

“Practicing the Art of Surrender”

Rabbi Daniel Greyber

Rosh Hashanah 2011/5772

One day, the world's leading astronomers spotted a comet and predicted that in 4 days the comet would strike the glaciers of the arctic region, melting the glaciers and leaving 90% land on earth covered with water. The pope got on television and implored all Catholics to take communion immediately and prepare to die in purity. The Dali Lama got on television and implored all Buddhists to meditate and prepare to accept death in peace. The Grand High Islamic Mufti got on television and implored all Muslims to give themselves over to Allah. The Chief Rabbi on Israel got on television and said: OK. We have only four days to learn how to live underwater...J

We laugh at that joke because it pokes fun at something about ourselves that we know is true: we are an industrious people. Israel has brought things such as instant messenger software, firewall protection for computers, radiation free breast cancer treatment, a “gut cam” ingestible pill video camera to diagnose cancer, a large-scale solar electricity in the Mojave desert in California, to name just a few.

Given the fact Jews comprise a mere ¼ of 1% of the world's population (13 million amidst 6 billion), and that 99% of the world is non-Jewish, it is impressive, almost astounding to note that, of the 660 Nobel prizes from 1901 to 1990, 160 have been won by Jews, 40 times more than should be expected of them based upon populations statistics. We have brought the world thinkers such as Einstein & Freud, or Jonas Salk who cured Polio. We bring the world the movies of Spielberg; the paintings of Chagal; did you know that the words “give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses” inscribed on the statue of liberty were written by Jewish poet, Emma Lazarus?

Our children go to Duke, UNC, NC State, Harvard and Princeton, Yale and the University of Pennsylvania, Berkeley, Stanford and UCLA. We are a powerful people. We have worked hard and sacrificed and, thank God, we have much to celebrate and be proud of and we should never be ashamed of what we have achieved and given to the world.

But today, I worry that our industrious spirit has come at a cost to our souls. A few years ago, I heard Rabbi David Wolpe say that when Jews came to this country, they were at home in their Judaism and immigrants to America. But today we are at home in America, and are immigrants to our Judaism. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: “In the pursuit of learning, one goes to a library; for aesthetic enrichment one goes to the art museum; for pure music to the concert hall. What then is the purpose of going to synagogue? Many are the facilities that help us to acquire the important worldly virtues, skills and techniques. But where should one learn about the insights of the spirit?” I have no doubt that Jews feel at home in the library, in the art museum, in the concert hall. But I am afraid that we are immigrants to the synagogue. We should feel at home here but we feel alienated and estranged.

Every High Holidays it breaks my heart because I know that millions of Jews show up today and for them the service is painful. This liturgy is beautiful and uplifting but it is not easy. Is it the Hebrew? For so many Jews the services might as well be in Latin. This year we have a better translation and commentary, but something else is at work.

Let's be honest. Don't we believe that if Jews really wanted to feel comfortable in shul – we could! Could not the people who brought the world the first surgeon (Dr. Simon Baruch) to perform an operation for appendicitis learn Hebrew? Could not the people who brought the world Gershwin & Berlin understand the structure of the Jewish prayer book, the *siddur*, a word which means “order?!”

Jews are wildly successful in so many areas – if we wanted to feel “at home in our Judaism” I believe we could.

But the hard truth, the uncomfortable truth that keeps me up at night, is that maybe we do not care. According to a Gallup study of religiosity in America, nearly 60% of all Americans view religion as very important in their lives; only 14% say that it is not at all important. But among Jews, the figures are nearly reversed. 39% (vs 60%) say that religion is important; 35% (vs 14%) that it is of no importance. Could it be that we do not care? What is the source of alienation and apathy?

Could it be that the source of our societal success is the cause of our spiritual alienation? Could it be that the industriousness and hard work and sweat and drive that has given us such success and power has left a spiritual scar upon our souls, an abscess of the spirit?

I have told you before a story from the Talmud (Shabbat 150a) about a poor farmer who is walking back from shul one Shabbat evening. As he approaches the border of his property, he sees that part of his fence has fallen down. In that moment, he must choose: if he repairs the fence, he will violate Shabbat but will keep his animals (some of his few possessions in the world) from running away. If he does not repair the fence, he will keep the Shabbat but risk further financial trouble for him and his family. He decides to keep Shabbat and not repair the fence. Overnight, a caper bush miraculously grew in the very place where the fence was damaged – both keeping his livestock from running away and providing a livelihood for him and his family.

