

*One True Thing*

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Rosh HaShanah 2011

This Rosh HaShanah, I want to invite you to do a small thing, something that is simple, and powerful and possibly the most important thing you can do as you enter this new year. During the time we are in services, I want to invite you to look within your self, and using the prayers and the songs and the community as a support and a backdrop, see if you are able to say *one true thing* about where you are, and where you want to go, in your life in this new year. One true thing. It might be a truth about how you are as a friend, a truth like, "I've thought about the past year and I need to be more responsible when I make commitments to my friends." It might be a truth about an apology that you need to make before you can move, unencumbered, into the new year. It might be a truth about your connection with your Judaism and the Jewish community. But rather than praying scores of prayers and thinking over tens of resolutions we might make, can we focus on one truth that we have learned that might shape us into the person we most want to become in this new year?

In many ways, this approach is counter-intuitive. So much is going on at services. How can we limit ourselves to one thing? We Jews are a people of world class talkers. We are so full of words. This morning we prayed Eilu finu maleh k'yam, If only our mouths were as full of words as the sea is full of waves... But they already are. The words pour out of us. Jewish prayer is so wordy. It's full of concepts, metaphors, commentaries and many levels of interpretation. Many prayers are beautiful and many of the concepts can inspire us, but sometimes all of the words, all the verbiage, gets in the way. Can we use this time together to cut through the words, to look into our hearts and uncover a truth we need to bring with us, a truth that will propel us to change, in this new year?

You know, a really good friend, someone who really cares about you, will tell you the real truth, the hard truth. In the Talmud, the rabbis say that there is no such thing as friendship without criticism. That kind of a friend is precious: someone who values you and loves you but knows you are not perfect (as if anybody is) and is willing to tell you when you are off base, or off track or off putting. Rosh HaShanah is a time to be our own best friend and part of that responsibility, is to tell ourselves those difficult truths. People who talk to themselves are sometimes considered crazy but on Rosh HaShanah, we should talk to ourselves. (You don't have to do it out loud).

The "one true thing" that we tell ourselves doesn't have to be negative. It doesn't have to be a criticism. It might be a realization. A number of years back our son had a simple and profound realization that he was most happy, and most at home, when he was outside, in the expanse of nature, in the mountains and deserts. That one realization set him on a path and now he's working now as a mountain guide in the Grand Canyon, and his motivation started from realizing, and articulating a truth that he understood was essentially important in his life.

I want to expand the idea of saying "one true thing." When the rabbis chose the Torah readings for Rosh HaShanah, they didn't choose Genesis, about the beginning of the world and they didn't chose the revelation at Mount Sinai, about the beginning of the Jewish people. Instead they chose readings that dealt with the relationship between parents and children. These aren't easy readings: we read of Abraham's son Ishmael and his mother Hagar being sent away from Abraham's home. We read about Abraham binding Isaac and coming close to sacrificing his son. The rabbis knew how essential our relationship with our parents is and how we can't really enter a new year without thinking about that bond between us and our parents, between us and our children.

So you can also use this time to come to another kind of understanding: What is one true thing you would like to say to your parents? What is keeping you from saying it? I'll tell you a true story about a friend of mine who struggled and struggled with

the fact that she thought her dad drank too much. Now, he wasn't out of control and he wasn't abusive and he was successful in his work but she told me, that every night, as soon as he walked in the door, it was two or three or sometimes four drinks. And it took a couple of years, and a lot of courage, before she was able to sit down with him and tell him how much she loved him and worried about him and concerned about his health. By the time she worked up the courage to talk to him, she realized that it ultimately was his decision about how to deal with his drinking. It was her responsibility to say that true thing to her father. And totally to her surprise, he listened and told her that he had been thinking about this a lot too and while he might not be able to change totally for himself, he thought he could for his family. And after that conversation, her dad actually cut way back on his drinking.

Sometimes the true thing we want to tell our parents isn't a criticism at all. Sometimes, it's full of gratitude and love. I was recently talking to a student whose grandfather recently passed away. His grandfather wasn't that old and he wasn't sick. No one thought it was his time to die. The family was very close. This student knew his grandfather really well and it was fair to say that the family was devastated by this death. When I asked how he was doing, he said, "It's been really hard but my mom has just been extraordinary, taking care of us, keeping us all together. She's been great." When I asked if he had told her that, he said, "No, not yet." Well, that's is a true thing that would be good to tell a parent.

And it's possible to think even larger: Is there one true thing that you want to say to the world? Something that you feel strongly about? A cause you believe in? At services a few weeks ago, before Kaddish, a student said she was thinking about Troy Davis, the man who was executed in Texas when there was so much outcry to commute his death sentence. She didn't make a big deal about this but it was clearly on her mind and the words came from her heart. In our tradition, we say "words that are spoken from the heart enter the heart." And her words really made an impression on me. I had thought about this execution last week but this student's words made me stop and think more: Had I done enough about this? Did I need to

engage more with the issue of capital punishment? What is the true thing that you want to say to the world?

Now, in this d'var Torah, I've only been focusing on *the first step* in the process of teshuvah, of change and growth, that we are obligated to do in this period between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. What I've been calling "one true thing" is also called *hesbon hanefesh*, taking account of yourself, taking account of your soul. But that process of self-examination isn't meant to end in our minds or our hearts. It's meant to move us to action. Once you formulate and understand a core truth about your life, the question to ask is: how am I called to act on this realization. If your true thing is that you need to, want to, be a different kind of friend, then you probably have some apologies to make during these *aseret yamai teshuvah*, the ten days of change between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Make the apology, let it go and move on with your life.

If you come to a deeper understanding of something that you appreciate about your father or your mother, or need to say to your brother or sister, don't let that stay in your mind but send the email or better yet, make a phone call. Love is like a shark: if it doesn't move, it dies (that's not from the Talmud, that's from me) but it's true: our relationships need to move and grow, just as you change and grow in college and as your parents change as they deal with the difficult transition of having their children leave home.

If your true thing is about your connection to your Judaism, take the step, learn more Hebrew, make Shabbat a part of your life, become engaged in tikun olam, repairing the world. There are so many creative Jewish things happening on campus and if you don't find what you want, talk to me or Rabbi Ruttenberg or about twenty other great people I can put you in touch with, and we'll figure out how to make it happen. I really mean that.

If you come to an understanding of something you need to say to the world, an issue that calls your heart, then find the organization doing that or found the organization if one doesn't exist. There are so many pulls on our time, so many organizations to join, so many causes that call for our attention. We can't make a choice and determine where to devote our time and energy until we know what is essentially important to us. Our reflections on Rosh HaShanah should ideally bring us closer to our personal truth and that truth should move us to action.

The Israeli writer Shai Agnon wrote that "One prayerful sigh is worth more than all the songs and singers." This Rosh HaShanah, that's what I'm looking for: That one real revelation, one heartfelt understanding to say to myself, to the people I love, to the world. This Rosh Hashanah, can we find, can we say, one true thing? Shanah tovah. Wishes for a year of renewal, growth and peace.