

**THE NEW SHUL / Erev Rosh Hashanah 5766 (2005)**

**Sermon by Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein**

There is a lot on everybody's mind right now,  
 more, perhaps, than in many years—  
 Hurricane Katrina, Iraq, Israel & Palestine,  
 the Sudan & Darfur, Islamic extremism.//  
 Yet on this Rosh Hashanah,  
 & for the next 10 days, until Yom Kippur,  
 I'm less concerned with what is on our *minds*  
 than with what is in our *hearts*.//

And so I want to begin tonight's sermon,  
 not with a thesis or an argument,  
 but with a *story*,  
 a story that comes from *my* heart,  
 & one that I would like to share with you.//

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It was definitely old school—  
 you had the tall, stained glass windows,  
 the vast & vaulted ceiling,  
 long rows of fixed pews,  
 the paid choir singing from behind a screen,  
 the omnipresent organ,  
 & the clergy wearing black polyester robes.//  
 The worship service was very high church—  
 but this place was a *synagogue*.//

I had been invited to give a lecture at a large,  
 affluent congregation in an urban area.//  
 During the Shabbat service & prior to my talk,  
 I'd been sitting on the elevated *bimah*  
 in one of the seats reserved for clergy  
 & other "special people,"  
 like synagogue presidents & local politicians.//

You don't want to bite the hand that feeds you,  
 so I sat politely & patiently  
 thru all the liturgical "Thees" and "Thous"  
 & the English responsive readings performed  
 in perfect unison.//  
 I was a young rabbi with a job to do,  
 & I was grateful for the opportunity  
 to expose this staid, conservative community  
 to a little Jewish mysticism.//  
 I'd recently returned from a summer mission  
 thru Central Asia,  
 thru the newly-independent nations  
 of Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, & Uzbekistan.//  
 The Judaism that I was exposed to *there*—

raw, tribal, & impassioned—  
 had opened my eyes  
 to a more *visceral* form of Jewish life  
 than I had known here in the United States.//

As I sat before the congregation,  
 I was wearing a token of my trip on the Silk Road—  
 an oversized, brightly-colored yarmulke  
 that was customarily worn by men  
 in that remote, ancient region,  
 both at services & on the street.//  
 With the exception of 4 or 5 other congregants, everyone else was bareheaded.//  
 But I didn't think much about my yarmulke—  
 I just liked the way it looked,  
 as well as the way it *felt* as it embraced my skull.//

I gave my talk toward the end of the service,  
 & I examined some of the core teachings & myths  
 of Lurianic Kabbalah,  
 a bold & somewhat *subversive* twist  
 on classic Jewish mysticism from the 16<sup>th</sup> century.//  
 I presented its radical ideas  
 about creation & redemption,  
 & I explained its focus on intuition  
 rather than reason  
 as a key to unlocking the mysteries of the universe  
 as well as the soul.//

When I'd finished,  
 I invited the congregation to ask me any questions they might have.//  
 The senior rabbi walked up to the lectern  
 & whispered, "We don't do that here."//  
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After the service, I spent a few awkward minutes  
 with the senior rabbi in his lavish office.//  
 Save for the religious texts on one of the walls,  
 I could just as easily have been in the office  
 of the CEO of Merrill Lynch or Smith Barney.//

"Quite an interesting talk," said the senior rabbi,  
 a respected elder in the Jewish establishment.//  
 Yet his intonation of the word *interesting*  
 made it sound like what he really meant was,  
 "Not bad for an upstart punk,  
 but you've got a lot to learn about being a rabbi  
 in today's world."//

I thanked him for the opportunity  
 to speak from his pulpit & I wished him well.//  
 "There's just one thing," he added.  
 "Oh?" I asked.

“The yarmulke.” *A dramatic pause.*  
 I instinctively—almost *protectively*—  
 reached for the top of my head.//  
 “This? What about it?”  
 “It’s just—it’s just not in the spirit of the Sabbath.  
 Its striking size, all those vivid colors. . . .  
 The Sabbath is about sober reflection  
 & contemplation.  
 That yarmulke is not dignified or decorous.  
 It’s *primitive*—it conveys too much emotion.”//

*Is this guy for real?* I wondered.  
 Not in the spirit of the Sabbath?  
 Too much emotion?  
 What does this overripe, caught-in-his-brain cleric think a Sabbath ceremony should feel like—  
 a *funeral*?//

