

“TO EVERYONE A SEASON”
Part Two

“COMES AUTUMN TIME”
A Sermon for Rosh HaShanah Day 5772
September 29, 2011

Rabbi Edward Paul Cohn
Congregation Temple Sinai
New Orleans, Louisiana

Here in New Orleans seasons commonly appear later than the calendar might indicate due to temperature lag, and hence though officially **fall**, you'll be happy to know that our A.C. is still set for summer! "Comes Autumn Time!" because the September equinox signals fall's arrival nevertheless. And what does autumn connote in our minds?

Well, it is a time of fullness and fertility! A time in which the still unharvested crops hang upon the vines. Old tasks must now be taken up, routines begin anew after the summer is past. We are moved to action, to gather-in the riches of the earth because, with some sadness, we know that this autumn is uncertain in length and that a winter lies ahead.

How shall these images speak to you and me as **Jews** on this Rosh HaShanah Day? As with each of the other seasons of nature, it is not only that we live through many autumns, but that many autumns live within us.

This is the ideal season, both within the realm of nature and within our human spirits, for our Jewish New Year to occur. **This** day we commemorate the Creation – the Birthday of the world, and our powerful Legend which anticipates that with the opening of the Heavenly Ledgers, (the books of those who have lived well, the books containing the names of those who have lived poorly, and the books of those of us who are in between) the ultimate judgment of our actions is yet to be decided. How well have we planted? What have we chosen to sow? How worthy is our Harvest?

First and last things are brought together as the Shofar's piercing call has sounded its annual alarm:

Do no leave your best intentions in life
to wither unharvested upon the vine!

Our Judaism teaches us that we define ourselves by what we cherish to our bosoms **and** by what we so lightly esteem as to leave unclaimed, unharvested along the way. What do we Jews let to wither by our indifference?

Well here's some good news!

Have you heard that we American Jews have been declared as the most popular religious group in the United States? So insist authors Putnam and Campbell in their new book, *Extraordinary Grace*, which assesses how warmly Americans feel toward various faith groups other than their own.

I had not heard about it, and apparently neither had my friend Rabbi Eric Yoffie. Eric wondered why our coming in at first place as America's favorite "other" faith has received so little press and attention. Perhaps, the president of our U.R.J. theorizes, because it contradicts our own ingrained self-image of victimhood.

The theory is that where as older Jewish Americans embrace a gloomy self-portrait, our "20-30 Somethings" dismiss such thinking as unfounded Jewish pessimism. They opt for a Jewish world view predicated on positives, not negatives. These are the attitudes we should center our thoughts upon on this Rosh HaShanah Day.

I. Jewish Literacy

And yet, with so much going for us as Jewish Americans, I still insist that the fly in the schmaltz is that we are seriously lacking literacy. Can you believe the current rage in both China and South Korea for Talmud study?

After careful study, the South Koreans and Chinese have concluded that our Jewish intellectual genius derives from **our** centuries-old pursuit of Talmudic wisdom. And hence, 50 million Koreans are now studying the Gemora in school. Image – there are more people who read the Talmud or at least own a copy in Korean language than Israelis who have it in Hebrew in their homes.

Well, I hope that works out for the Chinese and the Koreans, but I would be happy if Jewish literacy were to rise above those 43% of American Jews who, in a recent poll taken by the Pew Forum on Religion, couldn't even identify Moses Maimonides as the Jewish name on the list.

Improving our Jewish literacy is crucial and number one. How about this for this coming New Year:

- How about signing up for Hebrew Classes – beginner or intermediate – offered here at Temple Sinai?
- Participate in community-wide Limmud.

- How about signing up for our Introduction to Judaism Class on Sunday mornings at 9:00, it's just started?
- How about signing up for my Jewish Prophets Class which will be on Wednesday nights this coming November 2nd?
- How about signing up for the adult Bar or Bat Mitzvah Class?
- How about signing your children up, ages 4 years to 15 for Religious School. Get those errant 8th and 9th graders back for Confirmation. Who is the parent? Judaism isn't a salad dressing to be chosen – you choose for them.
- How about surprising your grandchildren by signing them up as well.
- How about telling me today that **you** are going with us to Israel in January on our Temple Sinai trip? (January 15-25th)

Jewish literacy is one of those precious Harvests which we often esteem too lightly or just never get around to, and leave the riches of Jewish intellectual treasures to just wither upon the vine.

