

Everyone has ideas about what Rabbis should talk about on the High Holidays. No doubt, you probably have ideas as well. Or at least what I shouldn't talk about. Rabbis, Rabbinical organizations, Jewish newspapers and websites, even our leading Jewish organizations communicate to us pulpit rabbis what they think we should speak about on the High Holidays. Believe it or not, even Presidents of the United States – yes you heard me correctly – have tried to influence what Rabbis talk to their congregants about on the High Holidays. And I know that those of you who will have lunch today with members of other synagogues will actually compare what your Rabbis spoke about. In fact, there's a joke about that: a bunch of people were sitting around comparing their Rabbi's HH sermons. One of them asked "what did your Rabbi talk about?" "Oh, about 25 minutes, how about yours?"

But this Rabbi at least has always believed that the sermon plays an important role in our Shabbat, holiday, and especially HH services. The purpose of a sermon is to transmit serious Jewish ideas and lessons in a manner that the prayers and holiday observances often do not. Let's face it: we struggle today with the same type of issues that Jews attending synagogue have struggled with for the last 2,000 years. The Hebrew can be difficult. The poetic imagery upon which so many of the High Holiday prayers depend can be hard to understand and appreciate. Given our busy lives, and especially the difficulty so many face in taking off days midweek to be here, it's hard to put everything aside so we can actually concentrate on the religious experience on hand. So the lessons of our Rabbis and teachers have always been part of the communal religious experience of the Jewish people. These have taken different forms over the years. Yet

since the day that Moses received the 10 Commandments at Mt. Sinai, religious leadership has always included not just explaining what the laws were, but teaching their value as well. The form may change but the purpose has remained a constant: to close the gap between the divine and our own human experiences so that we might be encouraged to do more, achieve more and be more than we otherwise would believe is possible.

So today, as I have done for most of my career, I'm going to ignore the advice that so many have graciously offered. I am deliberately not going to address political issues or some of the great and important concerns of our day. It's interesting how those who encourage Rabbis to talk about such issues always have a specific end in mind when they make that recommendation. And indeed, it's not that I don't have my own strong views about the hard choices and decisions that need to be made and my own concerns about the men and women we have chosen to lead us. But I don't want to talk about Democrats and Republicans, global warming, or the crisis at our borders because you will either agree with my opinions and you may or may like my sermon, or disagree with me and not even listen. There are other forums to address these subjects, and in my sermons and my writings to the congregation, you know I have never been afraid to talk about these things. But what I am sure about as never before, and what I see more and more after three decades serving congregations, is that too many people can attend our High Holiday services and leave with nothing other than whatever benefit – and I'm not making light of it – but whatever benefit accrues from simply being in the synagogue. The words don't always lift us up, and in an age of growing individualism even the large crowds that attend on the HH's don't mean what they once did. As

attachment to communal life in general, and Jewish communal life in particular, lessen over time, it would be irresponsible for me to give you a kosher version of the op-ed page of the NYT. So more than ever before there has to be something for you to take home today, and to think about. Something that is easy to remember yet simultaneously reminds you that you are capable of more no matter how good or bad the previous year has been, no matter how good or bad things are going in your own personal life. So that's what I hope to do. *To teach you something you didn't know before you arrived.*

So today you're going to leave knowing the most important verse in the entire Torah. Not just important on its own, but also luckily, the key to understanding the High Holiday experience. But before I give you the answer I want to tell you about the discussions of our Rabbis over this very question: what is the most important verse in the Torah? Those who come regularly on Shabbat are probably horrified that I just asked that question because I have spent the last 23 years trying to convince you that no one verse in the Torah is more important than another. And there is certainly truth to that. Some may be more immediate, or speak of concerns that must be addressed before others. But we have a long tradition of trying not to say that one part of the Torah is more important than another. And there's great value in that. But our Rabbis understood that there were times where the ordinary approach was lacking. There were certain times that called for different decisions to be address great concerns. So they asked themselves: what is the most important verse in the Torah? Before we begin, I want you to ask yourself: what is the most important verse?

