

# Rosh Hashana 5765 - Rendezvousing with the Shepherd

- Daniel Cohen

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## Rendezvousing with the Shepherd

Why do Jews gather from all over the world on Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the new year? What is our purpose for being here today? What is our goal?

We may gain some clarity by asking another question as it is in Judaism we often answer a question by asking another question. Why does Rosh Hashanah in fact come before Yom Kippur? Rosh Hashanah is about the coronation of G-d as the ambassador and sustainer of the world. It is about our connection with the Almighty. It's about a universal belief in G-d's presence. Yom Kippur is about personal commitment, connection, forgiveness and confession.

One would think at first blush that before looking at the big picture we would need to first solidify our own personal commitment, which is represented by Yom Kippur. In fact the distinction between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is that Rosh Hashanah symbolizes the forest, the big picture; and Yom Kippur, the trees.

I would like to suggest that we answer these questions with one of the most popular words in Judaism. The word is one of the only Hebrew words with which most people throughout the world are familiar—Shalom, which of course means peace.

I remember when my grandparents, they should live and be well, took me on my first trip to Israel before my Bar Mitzvah. Immediately when we got off the plane we were greeted by our guide. My grandfather who did not know much Hebrew said to our guide—'Shalom!' And the man turned to my grandfather and said "How did you know my name?" Shalom means peace, Shalom is a name, Shalom reflects a sense of unity and Shalom is also a name for G-d.

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Ha Kohein Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, explained that the Talmud (the oral law) teaches us that we must pursue Shalom, peace before truth. Shalom, peace, is one of the highest values in Judaism, so much so, it says in the Talmud, that in certain cases one is allowed to deviate from the truth in order to achieve Shalom peace. Unity of connection with our people and with G-d is a precondition to Yom Kippur. We must be whole with each other and with G-d before we approach G-d for our own personal needs on Yom Kippur. If we stand alone, today" Rabbi Kook writes, "we stand a slim chance. But if we stand with G-d and each other our hopes for success and for blessings will go much higher". Rosh Hashanah, which symbolizes peace comes before Yom Kippur, which symbolizes truth.

I would like to focus on three areas of Shalom this morning: Shalom with G-d, Shalom within our community and finally Shalom within the Jewish people.

I open with a story about a contest that took place in England over 100 years ago at the turn of the 20th century. One of the most common types of contests in England was one in which individuals competed for who could recite a work of poetry in the most compelling, compassionate and articulate way. In this particular competition, after many people had fallen by the wayside, five finalists remained. The work of poetry that they had to recite was one of the greatest masterpieces of world literature, Psalm 23, written by King David. It is in our minds one of the holiest works, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...”.

As each person recited the Psalm it was clear that there was a young man who would emerge victorious. With his English accent, he recited Psalm 23 with great devotion. He completed the Psalm and the entire crowd rose from their seats and burst into applause. He was rewarded the first prize for his rendition. As he was accepting his honor, there was a older Jewish man, with a long white beard, sitting in the back of the crowd. He raised his hand and said “Gentlemen may I please have an opportunity to recite this Psalm?”

The old man stood up and began to recite the Psalm. For the first five seconds as he was reciting in broken English, everyone looked dumbstruck, and for the next thirty seconds as he continued his recitation, everyone was awestruck. Finally, at the conclusion of the recitation, the entire crowd was in tears. After the old man was finished reciting, the man who had won the prize came to the rabbi and said, “Rabbi YOU deserve this prize!”. The rabbi turned to the young man and said “No! I am not doing this for any sort of honor”. Then the young man said, “I have a question for you. Why when I recited this Psalm was everybody cheering and when you recited this Psalm, everybody was crying. And the old man turned to the winner and said, “Everyone was crying, because I know the Shepherd....I have a relationship with the Shepherd”.

When I contemplate this story, it instills within me one of the key aspects of why I am here today on Rosh Hashanah, and that is to build a relationship with G-d, the Shepherd, Shalom with the Almighty.