II. Reform Judaism and Your Temple Sinai

There is another awareness and appreciation which I believe we need to highlight on this first day of our New Year 5772, and that is our identity as Reform or Liberal Jews. It too is part of our Legacy, a precious harvest, which we dare not take for granted because of indifference, and leave to dry upon the vine.

- Reform Judaism was established 200 years ago in Germany on the firm insistence by its founders, lay and rabbinic, that the Torah is not a Divinely written document, but is rather divinely inspired.
- There have been many articulations of Judaism from Biblical time to this very moment.
- Therefore, the Halacha – that is the law of Jewish orthodoxy and all other Jewish legal formulations – is not binding upon us as Reform Jews.

There is, you should remember, nothing which is intrinsically anti-Reform about most any of the practices of Orthodox Judaism. We are free to observe them all –

- Sabbath restrictions
- Sabbath customs
- dietary laws
- tallit, Kippot, t'fillin
- burial customs
- Prayers entirely in Hebrew
- and the list could go on and on and on. . .

But, you cannot, I repeat, you cannot be a Reform Jew and tell anyone else that there is only one way to practice Judaism! If you must do that, well then you have crossed the line, and are no longer a Reform Jew. You are Orthodox – Head over to Chabad or Beth Israel or Young Israel. There are countless options of both belief and practice, but freedom of choice and conscience is forever the hallmark of our beloved Reform Judaism.

I will not allow myself, and I hope you will not either, to be characterized as one who is **not** religious. We hear that said all the time. “He’s a religious Jew, she’s not religious.”

I may not be observant in many of those ritual practices esteemed by Orthodox Jews and perhaps viewed by them as essential to Jewish being, but, as a Reform Jew, I am a fully religious Jew, second class to nobody!

There is **no** reason to be apologetic or to allow anyone to make you, dear friend, a second-class Jew – and that includes the Israeli Chief Rabbis and all of their ilk of the extremist, fanatic Israeli (so called “Religious”) political parties whose essence is closer to fascism than it is to Judaism.

This great Congregation Temple Sinai gave birth to Reform Judaism in The Crescent City almost 142 years ago. Those pioneer reformers were determined and courageous visionaries. They undoubtedly suffered hurtful defamation from their more observant co-religionists who misunderstood this new Judaism. Their intent was to breathe relevance and vitality into a stale Judaism, a new Judaism for a New World.

The proof they say is in the pudding! Reform Judaism was subsequently adopted by Congregation Gates of Prayer and also by those congregations which decades later coalesced and became today's Touro Synagogue though Judah Touro was an adversary of Reform. Reform has proven its dynamism many times over by its reinterpretation and adaptation to new realities, ideas and needs of the spirit.

As Robert Kennedy declared,

“. . . the future does **not** belong to those who are content with today, [nor those who are] fearful in the face of new ideas and bold projects.”

And so, Temple Sinai has now determined to move forward with an exciting Temple-wide Campaign we have named, “Renewing the Sacred.”

As you will hear later from our President, Cliff Kern, we will eagerly pursue this “Renewing the Sacred” Campaign in order to safeguard this glorious and historic sanctuary – an irreplaceable architectural treasure which is in need of timely protection, as are other areas of our complex.

As my 25 year approaches, I will work arm and arm with you.

III. The State of Israel

Yet one final harvest of protective caring and eternal pride remains to be underscored on this New Year's Day. I speak, of course, of the State of Israel and her brave people. We dare not forsake Israel to its unworthy critics.

That said, this has been both an unprecedented and confusing year in the Middle East. At times hopeful, or was it foreboding, even the most seasoned of experts have been left clueless as to the eventual ramifications of “This Arab Spring.” And, of course, there remains the most pressing issue of Palestinian statehood and the Two State Solution.

I, for one, was intrigued by the published statements of September 12th by Michael Weil, Executive Director of our own Jewish Federation of New Orleans. He urged Israel to support Palestinian statehood, as he put it, “in the strongest manner.”

Michael equated their national ambitions with our own People's, dream of a Nation State first articulated 120 years ago by Theodore Herzl in Basel. Michael Weil wrote:

...(Israel) should be the first nation to vote in favor of Palestinian statehood. This should be followed by demands that the Palestinians prove they can fulfill the responsibilities of statehood.

