

**Summary of Rabbi Neil's Sermons (5776/2015)**  
**Why Are We Here?**

**Erev Rosh Hashanah**

Maybe in search of something, maybe to atone, maybe to meet with members of the community or with God, maybe to grow, or maybe we don't know why but we just feel we should be. Ultimately, though, we are here to change the world. We live in the Dominant Social Matrix, which is everything that we think, say and do now. We live and act within a framework of agreed social norms, defined rarely by ourselves as a global community but, rather, by those with power, and we know that the Dominant Social Matrix is extremely unhealthy. Unfortunately, we cannot often see our way out of it so instead we justify it. But we can't expect to change the world and improve society if we're still thinking and talking and acting the same way - we can't shop our way out of social crisis. We have to reshape society which means that, first and foremost, we have to reshape ourselves.

In his book *Caring for Creation*, Max Oelschlaeger tries to move beyond the Dominant Social Matrix to set up a New Social Matrix, a new way of behaving and talking. Progressive, democratic expressions of religion are an essential part of that new narrative. Why? Because when we come together and explore liturgy or explore Torah, when we engage in God-talk, we are actually talking about ourselves and our place in the world. We are trying to answer the question "Why are we here?" Religious communities such as ours have a unique and powerful narrative that transcends time, starting at the beginning of creation and ending at total human fulfillment and global peace. It is a narrative that says that everyone is a deliberate and cherished part of the created order and that everyone has a valuable contribution to make towards society's perfection. That narrative is a totally different one to that of the Dominant Social Matrix, which is a narrative of personal fulfillment through economic means. Our narrative, the religious narrative, is of all of us being wonderful beings created in the Divine image who move communally towards perfection. And that's got to be the narrative that underlines the New Social Matrix. It's a narrative of a shared journey, of the equality of all, of our unique place in the created order and the need to preserve it and each other.

Prayer in Hebrew is *l'hitpalel*, which is a reflexive verb, meaning to judge oneself. Sincere prayer means sincere self-change and changing ourselves deliberately and inevitably means changing the world. As such, **we are here to change the world.**

### **Rosh Hashanah morning**

Why ask the question in the plural – why not “Why am *I* here?” This seems like a perfectly appropriate question to ask at a time of personal *teshuvah*, of individualised return to God. The Dominant Social Matrix is all about the individual, all about the success of each individual person. Success is defined in comparison with others – if you are wealthier than them, happier than them, and so on. We live in a society that treasures the individual and there’s nothing wrong with that *per se*. After all, in religious terms, we cannot pretend that the individual is not often key, since so many of our prayers are based on the first person singular – “Open up *my* lips,” “...the soul that You have given *me*,” etc. Later Rabbinic thought developed this idea of individualism with the idea of Divine justice to create metaphors such as each of us having our name written into a Book of Life. So the traditional liturgical answer to the question “Why am *I* here?” is to atone and to return to God, to get your name written into the book of life, to have a successful next year.

Martin Buber wrote in his 1923 book ‘I and Thou’ that there are two differing kinds of relationship, which he terms I-It and I-Thou. The I-It relationship is the one of objective relationship. It’s the relationship between two separate beings, coming together for a connection. I-It is how we relate to the world and everyone in it almost all of the time. We exist in our sphere and they – whoever or whatever we are relating to – exist in theirs, which is all fine but is also limited. The second kind of relationship, which is extremely rare, is the I-Thou encounter. That is where the self is totally lost in the encounter, where the encounter is not bounded in any way. The I-Thou encounter cannot be explained, because to explain it means objectifying and measuring it and that is contrary to its very being. The I-Thou relationship isn’t a means to an end but is an end in itself. God, to Buber, is the Eternal Thou. So to Buber we cannot describe God but in moments of I-Thou relationship, we experience God. Thus, the self is merely a grounding in a much larger shared experience that is no longer about the self. What Buber is not saying is that “there is no I,” it’s just that when we’re meeting God, the I, the self, is not as important.