Somebody once approached a rabbi and said “If you had to summarize the goal of Rosh Hashanah, what would it be?” The rabbi said if we can achieve the following we will have had a successful Rosh Hashanah: All men shall know that G-d is the Master of the world. It says in the liturgy for Musaf regarding the coronation of G-d as King over the world: May every creation know that You have made it, and may every being realize that You have brought it into existence, and may every breathing thing proclaim, the Lord G-d of Israel and His Kingdom rules over all. One of the main ideas today is to build our relationship with the Shepherd, with our Creator.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev once made a call to all of the men, women and children in his community and said to them, “Everyone meet in the synagogue!” Because it was a Tuesday in the middle of the week, everyone was wondering if something terrible was about to happen. All of the Jews gathered at the synagogue and Rabbi Levi Yitzchak ascended the pulpit, clamped his hands on the Bemah and said, “Jews! Do not forget that there is a G-d!”

We know that today as in the past, we sometimes lose sight of what is truly important in life. We

go through the motions without the emotions. Yes, we are connected with our culture, and we are masters at saving time and multi-tasking, but at what price? We miss the experience of rendezvousing with the Almighty; and yet it is precisely this void, the lack of an appreciation of the beauty of our world, that we desperately seek to fill.

One of the great prophets predicted that in the times prior to the coming of the Messiah in which we live today... There will be not hunger for bread, nor thirst for water, but rather there will be a yearning to hear the word of G-d. In fact it is written in Kabbalistic literature over 1005 years ago, that as the Messiah approaches, the study of Kabbalah will permeate the world.

The Kabbalah says that the energy is in the air, and the desire to return is within us all regardless of our social, political or cultural status. We need to utilize today to fill that need, because it is an integral part of each and every one of us.

How do we get to know the Shepherd? I would like to focus on the notion of rendezvousing with G-d. In "G-d and the World Around Us", Gerard Manley Hopkins writes: "The world is charged with the grandeur of G-d".

In this morning's Torah portion regarding the story of Hagar, the wife of Abraham and their child, Ishmael, the Torah tells us that Hagar was sent out of the house because of the negative affect that Ismael was having on Isaac. The Torah states, "...and G-d opened up her eyes, and she saw a well of water and she went and filled the urn with water and gave the young boy a drink". The Torah does not tell us that G-d created a well. The well had been there all along. What had happened was that Hagar opened up her eyes and understood what she was to do.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a great English poet, writes "The earth is crammed with Heaven and every common bush afire with G-d. Every bush is a burning bush, the miracle that is taking place around us. But only he who sees takes off his shoes, and the rest sit rounded and pluck blackberries".

Helen Keller writes, "It is more difficult to teach the ignorant to think than it is to teach an intelligent blind man to see the grandeur of Niagara. I have walked with people whose eyes are full of light but who see nothing in the woods, or sea, or sky; nothing in the city streets, nothing in brooks. What a witless masquerade is this seeing. We are better far to sail forever in the night of blindness with the sense and feeling in mind, than to be thus content with the mere act of seeing--to have the sunset, the morning skies, the purple of distant hills, and yet allow our soul to voyage through this enchanted world with nothing but a barren stare".

It is about making a simple affirmation every morning, which I would like you to say with me today... THANK G-D I'M ALIVE! It's about feeling a sense of blessing and energy that G-d infuses within each of us every day and seeing the harmony and symmetry in the world around us.

Another example is the simple gift of 'water'. It is the basis of all life. One of the greatest things about water is that the inhabitants of this planet HAVE it and no one else does. As far as scientists can tell, the earth is the only place in our galaxy and in the entire universe where there

is liquid water. Oh there is plenty of H<sub>2</sub>O out there, meteors have water, Mars and Venus may have had water, but the earth's water is unique. That's because water only exists as a liquid above 32 degrees Fahrenheit. The temperature out of space is about -400 degrees. Thanks to our exact positioning near the sun, and the properties of the earth's atmosphere, we have the REAL THING... soluble, drinkable, pure water. It also supports the 'small stuff' too. DNA and RNA stem cells could not exist without water.

Water is necessary for carbon, the basis for life. Let's talk practically. If I'm hot, I can put a few pieces of frozen water in a soda. If I'm cold, I can boil water and have tea or another hot beverage. If I need to take an aspirin, a glass of water has no taste. If I am really thirsty, there is nothing more satisfying than a cool glass of H<sub>2</sub>O.