And lest you think our Federation Director is a total captive of an over-stimulated and unrealistic imagination, he calls upon Prime Minister Netanyahu to meet with the head of the new Palestinian state to negotiate borders and resolve all outstanding issues. Weil concludes with this realistic and incisive prediction:

I doubt that Abbas will respond favorably. Nor do I expect that the Palestinians will be eager to return to the peace negotiations. But their refusal will put the Palestinians on the defensive and expose their current statehood push as just an empty public relations tactic. Meanwhile, by supporting Palestinian statehood, Israel would underscore its willingness to move forward and achieve the ultimate.

Much has been said of late regarding our President's loyalty to the people of Israel and the assurance of their security. I believe he has been very poorly and unfairly treated by politicians and Christians, and yes, Jewish groups whose hidden agenda is focused, at least as much upon the upcoming presidential election, as it is with a genuine and abiding concern for Israel's future.

Only a week ago, in a Conference Call of almost 900 American rabbis with President Barak Obama, I heard him delineate the record of the administration's concern and concrete actions on behalf of the State of Israel. Mr. Obama told us of:

The most comprehensive and meaningful strategic and operational consultations across all levels of our government in the history of the relationship between the United States and Israel.

He challenged us to cite a time when there has ever existed a stronger security integration than there is right now. Those interactions are what averted tragedy in Cairo.

The 2011 budget is secured in full for Israel and added to it, is 205 million dollars to help produce “Iron Dome” which has already shown itself so successful in intercepting dozens of rockets which might otherwise have struck homes or schools or hospitals.

. . . we are going to be consistently standing up against efforts to delegitimize Israel said President Obama.

Friends, it may be true as reports strongly suggest, that Mssrs. Obama and Netanyahu are not bosom buddies. Fine! I’m sure you can find an Israeli who is not wild about the Prime Minister, and with little effort, an American who will not vote for the President.

But, show me Obama the “appeaser!” Show me what bus Israel has been thrown under and when and where it took place. I believe we ought to watch and weigh with a healthy skepticism what everyone is saying very, very closely.

No political party has a monopoly on wisdom, patriotism or civility, but perhaps we have reached a new low in fair minded political rhetoric – and the election is over a year away.

Well, remember, from the outset, we wanted to strike a positive note, and determined to build our future in the 21st Century American Jewish world founded on vision, openness, inclusion and a progressive path to Torah favored by our “20-30 Somethings” – and many others of us!

Last June 26th found me up in beautiful Mystic, Connecticut for a most happy occasion with dear friends. It was a glorious Sunday morning and I ventured out on a wonderful walk on Main Street, eventually reaching the impressive white steepled Union Baptist Church which stands on a hill overlooking all of Mystic.

The service time on that Sunday was still 25 minutes away and I politely informed the usher that I was entering only to take a quick look and would be soon leaving.

“Well, what do you do sir?” he asked.
Reluctantly I replied, “I’m a Clergyman.”
“What church do you serve?”, he pursued.
“I am a rabbi.”
To which the usher called out to another man,
“Clyde, bring the Pastor over!”

Two minutes later, a young bearded man in ministerial robe and stole hurried over asking, “Could it be true? Are you a Jewish Rabbi?” I told him absolutely, from Temple Sinai in New Orleans, Louisiana.

“Well,” he remarked, “the Lord really **does** work in mysterious ways. You see, I need some help for this morning’s Sermon. It’s on Genesis Chapter 22 – you know, Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah. How do you pronounce **this** Hebrew word? I’ve tried all week long to find out. It seems like an important part of the text.”

By this time, the service was due to begin in five minutes, and those sitting in their pews were listening in on this conversation.

I asked him, “Which word do you want to know?”

And he pointed to the word: Hee nay-ne. I told him: It is pronounced: “Hee nay-ni – Behold, here am I.” With a big smile and a hearty handshake, Reverend Robert M. James, Jr. ascended the pulpit that morning.

Now, it is our morning to well consider its meaning. “Hee nay-ne – Behold, here am I,” along with the Shofar’s stirring sound both punctuate this Rosh HaSahanah Day.

Autumn Harvest and Rosh HaSahanah Day: what have we sown and friends what will we reap? What will we leave unharvested? We could read it for the Pastor, but will we **live it** for our own faith?

Hee nay-ni : “Here Am I”. Here are **WE!** We are **with** You God, though we know, sometimes it must **not** look like it. But we are! Mindful of that timeless call to Abraham. **We** are here today! **We** are Family! **We** are Jewish! And we are so proud.

And **so** may it ever be!

Amen.