of us this Rosh Hashanah attends services to search for meaning in our own special way. As Jews and as human beings, we hope and anticipate that coming to temple will fill a need; that we will be moved by the experience.

Though we are here as a congregation, listening to the beautiful music and praying together from the same prayer books, our needs are very different, very individual. Why we are here are likely for very different reasons than for someone else sitting across the way.

On this Rosh Hashanah, I would like to explore for a bit the topic of need, and our search for meaning.

What do human beings need? Perhaps the person who wrote most brilliantly about what human beings need was the psychologist Abraham Maslow. Born a Jew although not particularly observant, Maslow developed what he called a hierarchy of needs. He built a pyramid of human needs, level upon level. Higher levels of human needs depend on lower levels, like higher levels of a pyramid depend on lower levels. What do humans need? And how might Judaism can fulfill each of those needs?

According to Maslow, the first level in the hierarchy of needs is the physiological. We have bodies, and we need basic ingredients for our bodies to survive. We need food; we need water; we need shelter. We need air to breath and a place to sleep and a way to meet our biological needs. And we need good health, the ability of our bodies to work correctly. The Rabbis recognized this idea from the very beginning. They said *Im Ain Kemach Ain Torah*. “Without flour there can be no Torah.” The Baal Shem Tov tells the story of a pious man who ran a soup kitchen for the poor of the community. He provided meals, but first he had these poor people gather in a sanctuary for prayers. The Baal Shem Tov walked in on this, and challenged him. “Why are you making those hungry people pray?” The man answered, “I am worried about their souls.” The Baal Shem Tov

answered, “Better you should worry about their bodies and your own soul.” Judaism is built on the idea that we need to care for the bodies of others and our own souls.

Judaism is different from other religions. Other religions emphasize heaven, some other spiritual world. It is the spiritual that is important, not the physical. To our Christian and Moslem friends, this physical world, the world of our bodies, is an inferior world. They ask, will you get to heaven? I have never seen the words on a synagogue sign, “Will you Get to Heaven?”

Only Judaism teaches that this physical world is where the action is. This physical world is where we can do mitzvot. When we bury our dead we wrap them in their tallit, but first we cut off a fringe to make it unkosher. The dead do not need a kosher tallit. They cannot do mitzvot in heaven. Our goal is to create heaven in this world. And so we need physical bodies. And the first great teaching of Judaism is we need to take care of those bodies, both our own and those of others.

Maslow’s second level in the hierarchy of human needs is security. We need to feel safe. And unfortunately for Jews, through most of human history throughout most of the world, we have not been safe. We Jews said after the Holocaust, “Never Again.” But we know all too well that the tide of anti-Semitism is rising once again, and not just in Europe where right-wing nationalist parties are wielding increasing influence, but here in the U.S. where, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of hate groups they’re tracking is at an all-time high. When it comes to security, and knowing our history where Jews are often targets, I share with you my fears when I listen to some of the extremist rhetoric we’ve been hearing in this election season. The unfortunate reality is that our temple must make the security of our building, of our children, and of our worshipers, a major priority this coming year.

It is sad that the greatest threat to human beings is not wild animals, is not hurricanes and tornadoes and tsunamis, is not diseases. The greatest threat to human beings is other human beings. And Judaism teaches us that we can do what is necessary to protect ourselves.

Yet Judaism teaches something more. Even our enemies are God’s children. Our tradition in the Avot de Rabbi Natan teaches, “Who is strong? Whoever turns an enemy into a friend.” Yes we need security. But in seeking security, we ought to never lose our humanity – again, all too easy when the rhetoric around us is so polarizing.

The first two levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs has to do with our physical selves. We need to care for our bodies, and we need security. But that is not enough.

For Maslow, the third level is love and belonging, family and friends, community. We need other people. We need family. I think of the story of the older couple living in King's Point, Florida. The husband calls his son in Chicago a few days before Rosh Hashana, and tells him, "I don't know how to break this to you but your mother and I have decided to get a divorce." The son panics, "Dad, don't do anything. I will be on the first plane down there." He then calls his daughter in Los Angeles, "Your mother and I have decided to get a divorce." The daughter responds, "Dad I am coming right out there." The man then turns to his wife. "Good news. The kids are coming for Rosh Hashana."

