

## **Erev Rosh Hashanah: Tikun Atzmi challenge!**

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How often do we encounter jokes that begin with the phrase, "There are two types of Jews?" Today, I want to delve into that notion once more, though not in jest. As a rabbi, I find myself faced with two kinds of congregants: those who implore, "Rabbi, please avoid discussing certain topics in your sermons," and those who insist, "Rabbi, you must address these issues." Within our congregation, there are those who enjoy my words but occasionally resist my messages, and then there are those who believe that my priorities should mirror theirs - that the most pressing issues in their minds must be the focal point of my sermons.

### **The "Don't Talk About This" Congregants**

Last year, just before the High Holidays, I came across an article titled *"10 Things I Really Don't Want to Hear From My Rabbi on Rosh Hashanah."* Let me share a few excerpts to provide insight into this hypothetical "open letter" to a rabbi.

1. "Rabbi, please spare me the reminders of how dire the world is; I'm well aware, as I read the news daily! Offer me hope, a glimpse of a brighter future, and provide words of faith to make sense of seemingly senseless events.
2. Rabbi, I understand that Rosh Hashanah is a day of judgment, but remember, God is the judge - not you. I come to the synagogue seeking inspiration, not a litany of my mistakes or your accusatory finger. I wish to contemplate my missteps, not feel like a defendant in a trial.
3. Rabbi, refrain from emphasizing my once-a-year attendance. Repeatedly highlighting my status as a 'twice-a-year Jew' won't encourage me to attend more often; it might actually push me further away. Create an environment of belonging, not estrangement.
4. Rabbi, please avoid constantly discussing Israel or the Holocaust. I acknowledge the significance of Israel in our lives, even as a Zionist living in the United States. The Holocaust's importance is undeniable, but I don't want my Judaism centered solely around the memory of horror. Rabbi, share the positive teachings of Judaism relevant to me, as a Jew living in the USA.
5. Rabbi, don't transform the bimah into a platform for your political ideas. Your beliefs are yours, and mine are mine. I'm uninterested in your voting preferences, and I'm not inclined to share mine. In the synagogue, let's unite: with God, loved ones, our community, and ourselves. Share words that foster unity in a divided world.
6. And Rabbi, remember, there's a reason TED talks are limited to 20 minutes..."

### **The "You Must Talk About This" Congregants**

From this compassionate and involved group, I didn't come across an article last year. Nevertheless, I received numerous emails, phone calls, and had informal conversations during

Shabbat dinners and classes. "Rabbi, you must address the mental health crisis," "Rabbi, discuss global warming," "Rabbi, talk about the situation in Israel, critique the government while reaffirming our Zionism," "Rabbi, address the challenges in our State and country"... The list goes on.

To you my cherished congregants, I want you to know that I hear you. Your concerns are mine too. I experience distress, worry, and hold strong political views as well. I'm here to listen, to engage, and to share in your concerns over the world, Israel, the U.S., and the future of Judaism. We might agree on some matters, disagree on others, but remember, the person to your left might have divergent priorities and viewpoints. Maybe I will address some of your issues during my sermons, maybe I will not. Please try to understand that I'm not able to address all the important issues from the Bimah in the following days, but you have my commitment that I want to be your ear to listen to all the things that are the most important and pressing issues for you.

### **Being a Rabbi, Being Your Rabbi**

I relish being a rabbi. I count my blessings daily, thankful that Hashem has bestowed upon me the privilege of making a livelihood from something that brings me joy and pride almost every single day. Selecting sermon topics during this crucial time for the TKAE community is a challenging process. It's a decision that often awakens me in the middle of the night, prompting me to write. This decision monopolizes my focus, leaving little room for anything else.

Addressing every topic that resides in your minds as essential for these High Holidays is simply unattainable. Agreement on every subject is elusive, as God created us as distinct individuals. Often, you may believe that Torah or that Judaism aligns perfectly with your political or philosophical stances. Allow me to dispel this notion: sometimes it doesn't. In fact, our tradition's breadth allows it to encompass diverse political views.

As your rabbi, I'm here to guide, not judge; to teach, not dictate; to advise, not command. Many times, I come to listen more than to speak. During these Yamim Noraim, I've chosen, perhaps with humility and even the risk of error, to address matters that I perceive as universal challenges. Things that I personally struggle with, and I would like to share them with you. Fear, uncertainty, the tension between the collective and the individual, discussing without fighting, the incoherence between our ideas and our actions, the limit of second chances, the meaning of being a Jew in the year 2023 - these are the issues I wish to engage, sharing insights from my heart and our Torah.

