Rosh Hashannah 2015

Inspired by the internet postings of Rabbi Salomon Gruenwald of Denver

“Hayom Harat HaOlam” – today is the world’s birthday; today is our birthday, and we return here every year to take stock of our lives. We come here one year older; hopefully a year wiser. How do we acquire that wisdom? In the next few minutes, I would like to share some thoughts about what it means to mature as a Jew

In America, adulthood is defined in a legal sense by attaining privileges and liberties. At 16 you get to drive. At 18 you can vote. At 21 you are allowed to buy alcohol. Adulthood is about achieving self-determination, individuality and becoming unencumbered. In American culture, adulthood is a destination. By contrast, in Judaism adulthood is a journey toward greater responsibility and embeddedness in community. Adulthood is something you grow into and there is no single day on which you arrive. It begins at around age 13 because that’s the age at which you begin making your own choices and dealing with the consequences. It’s something you learn gradually from parents, teachers, friends, and community. And the journey never really ends. We continually work at inhabiting the role of adult. To declare yourself a bar or bat mitzvah is to step into the light of community and say, “I am responsible for who I am and what I do.” It is to begin to understand that your actions have consequences not only for you as an individual, but for your family, your community, and indeed for the entire world. Maimonides taught that you must imagine that all the world’s sins sit on one side of a scale and all the world’s goodness sits on the other side – and they are perfectly in balance. And, your next act, your next deed, your next choice will determine the fate of the universe. In other words, to become a bar or bat mitzvah – what it means to become an adult in Judaism – is that you are called upon. A claim is made on your life. You are needed. God and humanity need you. You cannot hide behind your individualism; you cannot run away into your private space. The message of adulthood is a powerful one. Adulthood in Judaism is to experience the honor, the joy, the exhilaration of being responsible for the world. Jews talk a lot about *tikkun olam –* the Hebrew phrase that means “repairing the world”.

The Torah calls us and we call ourselves The Chosen People. It is an often misunderstood, or misconstrued, term in Judaism. It does not, as our enemies have often contended, mean that we are chosen for privilege. It means that we are chosen for responsibility. We are called upon to care and help when someone is suffering. To reach out. To not look away.

Consider the Chinese proverb: “If you want happiness for an hour—take a nap. If you want happiness for a day—go fishing. If you want happiness for a month—get married. If you want happiness for a year—inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime—help others.” It’s true. We are at our best, our happiest, we are closest to God, when we are helping another person.

We not only need to help others to be happy and fulfilled, we also need others to be truly fulfilled. When we’re young we think growing up is about achieving independence, freedom, breaking attachments. But, the lesson we learn in growing up is that we need other people to become fully human. As we grow older and more mature, the claims on our life deepen: adulthood is found in friendship, in intimacy, in love, in commitment, in rooting oneself in community, in contributing to the society through our work, and in parenting or mentoring others. The more we are claimed, the more human we become.

There is a wonderful fable about Adam and Eve which illustrates the wisdom that comes with experience and maturity: Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden. And they lived together, east of Eden, tilling the earth and raising children, and struggling to stay alive. After the years of struggle, when their children were grown, they decided to travel the world. They journeyed from one corner of creation to the other and explored the world’s wonders. In the course of their journeys, wandering from place to place, they came upon the entrance to the Garden of Eden, now guarded by an angel with a flaming sword. They were frightened and they began to flee when God spoke to them: “Adam. Eve. You have lived in exile these many years. The punishment is complete. You may return now to the Garden.” And suddenly the angel disappeared, and the way to the Garden opened. “Come in, Adam. Come in, Eve.” “Wait,” Adam replied, “You know, it has been so many years. Remind me, what is it like in the Garden?” “Well,” God responded, “The Garden is paradise! In the Garden there is no work. You need never struggle or toil again. In the Garden there is no pain, no suffering, no responsibilities. In the Garden there is no death. Day after day, life goes on forever. Come Adam and Eve, return to the Garden!” Adam considered God’s words — no work, no struggle, no pain, no death; an endless life of ease. And then he turned and looked at Eve. He looked into the face of the woman with whom he had struggled to make a life, to take bread from the earth, to raise children, to build a home. He read in the lines of her face the tragedies they had overcome and the joys they cherished. Eve looked back into Adam’s eyes. She saw in his face all the moments that had formed their lives – moments of jubilant celebration and moments of unbearable pain. She remembered life-changing crises and moments of tenderness and love. She remembered moments when new life arrived and moments when death intruded. She saw in his eyes all the laughter and the tears they had shared. As all their shared moments came back to her, she took Adam’s hand in hers. Looking into his wife’s eyes, Adam shook his head and responded to God’s invitation. “No… no thank you,” He said, “that’s not for us. We don’t need that now… Come on Eve, let’s go home.” And Adam and Eve turned their backs on Paradise and walked home.

On this Rosh Hashanah – Hayom Harat Olam – these days of reflection and renewal – may you feel at home in your growing; to know that life – with all its challenges and all its opportunities; with all its struggles and with all its joys – is a calling. May we more fully embrace the lessons life teaches us and may we all return here next Rosh Hashanah a year older and a year wiser.

Happy Birthday, and Shannah Tova!

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