We live in two minds, in two relationships, the I-It and the I-Thou. And interestingly, that is how Jewish tradition presents the relationship, too. At the same time of talking in the singular voice, our tradition also uses the plural – “The Eternal *our* God,” “*we* have sinned,” etc. We can choose to live as individuals or we can place our individuality firmly within the context of community. Everyone is an individual, but human beings are social creatures who need community. Individuals need community as much as community needs individuals. What we’re

ultimately looking for is to move beyond I-It and into I-Thou, into a transcendent relationship within community whereby we encounter God in community. Why am I here? To be part of a community of meaning. Why are *we* here? That's the harder question. That's a question about being grounded in the self but also transcending the bounds of the self. Not denying the self because that is not possible, but, rather, not being limited by it. "All Israel are responsible one for the other," say the Rabbis (Talmud: Sh'vuot 39a). So we are here to be reminded that no-one is an island, that everything that we do impacts others, whether we know it or not, and that the more we define ourselves in community - the more our own "I" is in relationship with others - the less we harm others unknowingly. Why are we here? **We are here to be reminded that we only exist in relationship to others, and that we therefore have to explore every relationship and make it as deep, powerful and transformative as we can.**

### **Shabbat Shuvah**

Why are we here surrounded by so much suffering? Our suffering is suffering of loneliness, of bereavement, of illness. It's not the kind of suffering known by billions of people worldwide, who are deprived of clean water, food and safe shelter. It's not the suffering of dictatorships or of war. That is suffering the likes of which we are usually completely spared. And we have to look at ourselves and acknowledge that much of that suffering is our fault. We live in a society based on slavery, a society that flourished because of physical slavery and that now continues to flourish because of economic slavery. As consumers, we buy goods from multinational corporations who continually scour the earth for the cheapest labour possible, locking people into poverty and inhumane work conditions. So when we ask "Why are we here surrounded by so much suffering?" we have to accept that part of the answer is "Because that's the way we want it."

We need to draw a distinction, though, between moral evil (which is of our own doing) and natural evil (such as earthquakes and tsunamis). How do such things exist in a world with God? Maimonides explains that those who are close to God are protected from natural evils, but it is difficult to see how he could have said that as a physician who must have seen good people suffer. The Book of Job attempts a response which is, effectively, that only God knows why there is suffering, but for most of us this is an unsatisfying response.

Maimonides also says that the universe is, by its very nature, deficient. God's creation is perfect, given the matter that was used. But that matter was imperfect and therefore bad things happen. But how could God let that happen? If God is Creator, why is creation so painful? What kind of God creates a world like this?

The Rabbis say that every creature has a purpose, but what of the ichneumon wasp that eats out a caterpillar from the inside, so troubling Charles Darwin and others? Couldn't that have had a nicer purpose? After all, if the intention of this world is to get to a state whereby, to quote Isaiah (11:6), the wolf will lie down with the lamb, why have predators and parasites at all?

So, why are we here, surrounded by so much suffering? There are at least two possible answers. The first is that we need to redefine God in the face of suffering, the second is that we need to redefine ourselves in the face of suffering and of God. The first response, which is a response taken by many people once they truly encounter real suffering, is to move away from the long-held notion of God being omnipotent or omniscient, that is, all-powerful and all-knowing, some moving away from the notion of a supernatural God altogether. The second response - the redefining of ourselves in the face of suffering and of God - is more challenging. Just as in the Book of Job, we don't know why there is suffering. But we can spend our lives waxing theological about it, or we can respond to it. Instead of spending our lives wondering how evil squares with the notion of God, our tradition (e.g. Talmud: Sotah 14a) enjoins us to simply accept that it exists, that God exists, and that we have a duty to imitate God in relieving suffering.

So, why are we here surrounded by so much suffering? Because suffering exists. That's it. What do we do with that fact? That's where *teshuvah* (returning to God) comes in, because to engage in *teshuvah*, in returning to God, isn't just about prayer and reflection, it's about action. It's about relieving the suffering of others. It's about actively going out into the world and relieving suffering. Why are we here surrounded by so much suffering? Because **we haven't yet completed our task of reducing suffering as much as possible, which is the role of religion - to go out and reduce suffering in the world.**

### **Kol Nidre**

Why are we here engaging in a process of change as opposed to in a social club chatting to friends about our life or in a field engaged in deep contemplation and meditation? The answer is that this isn't really about us as individuals, but about us as a community. We have all year to explore our own self but this is one rare time when we come together and explore our *collective* self. Many people, especially in Santa Fe, call themselves "spiritual but not religious." The irony with such people is they probably are religious, they just don't like set liturgy. Being religious is, after all, about connecting with that which is greater than ourselves, and changing our behaviour in response to that connection. People who come to Temple and people who sit and meditate in fields both can sense the same and respond

accordingly. The difference is liturgy. What many people don't realise is that liturgy is art. The prayer books we use, their layout, their composition, their translation, is all art. In some sense it's like a painting, and in some sense it's like music. It has been designed to provoke thought and emotion.