When I first read that story, I thought of it as simple; it has moral quite common to rabbinic literature: the pious are rewarded for their suffering. “Keep Shabbat,” urged the rabbis, “and you will be rewarded for your troubles.” But that story has a deeper message that we, as modern Jews, struggle with and it is the deeper message that I want to suggest as an answer to the questions I have posed today. I will sum it up in a couple of two word phrases: “trust God.” “Let go.”

In one word, quite foreign to the modern Jewish vocabulary: Surrender.

We are *Yisrael* – a name that means – “God wrestlers.” The contentious debates of the Talmud created a culture that valued sharp, quick-witted thinking. Some would say that, when the walls came down and Jews were allowed to participate in the wonders of the university and the Western World, it is the Talmudic culture that enabled Jews to achieve our incredible success in the sciences and the arts and medicine.

I am not concerned that we – in this room – are raising a generation of kids who will be scared to doubt and challenge God and the tradition. I am concerned that we are God wrestlers ONLY. What is the content of our faith? By which I mean, what are those things that we are willing, in the end, to accept? When people get hurt, they find it harder and harder to make themselves vulnerable again. They close up inside. Jews have known what it means to suffer, in Egypt, in the Crusades, in Spain, and only two generations ago in the Shoah. But have we been hurt so many times that we cannot trust again?

I think for many of us the notion of “surrender” feels not Jewish. But any authentic faith tradition has, as one of its core tenants, surrender.

Our theme this year is beginnings. Rabbinic tradition says that before the world was created, God was *יחיד בעולמו* – alone in God’s world; there was nothing but God. In order to create the world, God had to do *צימצום* – God had to contract God’s self so that there could be a place that was not God; in order to give human beings free will, God needed to surrender some of God’s power so human beings

could make choices that were truly free. In order for us to truly exist – which comes from the latin *ex stare*, to stand outside, - God and God's world could no longer be one and the same. Surrender is the beginning of God's relationship with the world, the very basis of beginning.

Abraham is a model of Jewish faith. Abraham knows how to argue. When God tells him that He will destroy Sodom & Gemorrah, Abraham protests: "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? Abraham bargains with God. What if there are 50, 45, 40, 30, 20 and finally 10 righteous people?" Abraham questions God and doubts His justice to God's face! But in the end, Abraham did not only question. He also obeyed, and, when God told him to take "his son, his only son, the one who he loved, Issac" and sacrifice him on the mountain, Abraham conquered his desperate desire to show compassion for his son and he surrendered his own will to God's. Modern Jewish commentators, always questioning, argue that Abraham failed the test. To be sure, there were dear costs for what Abraham did; his wife Sarah died immediately afterward and he never spoke to Issac again. But the Torah states clearly, "because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore and your descendents shall seize the gates of their foes, because you have obeyed My command."

In the Machzor, we pray, through the merit of what Abraham did, that just as Abraham conquered his own desire for compassion and did God's will, so too, we pray, that You God will conquer Your anger at us and show compassion and hear our prayers." Abraham did not fail. The test was, in the end, can you sacrifice your own will, what every fiber in your being tells you to do, in order to do what God asks. The Torah and the rabbis admire and approve of Abraham's questioning of God at Sodom and Gemorrah, but what proved to be Abraham's greatest spiritual achievement in the rabbinic tradition was his acceptance of God's will and surrender of his own.

Surrender is a core notion of the Jewish tradition. Think about the Hebrew word for blessing - "*berachah*," – it comes from the same root as "berekh" which means, "knee." The implication is clear: we can receive a blessing when we bend our knee in acknowledgement of God. Ironically, Jewish blessings affirm our dependence on God even when human beings play a major role in what we have received.

The most common blessing over food in the Jewish liturgy is "Hamotzi": Blessed are You Adonai our God King of the Universe Who brings forth bread from the earth. This blessing should raise an obvious question: Does God bring forth bread from the earth? Have you ever seen a field of loaves of bread? No! Grain grows in the ground and it is only after an elaborate, human directed process that grain is ready to be used as flour that can then be made into dough that can finally be baked as bread. And yet, we acknowledge God, not human beings, as the One who is responsible for the bread that we eat.