I remember musing to myself,  
 “I’ll be sure to stay very sober & calm next time. You’re absolutely right—  
 this yarmulke represents a dangerous  
 & slippery slope—  
 the *harder* stuff is right around the corner.  
 Before you know it, I’ll be drinking rat poison, playing with snakes, & speaking in tongues.”//  
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Though this episode occurred many years ago,  
 it is emblematic of one of the great pathologies  
 of modern Jewry & of Westerners in general—  
 our inability to get out of our *heads*,  
 & our incapacity to trust our *hearts*.//

This is partly the residue of the Enlightenment,  
 a complex historical event  
 that opened humanity’s eyes & minds,  
 but in some ways closed its soul.//  
 While its emphasis on reason & scientific method  
 led to great advances in industry,  
 technology, social structure, medicine,  
 & our knowledge about ourselves & the universe,  
 its inherent triumphalism—  
 & dogmatism—  
 dismissed most forms of faith as mere superstition,  
 & gradually reshaped organized religion  
 in its own image.//

Religious institutions were eviscerated  
 of any deep emotionality  
 & instead became seats of cerebralism.//  
 Liturgies became statements of creed  
 rather than expressions of yearning;  
 sermons became rarefied & highly intellectual,  
 often referring to God in a distanced, detached way, as “The Deity,”  
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rather than by one of the many *personal* names  
found in the Bible;  
the clergy, donned in academic-looking gowns,  
led services & preached from lofty platforms  
far removed from their congregants below;  
& religious rituals, unless they were compatible  
with rational explanation,  
took a back seat to words or disappeared entirely.//

In defiance of this phenomenon,  
there were voices of protest.//  
Nietzsche, though not religious in a formal sense, declared that he lived in the age  
of the death of God—  
& he didn't declare it with glee.//  
Kierkegaard, who argued that faith  
was an act of the will, not of the mind,  
castigated his bourgeois Copenhagen community  
for killing off Christianity.//  
& even in the less cosmopolitan, more rural environment of Eastern European Jewry,  
a brash & populist mystical movement, *Hasidism*, emerged largely in opposition  
to the overly-rationalistic & legalistic Judaism  
of the time.//

Hasidism claimed that the lifeblood of Judaism  
was its *spirituality*,  
its genius for uncovering sanctity & mystery  
in seemingly commonplace activities like eating, drinking, & sex.//  
Making love on the Sabbath, for instance,  
was viewed as one of the highest levels  
of spiritual expression.//

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Enlightenment ideas formed the bedrock  
of our own society,  
& bestowed authority to the powers that ran it;  
though changes are certainly afoot today,  
for most of us, the head still trumps the heart.//  
That's why my colorful, distinctly *un*-sober yarmulke bothered that rabbi so much.//  
He saw it, probably unconsciously, as a *threat*—  
to his worldview, to his take on religion,  
even to his ecclesiastical position.//  
Why else would an intelligent, well-educated man make as stupid a statement as he did?//

The Jewish Sabbath—Shabbat—isn't simply about “sober reflection and contemplation.”//  
Shabbat is about *many* things,  
including quiet rumination, but fundamentally  
it is about the affirmation & celebration  
of *life itself*.//  
It is our coat of many colors, the beautiful garment Jews get to wrap ourselves in every 7<sup>th</sup> day.//  
Shabbat is the quintessence of *oneg*, of joyfulness.//

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And so is Judaism.//

When we lose sight of that fact,  
when we take the joy out of the Jewish religion,  
we begin to *destroy* the very thing  
we supposedly love.//

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In the movie “Jerry Maguire,”  
Tom Cruise plays a sports agent whose client  
wants Cruise’s character to *demonstrate*,  
not just talk about,  
his allegiance & commitment  
to the player’s football career & family.//  
With the famous phrase, “Show Me the Money!”  
the wide receiver tosses out a challenge & a charge.// He’s asking his agent to do his job—  
but he’s also asking him to prove his love.//

How deeply *passionate* are our religious leaders,  
*our* agents of Jewish life & practice?//  
If we really, truly loved our Judaism,  
wouldn’t we want to share it with—  
& demonstrate it to—  
other people in an emotional, heartfelt way?//  
Maybe we rabbis need a good kick in the butt  
from the Jewish community  
in order to get our blood flowing,  
to *feel* rather than just talk.//  
Maybe we need you to shout at the top of your lungs,  
“Show Me the Passion!”//