It's very easy to see liturgy as just a collection of words, but that would be like seeing a painting as a collection of brush strokes or a piece of music as a collection of notes. Liturgy is more than the sum of its parts because it is art. The difficulty over the High Holy Days is to see it for the art that it is because there's so much of it. So, perhaps the High Holy Day liturgy is less like a painting and more like a gallery or less like a piece of music and more like a symphony. There will be parts where you are moved, where you linger, where you are transfixed, where you are challenged. And there will be parts that don't impress at all, and that's okay.... that's actually the point. Liturgy is the art of the soul. Liturgy is a complex and wonderful blend of devices, reminders, prompts and readings designed to move us, to challenge us, to take us on a journey. It's a guided journey of the communal soul and that's what makes it unique. That's why we're here. We're here to engage in a unique, shared, guided communal journey. Liturgy also achieves something like nothing else – it connects past, present and future. It uses words that are thousands of years old to stimulate reflection about today and contemplation of the future. Our liturgy doesn't just connect us with the past but it also openly and unashamedly constructs a vision of the future and challenges us to implement it. It helps the self transcend, by which I mean it helps the individual self and the communal self transcend our own limited perception and holds us to a timescale and a developing theology that cannot be matched anywhere else.

So, why are we here? **We're here to go on a journey –a journey through time, a journey of the individual and the community; a journey that has been carefully crafted to stimulate and to challenge, to question and to empower; a journey that has beauty of form, that uses set structures to liberate us into free thinking; a journey that draws us together with a common goal achieved through individualised responses.**

### **Yom Kippur morning**

If we are here to go on a journey, what is the end goal of that journey? Franz Kafka's brief narrative, *My Destination*, a piece that mirrors that Yom Kippur journey, specifically suggests that the destination is "away from here, away from here, always away from here." We're talking about transcendence, which is the act of rising from one state to another, or the act of reaching something beyond the limits of ordinary experience.

If we want we can read each word in our liturgy formulaically or, if we want, we can use each and every word as a potential springboard for transcendence. To quote Abraham Joshua Heschel, prayer is an event, an event that we bring into being. We therefore have to create that event while we are reading. So, the first reason that we are here is to transcend – to transcend the normal use of language and to engage on that immense, never-ending journey of plumbing the depths of language and creating events with our words.

But to what end? There is no end – that’s the point. When we engage in a true encounter, to use Buber’s frame of reference of religious reference (see Rosh Hashanah sermon), there is no goal. The encounter is sufficient. The encounter with God doesn’t have a goal, or it shouldn’t have. Our liturgy tries to spell out goals to use as a baseline – forgiveness, atonement, renewal, regrowth. But while these each seem to be end goals, they are in fact springboards to something much greater – the transcendence of the self and the realisation of connection to something greater. Once we truly realise that there is transcendent existence and that we all can connect with it, then that realisation brings with it a question. That question is the question that God asks the first human beings once they gain knowledge of themselves (Gen. 3:9). And the question is this – *ayeka* – “Where are you?”

Once we can use our liturgy to take us away-from-here, away-from-here, once we transcend the interrogation of our liturgy and the demand for it to produce results, then and only then can we use it as a signpost to the eternal question that faces us, “Where are you?” There is a temptation to answer the question simplistically. *Ayeka*? Where are you? “Hineini,” shout the ancestors in the Bible... “Here I am!” but that is nowhere near enough - that is merely the start of the response.

**Ultimately, then, why are we here? We are here to transcend normality, to transcend words, to transcend normal experience and only through that, to be asked a question – “Where are you?” Because *teshuvah*, repentance, isn’t an act, it’s a state of being. It’s a state of living in the question, “Where are you?” When we talk of engaging in *teshuvah*, we’re not talking of engaging in an act, but of engaging in a total life change. *Teshuvah* is the act of returning to the true self, to the self living in awareness of God, to the self who is constantly being asked, “Where are you?” There is no end goal, the journey is forever. It is always away-from-here, away-from-here.**