Hamotzi seems to say to us "whatever good you may bring to the world, whatever progress you may achieve, we must acknowledge our ultimate dependence on God." This is the beautiful paradox of Jewish faith: only by lowering ourselves may we truly achieve greatness in this world. Only by surrendering some of our ego, some of our ambition, some of our possessions, can we again achieve a healthy balance of skepticism and faith, of taking and giving, of ambition and satisfaction.

So this Rosh Hashanah I want to encourage us to do something in the coming year that may feel strange: practice the art of surrender in your life.

Here are 4 ways you can do so this year:

#1. Practice **theological** surrender; it can lead to prayer. Theology is how we understand (and don't understand) God's ways in this world. During the *Shoah*, a group of Jews gathered in the camps and put God on trial for ignoring the Jewish people's suffering and for punishing them in a way totally incommensurate with their sins. In the end, God was guilty. Do you know what they did then? They prayed Ma'ariv. If those Jews, in the midst of hell, after convicting God of crimes against humanity, can surrender, and pray, should not we be able to let go of our doubts more and try to pray?

#2. Practice emotional surrender; it can lead to healing and relationship. Asking for forgiveness means to surrender oneself emotionally to another person. It means being willing to say I was wrong and opening yourself, making yourself vulnerable to being hurt, but also to seeing the image of God in another person who will teach you and change you forever. It means being willing to let a part of who you are right now die. It means admitting that you are wrong, limited, weak, vulnerable, lost, confused and in need. True relationship, true healing, cannot happen if we are not open to allowing that person to change us. But emotional surrender lays the foundation for true friendship and love, and for the healing of old wounds.

#3. Practice intellectual surrender; it can lead to faith. It is foolish for religion to take issue with science; science and reason and philosophy teach us wondrous insights about the world, about what can be measured and seen. But the great Jewish insight is that all that can be seen is not all that there is. God cannot be deduced, but God can be known. Is the secret of a sunset in the precise angle of its rays? Is the true measure of sound of the oceans' waves only measured in decibels? My grandmother Beatrice once told me that learning music theory spoiled concerts until she stopped trying to understand the music and started to listen again for its glory. May we stop trying to understand God and start listening for glory.

Finally, **#4, practice material surrender; it can lead to *sipuk nefesh* – satisfaction of the soul.** Work. Work. Work. I remember dropping by a Jewish high school in Los Angeles a few years ago and seeing one of the counselors from Ramah who I knew from the summer. I asked her how things were going and, when I did, she said, "okay, I'm just tired." I could see from the look in her face how different she was during the school year than during the summer. Our kids are tired. They are exhausted. Hard working Jewish parents drive their children to work hard, very hard. In the face of that counselor I saw a look that made me wonder, "at what cost, all this work, to our souls?"

In the 10 commandments, the Torah says, "six days you will work and do all of your creative labor." All of the work you are meant to accomplish can be done in six days. Whatever did not get done this week, the phone calls unmade, the emails unreturned, the errands undone – it's okay, God says, sometimes more forgiving of us than we are of ourselves. It's alright. Surrender.

Those who see the world in an "either/or" way will say that if we surrender our commitment to reason and argument, we risk a naiveté and foolishness. But to refuse to surrender to what is beyond our eyes and minds is to make an idol out of those things that are only tools towards understanding God's world. If we cannot surrender ourselves intellectually, we risk arrogantly believing we can understand everything. If we cannot surrender theologically, we risk alienation from God and a life without prayer. If we cannot surrender emotionally, we risk loneliness and anger and bitterness. If we cannot surrender materially, we risk greed and over-consumption and exhaustion. Some will say that surrender leads to stagnation and weakness and death but a healthy soul knows balance. The spiritual life needs surrender as one important aspect of a healthy soul.

We teach our children they can achieve so much. But when do we teach them that there are things in life that they cannot achieve by themselves? When do we teach them how to call out for help? We believe we are so powerful. But when do we learn that true strength, true greatness comes in the company of the Holy One?

"Many are the facilities," writes Heschel, "that help us to acquire the important worldly virtues, skills and techniques. But where should one learn about the insights of the spirit? May it be here. At Beth El. On Rosh Hashanah. Amen.