With my own family spread around the country, I know how important family is, and the importance of our Jewish communal family is no different. To be a Jew requires community. We need not just family, but other people, family and friends, to be who we are. Small wonder that Jews who live in small Jewish communities seek out other Jews, whether for a Passover seder or a Rosh Hashana service, a *shiva minyan* or a Friday night get-together. Maslow's third level is that people need people. I'll bet we all know someone who is well fed and safe – yet alone.

The most telling story I can think of – I've told it before – is of the small *shul* in the Old Country, many years ago, where the rebbe noticed that old Itzik – one of his regulars – had stopped coming to services. So one morning after the service, the rebbe went to visit Itzik in his small hut; Itzik was sitting forlornly, alone, starting into the fire burning in his fireplace. Without a word the rebbe went over to the fireplace and used the tongs to pull one of the burning logs away from the others. Then the rebbe sat, still without a word. And slowly, the isolated log went out, and the rebbe left. The message was clear, and the next Shabbos, there was Itzik, back in his regular pew.

So we humans have physical needs and community needs. But that is not enough.

There is a fourth level in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow called it esteem. People need to feel competent and confident. They need to feel a sense of achievement. They need to enjoy the respect of others. And in feeling they respect of others, they need to respect others.

Jewish tradition recognizes the importance of such self-esteem and sense of accomplishment. I remember once having a conversation with a Christian colleague who shared with me that he wished his church had a ritual like bar and bat mitzvah. He admires how young people entering their adolescent years stand up in front of a congregation and chant a long Hebrew portion from the Prophets, how these young people can learn prayers in a foreign language, and how they can deliver a speech on the

weekly portion. Young people need to grow up with a sense of accomplishment. And the bar or bat mitzvah meets that human need.

How many of us have belittled or demeaned others, for no good reason, or maybe even just to boost our own egos at the expense of someone else? How many of us are guilty of slighting others, even groups of others, through stereotypes, or unconscious bias, or innuendo? How often do we hear of “those Koreans,” or “those Blacks,” or “those Moslems,” as if we can tell something about an individual because we *think* we know something about a group? Think about how our unconscious biases and stereotypes feel, when we’re on the receiving end?

So we now turn to the highest level in Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs. He called it self-actualization. Our greatest need as humans is to live with a sense of purpose. The Christian pastor Rick Warren recently wrote a book on this theme, *The Purpose Driven Life*. The idea has deep Jewish roots. Numerous sources speak about the reason why we were put on this earth.

Few people expressed these ideas more powerfully than another great Jewish psychologist Victor Frankl. Frankl was a survivor of the Holocaust who spent time in the camps. After the war he wrote a book called *Man’s Search for Meaning*. He spoke of the death and the human indignities he had witnessed. But Frankl made one powerful point. Who were the people in the Nazi camps who had the best chance of survival? They were the ones who found a sense of purpose. They were the ones who found meaning. They were the ones who could honestly say, this is why I am here and this is what God wants me to do in this world. I believe Frankl was right. We were not put into this world by random chance. We are not here as the result of blind forces. Each of us is here because there is a force in the universe that wants us to be here. Each of our lives has a meaning. That is the highest level of what it means to be human.

Abraham Maslow developed a pyramid of human needs, a hierarchy of what it means to be human. We need physical survival. We need safety and security. We need family and community. We need self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment. And we need self-actualization, the knowledge that we are fulfilling some kind of divine purpose. Judaism has profound things to teach us about each of these five levels. We need to know who we are; we are not simply human beings but individuals with a purpose. And everything we do, even the smallest act of kindness – or the opposite – has cosmic significance.

May God help us see the powerful wisdom of Judaism, as we work through these Holy Days toward a better and more fulfilling future.