Water is redistributed all over the world through our oceans, lakes and rivers, as one of the greatest kindnesses that G-d has given us. We know when water is heated and boils it expands and becomes a gas taking up more space and becoming less dense, and as it cools it contracts taking up less space and becoming even more dense. But then a very strange thing happens. If water cools below 30 degrees Fahrenheit, instead of continuing to contract, water suddenly starts to expand. By the time it freezes at 32 degrees it has expanded by 10 percent. It is the only substance in the universe that does that.

Is this an accident of nature or a planned kindness? Consider for a moment what would happen if water followed the laws of nature. The bottoms of every lake and river would freeze, killing all the plant and fish life and fauna. How tragic that would be.

Instead, the reason water rises to the top is to create a blanket of warmth for the living organisms below it by not allowing the heat from below to escape, allowing for their existence. Instead of destroying life, water actually protects life, but only because it behaves in a way that defies all scientific principles. Why is it so? It is an act of kindness. If it's Creator intended to provide a life of fullness, richness and beauty, the natural laws would leave the ocean barren and polluted. This would not fit into the plan, so G-d changed the laws of nature, or in this case, water the protector of life, the source of life.

Rosh Hashanah is about seeing G-d in everything around us; in nature and the symmetry in the world around us, in the birth of a child, and in the death of a loved one. This past year we have had our share of Simkots of joyous celebrations and our share of tragedies and our challenge has been to see G-d in all of these experiences.

A young man once commented to me this year, "Rabbi, I was at my father's death bed at the moment of his passing and I can tell you that at that moment I felt closer to G-d than ever before". And it is true that it is often times on occasions such as these that we can truly feel connected with the Shepherd. But there are times in life when we have difficulties connecting and it is in these times of darkness as Rosh Hashanah alerts us that G-d is by our side as well, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me".

It is important for us to remember that G-d is always with us if we simply acknowledge Him. I am reminded of a story of a young boy who once asked his father, "Dad, where is G-d?" The

father turned to his son and said, "G-d is wherever you let him in". G-d is with us on ALL of our journeys in life, and sometimes it is in precisely those moments of suffering that we experience G-d in the most profound ways.

Rabbi David Aaron, who is the founder of Israelite, shares a story of a woman who he considered one of the most amazing people he had ever met. He said, "She was radiant with the joy of life." Rabbi Aaron once said to her, "You are a remarkable person--you always seem to be beaming with light". She said "Oh Rabbi, I can tell you why". She rolled up her sleeves and showed the scars running down both of her arms, and she commented, "Rabbi I have scars all over my body. About five years ago I was in a car accident. My friend was at the wheel, lost control and the car went over a cliff. The car rolled over a number of times and finally came to a halt, but in that moment I realized that I was still conscious, that I was still alive. I pulled myself out of the car, but then I saw that my friend was wedged into the wreck, so I ran back to pull her out. At that point the car exploded. The ambulance came and took me to the hospital and after surgery I was put into rehabilitation for about a year and a half to relearn the basic motor skills. Rabbi I have to tell you that it was the greatest gift of my life. During this time I felt the presence of G-d more than ever in my life. My radiance and happiness did not come without much pain and work".

Recently many suffered devastation in Florida with the worst hurricane Florida has experienced since hurricane Andrew in 1992. It is important to remember, however, that after hurricane Andrew, when the victims were asked how they were feeling, one woman responded for many. She said "It was so amazing, we felt so much love for each other that we had never felt before. We will remember forever the awesome feelings of unity, compassion and sensitivity that emerged during those frightening times. Though we experienced very painful moments, there were so many precious feelings and realizations that we achieved precisely from the painful moments." They felt a powerful connection to their Shepherd.

One of the most inspiring individuals who felt this connection, was Victor Frankel. Victor Frankel was a psychoanalyst in Auschwitz who wrote a phenomenal book entitled, A Search for Meaning. He survived the concentration camps and at the end of his lectures he would always say, "There is only one reason why I am here today. What kept me alive was you. I dreamed that some day I would be here telling you how I, Victor Frankel, had survived a Nazi concentration camp. I've never been here before, I've never seen any of you before, I've never given this speech before, but in my dreams I've stood before you and uttered these words a thousand times."

Today is the day to imbibe the beauty of the world around us and to understand that G-d walks with us in both moments of great joy and moments of great difficulty. And to recognize that we are living in a generation when not only we, but the world and the Jewish people are hungry for Shalom, for G-d" and for the relationship with the Shepherd.

