

We are meeting again tonight, as indeed we will do next week, in what we all must realize in overwhelming numbers. On my second Rosh Hashanah celebration in Temple Israel, I shall not have a question to ask. I ask it with humility and with complete sincerity. I am sorry if it strikes a jarring note, but I know of no other way to ask it than to ask it.

What are we doing here? Why are we here this evening? Why are any of us here tonight? Because it is Rosh Hashanah? Of what significance is that? Is there any meaning in celebrating a new year?

These High Holy Days of ours are different from all the other days we have. The others speak of happiness in our past, a battle won or lost, a sea divided, or an intrigue triumphant. A time for planting or for harvesting. But these great Days of Awe are unrelated to the rest. They hold themselves aloof from all events and happenings, incidents, and personalities. They speak to us, instead, about the whole of life, and the meaning and the relevance of what we have and who we are.

There is no instrument producing the sound of music that is more ancient than the ram's horn we call shofar. Three thousand years ago, and more, those sounds were heard. The shofar summoned Israel to battle, to move forward or to rest or to retreat. It summoned Israel to a symbol, a proclamation, procession, or parade. Whatever mood or crisis caused the call, it was a summons, and it was for everyone.

In later years, the sound was heard less often. At new moon or solemn assembly, the shofar sounded to announce the sanctity of the occasion. On the seventh year, the year of release, and on the fiftieth year, the year of jubilee when slaves were all set free, the shofar sounded to announce the sanctity of the human existence.

The centuries rolled on. Time passed. The sound took on a different setting, a unique style, a different mood. Only its meaning did not die. It remained a summons and it still talked of sanctity. It said that certain days were sacred, and that men, women and children were sacred, too.

In later years, it ceased to be that kind of summons. Our fathers and mothers came to worship on this day, not because they heard the sound, they came to hear it.

What once had been a summons, had become a prayer. A prayer without words, but a prayer none the less. Maimonides went so far as to suggest the

words the sound might mean. You might say that he wrote the lyrics. He wrote "Awake from your slumbers he who has fallen asleep in life and ponder over your deeds. Look well to your soul. Let there be betterment of your act. Forsake each of you these evil ways and thought."

The summons had become a prayer. A prayer our fathers and mothers went to hear. For us, I fear, it is no summons, and it is no prayer, and it evokes no tears. We come to Temple and we hear the sounds, and we speak. "How well he blew it," or we say, "How quaint." Am I wrong? Think back a little. Consider the moment when the shofar sounded last year on Yom Kippur. What reaction did we have? Did we tremble at the thought of judgment? Did we search inside our lives? In short, was it a summons or a sound? A prayer or a performance? A shofar is a summons and it still proclaims the symphony of life.

That is why this year in Israel the sound will bring forth bitter tears, for the sanctity of life is once again being trampled in the dust. The shofar's sound does not merely summon us to public gathering; it summons us to private questioning. It summons us to worship.

The question is "Is worship still as crucial a concept as once it was?" For most of us the answer would be no. Rabbi Simon, the just, who said the world rests on three things, declared that one of these was worship. Perhaps, but for most of us, worship is sometimes a thing. We come on state occasions when the invitation or the summons or the mood or the need is strong. But not much more. Worship is not our occupation and we wonder honestly how really important it is.

So, we answer the question with a question. How long would Judaism exist without worship? And the answer is: How long would Jews exist without Judaism? The coal removed from the fire stays hot for a little while before it turns black again and cold.

To those who say I am a Jew, but I am not religious, and I don't need Judaism. Of course, you can! But only because there is a Judaism. You can be a Jew without religion but only because there are those who keep the flame alive. And having kept the flame alive is not an unknown occupation.

There is a death in a far away place. First there is a funeral and after the service a question. The mourner is asked, "Shall I say kaddish for your loved one for you? The financial arrangement is agreed upon and the mourner returns home confident with the knowledge that his loved one will be remembered by someone who knew him not. His loved one will be prayed for by a stranger for a fee. A hired "kaddish sayer." Is this the thing we call worship that keeps our faith alive?

We have no word for worship in our sacred tongue. The word we use is the word we use for labor or for work. Avodah means labor and avodah means worship. Why? Because once it referred to labor of the Levites in the Temple. The labor of the sacrificial cult. It was the labor of men who worshiped God on behalf of other people. Is this the thing we call worship? How far removed from most of us is all of this? This hiring of a man to worship in our stead. A Levite, a kaddish sayers or a rabbi?