I endeavor to infuse these High Holidays with Torah wisdom that empowers us to face life's challenges. I seek to introduce ideas and texts from our tradition that provoke thought and growth. I want to challenge you; I want to challenge myself. I believe in a Judaism that doesn't align perfectly with our political or personal beliefs, but instead, challenges us to question and venture beyond our comfort zones.

I liken this journey to going to the gym. Just as we increase weights incrementally to build our muscles, Judaism too should push us to evolve. We can't start by lifting 100 pounds, nor can

we forever manage only 5 pounds. Every year, as I gaze into your eyes on Rosh Hashanah, I want to ask, "In what ways has Judaism helped you grow this year?" Your answers reside within your hearts, and I won't judge them. But I ask you, this first night of our New Year: "In what ways has Judaism helped you grow this year?" If Judaism does not help us grow, it's just an archaic way of life filled with death rituals.

There is a very well-known story attributed to monks and rabbis alike: *"When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town, and as an older man, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation, and I could indeed have changed the world."*

I want to be honest with you, as your Rabbi, I believe many rabbis (and many congregants too) like to talk more about the big "world issues," the big "Tikun Olam" endeavors as a way to escape our own personal Tikun, our Tikun Atzmi, the possibility to repair ourselves. I know the importance of addressing the significant challenges that humanity is facing. I'm not indifferent to global warming. I'm not indifferent to the migrant crisis. I'm not indifferent to the war in Ukraine. I'm not indifferent to the challenges of modern democracies. I'm not indifferent to the struggle of millions in providing food at their tables. I'm not indifferent; I suffer as much as you do from many injustices in the world... but many times I think we decide to talk about them, even though finding a permanent solution is beyond our possibilities, in a way to escape from the things that we can genuinely repair. Ourselves. Thinking and talking about how broken the world is sometimes a way to escape thinking and talking about how much we are broken inside. We need to do Tikun Olam, but we first need to do Tikun Atzmi; we need to repair the world, but first, we need to repair ourselves, our souls.

Bireshtchem, asking your permission, I would like to use these High Holidays to speak from my heart, more than from my mind. To speak from our Jewish sources to guide ourselves in ways not to change the world but how to change ourselves. James Jacobson-Maisels put it in these words: *"one cannot repair the world without repairing the self. To do so is to care about the suffering out there while neglecting the suffering in here: the suffering of one's partner, coworker, children, and self. It is to work for a social justice organization that is doing tremendously beneficial work while creating a toxic work environment. It is to become, as my grandfather noted of one prominent Jewish activist and colleague, someone who "would sell his mother for the cause." It is to pursue change from a place of aggression, hatred, and anger— and so, to sow the seeds of the very cruelty and injustice one is fighting against. Perhaps even more frighteningly, it is to become what one is fighting against—a legacy of too many revolutions, where the victors oppressed merely to become another brutal oppressor."*

This, my friends, is the invitation. In each one of my Sermons, I would like to challenge you as much as I want to challenge myself. Like a Chasidic rabbi used to say: "When you hear my sermon, know that I'm not talking to anyone in particular, but if you think I'm talking to you, I was talking to you." But, especially, know that I'm not talking to you before I talk to myself. Everything I'm going to share are the same struggles I'm going through in my own personal life. I don't have all the answers, but I have the Torah to guide me, and maybe it can be helpful to you too.

I may not be able to change the world, but I'm confident that I can change myself. Or in another way of seeing this, by changing each one of ourselves, we are changing the world too. Maybe Tikkun Atzmi is just another way of doing Tikun Olam because don't forget what we are celebrating today: the creation of the first human being from which the entire world came into existence. Each one has the potential to become a new world... and we need to be sure that the world we aim to create comes from a better self of each one of us. I invite each one of us this High Holidays not to see through the window but to the mirror.

I implore God for the strength to guide you lovingly and devotedly in the coming year. May my words provoke reflection, introspection, and growth. I ask for the humility to recognize my limitations and the wisdom to avoid causing offense. Should I falter, Yom Kippur is near - I can seek forgiveness in advance.

Wishing you all a Shanah Tova, a year (shanah) full of shinui (change)!

Rabbi Uri