Anyone who has been in Denver for the past few weeks knows of the affront to our Jewish community by the 'Jews for Jesus' pilgrimage, with its falsifications, lies and duplicity. No matter what a person's religious orientation or background, we can all agree that Jews for Jesus is not a part of the Jewish belief system, yet they have been successful. Over 250,000 out of

6,000,000 Jews have decided to adopt the Jew for Jesus philosophy.

Rabbi Tuvia Singer, who was here over a week ago, said perhaps the success of Jews for Jesus is a wake-up call for our community, so we can realize that the problem and the challenge is not Jews for Jesus but Jews for Nothing. What do we as Jews stand for?

Jews for Jesus is so successful because it is able to fill a void that we unfortunately are not doing to the best of our capability. The Pietzchechne Rebbe, the last remaining rebbe of the Warsaw ghetto says, "The soul relishes fixation". We all desire a personal and fulfilling relationship with G-d. Unfortunately we sometimes seek counterfeit pleasure in our attempt to satisfy the yearning for connection to G-d that is so prevalent in the world today particularly after 9/11. We have the material wealth but we are lacking the spiritual connection.

We want a rendezvous with the Shepherd that makes our community not only so potent for Jews for Jesus but so right for connection to G-d, and for the future of the Jewish community.

Today is not only about Shalom with G-d but Shalom peace within our community. We are blessed in this synagogue at BMH-BJ, the merger of two congregations, with a tremendous history and tradition. We have a heterogeneous membership with a variety of levels of observance. A reality I believe we need to celebrate. It is a reason to come together not to be split apart. Our diversity is our strength--we offer multiple gateways for connection.

It is important to honor the older members of our community, the ones who have been in our community for fifty and sixty years. We are only here today because of their great efforts. When you look on the walls of our synagogue whether it is the last president or leaders of our sisterhood you see, they all brought their G-dliness to our synagogue and we must celebrate and honor them for their contributions. And at the same time we must honor the more youthful elements of our congregation. It's all part of one great mosaic.

I would like to ask the past presidents and all members of BMH-BJ for the past 40 years or more to stand so we can honor you today.

There is an enigmatic statement in the Bible, which I believe can crystallize what our diversity means for our synagogue. The Bible tells us that there were two ways the Jews served G-d in the Temple. The first way was one that was only utilized at the time of the patriarchs and matriarchs and that was called a matzevah, which is a monument. But after Jacob bore his twelve children, G-d said I now despise the matzevah, the monument, as a way of serving G-d, I want you to only utilize an altar, which signifies multiple stones.

And again, Rabbi Kook, one of the greatest lovers of Jews of all stripes, says: "Why in our generation today, and after Jacob had his twelve children, was the matzevah no longer the right way to serve G-d but instead the mizbeach was used? Because in the time of Abraham, Abraham had one way of serving G-d and that was through kindness, and everyone who lived during that time was to funnel this service of G-d through Abraham. At the time of Isaac it was through devotion and prayer. Everyone who wanted to serve G-d had to serve G-d through that vehicle.

At the time of Jacob it was through the study of Torah.

But G-d recognized that with the birth of the twelve children it was no longer acceptable to expect every single person to serve G-d in the same way. With the emergence of the twelve tribes a new pluralism based on Torah was needed. Allowances had to be made for the new diversity of opinion, reflected in the Jewish people. If there was to be true unity in Israel, it must be through this polyphony of ideas for how to serve G-d--a great symphony where each one played a different instrument to the best of their ability

In this spirit, Shalom with G-d and the universe builds to this place and point in time. If we truly believe in G-d's presence in our lives and in each human being sitting here, we can more readily see each person as being part of the great symphony, playing their very unique musical instrument, with G-d Almighty as the Conductor.

I believe firmly that this is our greatest challenge as a synagogue and our great destiny. This past year we finally completed the dedication of our Torah. Each person contributed a letter to the Torah, and G-d willing it still will continue for the coming year. There are still opportunities to dedicate letters, to dedicate parshiyot. The dedication of the Torah symbolizes that no Jew will be left behind. It demonstrates that we care about each person in the synagogue, and that this synagogue is a community. We are ONE. If one letter in the Torah is missing the entire Torah is invalid. I want you to know that personally. We care about each and every one of you and I know I speak not only for myself but for the Chazan, for Sam and for all of our staff at the synagogue, and for our lay leaders.