We look horrified at this foreign form of surrogate worship. Yes, we belong to a temple and we want to know that services take place regularly in our absence, that the rabbi is always there although we are not. Is that so very far removed from all the rest?

We have an easy way of forgetting what a temple is all about. A school, a meeting place, a symbol to our neighbors, a museum. We have an easy way of forgetting where the Temple stands or ought to stand or had to stand within our lives. We have an easy way of forgetting and a hard way to remember. Hard and usually too late.

Let the Russians close down synagogues and we protest with every fiber of our being. Let any distant land deny our people the right to worship and we are on the march. But for ourselves, well – there is no danger here, so why bother.

But consider for a moment, God forbid, what we would do if someone, some oppressive governments were to close down every temple in the land. My guess would be that we would risk our lives to gather here for worship.

Ye, worship is a strange conception. Sometimes we delegate to others to perform something we never get around to loving until it is beyond our reach. There has to be more than that.

And this is where we stumble. Until Judaism appeared upon the scene, worship was a simple matter. You did what the high pries told you to do. You served your God with offerings and with gifts. It was a thing to do, to perform, to act out and to move away. But there was no connection, none at all, between the service of god and living a decent life. We Reform Jews were the ones who put it all together, realizing that ritual was not enough. It was the prophet Micah who spelled it out loud and clear! “Where with shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before Him with burned offerings, with cows of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? It has been told me, oh man, what is

good and what the Lord does require of me: only to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God.”

Surely you and I would say the same. As rabbi, I would wish that every member would attend our every service. Of course, I would.

But if I had to choose between the man who daily prayed his prayers and him or her who lived a decent, value-laden life, I know whom I would choose, and walk thereby a little of the way with Micah.

Why then come here? Not as an end in itself, not as a ritual that has to be performed, a deed that must be done. Not at all. But rather as a way of rekindling the flame, recharging the battery, rewinding, and affirmation toward a set of values and ideals.

You say to me “Oh, I don’t have to come to Temple to pray. I can pray in the kitchen.” Of course, we can. Only we don’t. And I know why. The kitchen is a crazy place to pray. It’s a place for cooking, for pots and pans, and galloping gourmets. And who finds quiet there?

So, we build a temple: a place of sticks and stones, and we set aside a moment in the week and no telephone will ring and no disturbance will occur, and we close that hour with music and with words to set the mood. And why? To think about our lives against the measuring rod of worth, against the backdrop of ideals. To say the words affirming those ideals out loud for all to hear. And for a little while to view the world as our world could be. Every corner in our temple has a reason and every project has a purpose. But our sanctuary is the heartbeat of it all. Take it away and all the corners would wither, the projects would crumble, and the building becomes an empty shell. A thing of sticks and stones, a museum of matters, that no longer matter. A place of hired kaddish sayers, a façade, of make-believe.

Worship. It is no prayer that someone else can pray for us. This is no dream that someone else can dream. Worship is a reaching up and reaching out. More than earning what we call a living; more than a search for games to play, more even than a struggle to survive. We need each other, and we need each other here. Here to strengthen one another and ourselves. Not in mystery, in magic or in fear, but with a yearning that will not be denied.

The Talmud tells us that when the Romans were putting the ancient Temple in Jerusalem to the torch, and the Temple was in flames, a young priest with the keys to the Temple gazed upon the ruins. He mounted the roof of the sanctuary and cried to heaven, “Master of the Universe, we did not have the merit to keep your holy place. We turn these keys back to you for safe keeping.”

And in desperation he threw the keys toward heaven. According to the legend in the Talmud, a heavenly hand reached forth and grasped the keys.

The sequel to the legend is that the keys to God's house were grasped for a moment by the heavenly hand and then were scattered. They landed in various parts of the world. The key to every synagogue and every temple has a little bit of the key to the actual temple in it. We are the keepers of the key.

We are the keepers of the flame. Let it first touch our lives and then we shall hold it high. The world rests upon three things, and one of them is worship. And we know why.

Create in us a clean heart, Oh Lord, and renew that special spirit within us. Help us to place the key in the lock, turn it and enter your holy sanctuary!
Amen.