Many of you probably answered with the *Shema*: Hear O Israel the Lord Our God, the Lord Is One. Our most famous prayer. For those of you who count words, among the shortest prayers that there is. And it's clear and unambiguous statement of monotheism is at the very heart of Jewish theology. And it's not a bad answer. You can't go wrong with the Shema. But ultimately, as important as belief is in Judaism, belief alone is not the most important thing. We have always believed in the primacy of deed over creed. We differ from our Christian friends and neighbors over the idea that faith alone is the key to salvation. We have always believed that as important as belief is, it is action and deed that demonstrate our ultimate values and our love of God. Certainly, faith and belief often motivate religious behavior. Yet, one of the most important Jewish lessons is that our righteous conduct and observance of mitzvot are important and meaningful even if the faith part is difficult. There's a famous story from the Talmud where our Rabbis imagine God saying "... if only they would reject Me but keep my Sabbath!" So yes, the Shema is really important. It's still the first prayer we teach our Hebrew School students. But it's not the most important. So what is?

I want to suggest several possibilities.

The first comes from the Book of Deuteronomy. It's the famous verse "justice, justice shall you pursue" and indeed it is among the most well-known verses in the Bible. Its plain meaning is apparent to anyone who hears it, and at the same time it's message is the key to building a healthy and just society. Anyone who has ever in any way, shape or form experienced what they have perceived as injustice understands why this must be included among the most important verses of the Bible. This

verse goes on to demand that only judges and magistrates of the highest caliber be appointed to dispense the law with equal justice, with no favoritism shown to the rich or the poor. In ancient times as now, the confidence of the people that the mechanisms that have been set up to judge disputes are beyond reproach is critical for the health of the society. Without that, right and wrong is too often based on wealth, or tribe, or class, where the legal result is not the fruit of a fair assessment of the facts, but rather a variation of who-knows-who. Indeed, when we compare successful democratic nations to what is often referred to as “the third world,” the distinguishing feature has to do with a justice system that people living in those nations actually trust. So yes, “justice, justice shall you pursue” is more than just important. It’s critical. But I want to suggest today that it’s not the most important.

The traditional answer to my question actually comes from the Book of Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”. *Rabbi Akiva, the greatest of the Rabbis, taught that this is the greatest principal in the Torah.* It is a recognition that the other people with whom we share our homes, our communities, and our world are human beings just like we are, and are deserving of the same respect for their needs and even their quirks that we rightly demand for ourselves. It is the culmination of an effort to improve ourselves, to become decent, ethical, compassionate and caring people. By infusing these religious teachings into our life we understand that the purpose of religion is not just to raise ourselves up, but to use that knowledge to lift up others around us as well. To remind us that as we struggle, others struggle as well. As we suffer, others suffer too. And just as we need a second chance, the benefit of the doubt, others are no less

deserving than we are. Even in America where individualism reigns supreme, this verse reminds us that we must make room in our lives for the needs of others. For most of my life I've held this to be the most important verse in the Torah. In fact, since I am 17 years old, I've carried a business card size piece of paper with this verse in my wallet, and I've tried to live this verse and practice it to the best of my abilities.

Now a contemporary of Rabbi Akiva, Ben Azzai took issue with this. Now I want you to understand that the sage was not criticizing Rabbi Akiva, but rather trying to add something to our understanding of this verse by asking a pointed question. What happens if you have trouble viewing your neighbor as "your neighbor?" I've always thought this was an excellent question. Do we always feel great human kinship – don't tell me how we should feel but rather how we actually feel – with all other people. What about people of different faith? Or different race? Or who are wealthier? Or who are poorer? Or of a different sexual orientation? How about Jews who don't share your own particular view of Judaism, or what Israel should do? *You shall love your neighbor as yourself* makes perfect sense when we all agree that we are neighbors as the Bible would have us understand it. But the last 75,000 years human history proves that most people simply don't. Look at our own nation - so many of our problems, whether racial, economic, social, or even political, are related to our inability to come together despite our many differences. It plays out in ugly and divisive political rhetoric that divides rather than unites. It prevents us from finding common sense solutions to difficult national problems. So Ben Azzai taught that as important as that verse was, we need to go back to the beginning of the Bible, Genesis Chapter 5 Verse 1: "This is the book of the generations

of Adam – on the day that G-d created man, He made him in His Image,” reminding us that despite our differences and backgrounds, all humanity shares a common source. Whether black or white, Jew or gentile, gay or straight, rich or poor, these differences, real and important and significant as they truly are, must also be appreciated amidst the common humanity that all human beings share. This verse reminds us of our essential sameness, commanding us to never allow ourselves to see another human being beyond our circle of concern.