The synagogue is founded not only on a belief in G-d, but also on the belief of the love of the Jewish people. We will grow through this ideal, not only internally, but also externally, as we will provide a magnet for Jews who are seeking warmth, love and joy. This year I urge each and every one of you to join a chavrah as a way of building community and unity, and as an opportunity once a month not only to learn about G-d and Judaism, but to learn about each other and to celebrate each other. Our main task is to build a community that is filled with unity and with love.

I recently came across an amazing book called *The Wings of Joy*, from which I would like to share a few brief messages. It expresses the idea of what we are about. He says, "When the power of love replaces the love of power, man will have a new name which is G-d. If you find it difficult to love the human in someone, love the Divine in them. The Divine in him is G-d. G-d exists in that person just as G-d exists in you. To love G-d is extremely easy, because He is divine and perfect, but if each time you look at an individual you can consciously be aware of that existence in him then you will not be disturbed by his imperfections or limitations. Please join me in the following meditation. 'G-d please do teach me only one thing--how to love the world the way you love me. Do teach me only one thing--how to love the world the way you love me'. We must regard the people around us as the limbs of our own body. Without them we are incomplete. G-d has created five fingers and though some are shorter or weaker than others, we know that only when we have five fingers are we perfect. Your middle finger is the tallest. If you feel that for this reason you do not need your shorter fingers then you are sadly mistaken. If you want to play the piano or type then you need all five fingers. If we remain isolated as

individuals, then the perfection that we achieve will be very limited. It is only by accepting humanity as part of our own life and by helping to perfect humanity with our own illumination that we can fulfill ourselves”.

Our goal, our hope, our mission is to make sure that our doors are wide open. We want people to join our synagogue community and we can do it if we continue to infuse an admiration for our path. Let's get people in our door. Let's get people involved in our committee structure as well. Let's get everyone invested in building the synagogue by giving our talent and time to create multiple gateways of connection and to bring a spirit of joy and fulfillment. We need to feel that our synagogue is a partnership between G-d and us, and that G-d will give us everything we need to be successful. We can do it—we can find G-d in each and every person and enable our community to shine brightly with the spark within.

This is our greatest calling...to establish real unity, to respect our diversity and our observances and to focus on the common bonds that strengthen us. If we can do this then it will bode well for the Jewish people throughout the world. For this is not only the greatest challenge of the Jewish people today, but also the right calling whether it is in Denver, Colorado amidst our different synagogues or amidst those who are affiliated or unaffiliated; and whether it is in the land of Israel where there are heart wrenching decisions that the Israeli people will face in the coming months. It is obvious we cannot survive as a Jewish people if we are not united together with one heart as one people.

Before Yom Kippur, we must have Rosh Hashanah which is Shalom peace, peace with G-d, peace with our universe and peace with the people around us in our own lives, and with Jews around the world. And finally, this Rosh Hashanah we pray for peace in the entire world. We hope for a time in which we can affirm the common humanity and divine spark that exists within each and every human being.

I believe we all felt this so personally and strongly this past March at our synagogue when we arrived on Shabbat morning and discovered a swastika emblazoned on the wall of the synagogue. Within a period of 24 hours Jews and gentiles gathered together in demonstrations of support. All of us were deeply moved, by the overwhelming sense of love and the power of Shalom, peace to conquer the voices of hate.

Rosh Hashanah is about achieving this Shalom, the peace with G-d, the peace of strength and unity amidst the diversity in our synagogue, and peace for all humanity.

I would like to conclude with a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King who wrote, “Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it.”

This past Shabbat we honored our firefighters and recognized those common bonds in humanity and the spark of G-dliness within every human being. Today, on Rosh Hashanah we are blessed not only to be here as a Jewish people, but also to have our police officers who are here supporting our religious freedom and peace in our community and across the world.

I would like to conclude this morning by asking them to come in and we will offer a prayer as we sing together 'G-d Bless America', and I hope and pray that G-d willing this year, the Almighty will bring us a year filled with peace with G-d, peace with our universe, peace with all of the people in our own lives and peace for all of humanity, and let us all say, AMEN!