By now I hope that the real purpose of what I’m trying to accomplish today is clear. I want to remind you or perhaps teach you anew about the most important verses in the Torah, as our rabbis considered them. As I said earlier, the idea for this sermon is based off an ancient Midrash where our rabbis themselves engaged in this very debate. Even in a Jewish tradition that does not like to rank the Torah’s verses in order of importance, these verses nonetheless stood out. So I want us to consider them today.

Because it’s Rosh Hashanah. It’s time for new beginnings. And I want you to consider your actions going forward into 5780 more aware of the three verses that I have shared already,

The Shema: because it is at the core of our Jewish belief and a call to greater observance

To love your neighbor as yourself. Because our country, and the world needs us more involved with, more concerned for and more aware of others with whom we share this planet.

These are the generations of Adam. Because it reminds us as begin the New Year that we are all connected. We are all human beings and we

emerged from the same source. Our important differences must not prevent us from seeing our essential connection to all. I strongly believe that these three verses are the core of the Jewish experience. I want you to think about these verses throughout the year.

So what is the most important verse of the Torah, at least at this point in this Rabbi's life? The one that speaks to our own unique strengths and abilities and may indeed hold the key to unlocking the potential of the entire HH experience? Its way back in the beginning of the Bible. Perhaps you remember the story. Before Cain kills his brother Abel, Cain is distressed because God seems to favor Abel's offering over his. Though the context is difficult to understand, God shares a vision with Cain that is often ignored in our circles because we get very caught up on the "Cain killing Abel" story and not what immediately precedes it. When God sees Cain's distress over God's preference over Abel's sacrifice, He says to him:

Why are you distressed? And why is your face fallen? Surely if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin crouches at the door. Its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master. (Gen.4:8)

This is what this Rabbi has come to believe is the most important verse in the Torah, the one that so simply and beautifully encapsulates the approach of Judaism to human behavior. It teaches that we can better ourselves and the world around us at the same time. Sin, temptation, evil -- they are always before us. Every time we leave the safety of our homes we are confronted by them. As was every generation that preceded us. Yet the Torah says, "You can be its master." It is telling us the very idea upon which the entire HH experience is based. You have free will, you are strong, and you are capable of making moral choices. There's always the

inclination to do wrong, to cut corners, to do things in such a way that acclimate us to low standards and associating with others that share them, leading towards a downward spiral that even 100 Yom Kippurs can't liberate you from. Or you can be better, and make a break from those habits, actions, and addictions that lead you away from your God given potential. That is what we need to think about today. And it's especially important because honorable conduct and personal responsibility is at the center of the national debate, and we can't depend on the institutions of the past to guide us as they once did. Our community, our nation, our world needs adults to step up and act according to the power and dignity that comes from acknowledging that we are heirs to a glorious heritage, who's God calls them to account at this time of the year.

The High Holidays are about looking forward. But the future will be better only if we believe that we have the power to rise above that which we know is wrong and worthless. The *Shema* reminds of our responsibilities to God. *Love your neighbor as yourself, and these are the generations of Adam* remind us of the dignity that all human beings share. *Justice, Justice shall you pursue* helps us consider how the rights and dignity of all may be guaranteed in the diverse America in which we live. And the final verse, my vote for the most important: a reminder that we are capable of making better choices. It speaks to us: You can overcome temptation, because you are stronger than you even know.

May it be God's will that we allow these authentic Jewish values and teachings to guide us through whatever the New Year may yet have in store.

L'shana Tovah.