The majority of Jews don’t belong to synagogues.//  
Only 46% of the 5.2 million Jews in America  
belong to congregations at any given time.//  
Modern Judaism, so heavily influenced  
by the ideas of the Enlightenment,  
isn’t speaking to people.//  
Yet that’s not just the fault of the synagogue;  
it’s also the fault of Jews *ourselves*  
for not getting over our baggage  
from lousy Hebrew school experiences  
when we were kids, or, perhaps on another level,  
for not being able to relinquish  
some of our *own* reliance on reason  
& begin to trust our *hearts* & our *guts*  
to lead us down the right path.//

We’ve created a strange Catch-22 situation—  
we don’t practice Judaism  
because it doesn’t touch our souls,  
yet we’re afraid of genuinely letting go,  
of *exposing* ourselves

to the uncertainties of faith  
that make deep & real engagement possible.//

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There are *some* Jewish groups out there  
willing to take risks, to experiment  
with more emotional modes of Jewish expression  
& identity.//

That's a start.//

But, sadly, all too often these groups fall  
into the trap of *anti*-intellectualism.//

We see this in the Jewish Renewal movement,  
in many of its communities & teachers.//

Their warm & fuzzy brand of Judaism  
may wash down easily,  
& it may focus more on emotionality,  
but like any kind of comfort food,  
it will ultimately make us sleepy & lethargic.//

My personal experiences in Renewal communities have usually felt like therapy sessions—  
a lot of talking, a lot of self-expression,  
a lot of outpouring of feelings.//

My brain, though, felt underused & flabby—  
& I'm not looking for *Twinkies* to nourish my soul.//

But I don't want *gruel*, either.//

Though they stand at opposite ends  
of the religious spectrum, ultra-Orthodox Judaism  
has much in common with the Renewal movement.//

In its rejection of most of the major ideas  
of the Enlightenment, ultra-Orthodoxy has adopted  
a *shtetl* mentality & structure, closing itself off  
from the modern world by living in enclaves  
either carved out of urban areas (like Boro Park)  
or removed in the country (like the Catskills).//

While not necessarily as emotionally open  
as the Renewal crowd, ultra-Orthodox Jews  
are just as anti-intellectual,  
yet in a radically different way.//

Their literalist, black-&-white approach to Judaism  
leaves no room, in any meaningful sense,  
for critical thought & mindful exploration.//

As religious fundamentalists, they don't think—  
they *absorb*.//

Both of these groups offer responses  
to the problems of contemporary Judaism—  
& both responses *stink*.//

The Renewal movement gives us more heart,  
but at the expense of our head;  
ultra-Orthodoxy lets us keep our head,  
but limits it to serving as a sponge.//

Yet our brain is not, & never has been, the enemy.//  
 The enemy is the way in which,  
 for the last couple of centuries,  
 we've granted reason & rationality absolute primacy  
 over all of the other elements  
 that constitute the whole human being.//  
 Now our era cries out for something different & new,  
 something *far* more difficult to achieve—  
 a balance of head *and* heart.//

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We need “*hybrid*” models of Jewish life,  
 models that allow for the healthy coexistence  
 & creative interplay of intellect & emotion.//  
 And by emotion, I'm not talking about superficial,  
 vapid exuberance, but authentic, real feeling—  
*any* sort of feeling.//

That's not as easy as it sounds.//  
 As much as I love *you*, my congregation,  
 getting you just to clap your hands during services—  
 forget about dancing in the aisles—  
 sometimes seems like extracting molars.//  
 But if we can't learn to get out of our skulls  
 & into our *guts*,  
 we can't ever expect prayer to do anything for us.//

Religion is something you have to experience  
 concretely & directly.//  
 It isn't an abstract, ethereal idea, nor is it a “thing”  
 that you gaze at from a distance  
 with wonderment or incredulity, like you would  
 the Grand Canyon, or a bearded lady.//  
 At its best, religion is not only accessible,  
 but a *force* that flows thru your entire body,  
 from your nerve endings to your cerebellum—  
 it is something that you *live*.//

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 One of the lively, experiential, hybrid models  
 that some communities, including ours,  
 have adopted is the Hasidic *tisch*.//  
 In Yiddish, a tisch translates simply as “table,”  
 but in the spiritual context it is much more.//  
 The tisch isn't a formal service,  
 but a way of having members of a community,  
 often on Shabbat or a festival,  
 sit down with each other to discuss, debate, sing,  
 eat, & drink.//

We've worked hard to create a community  
 that harmonizes not just the old & the new,

but the head & the heart.//  
 A tisch at our shul is as *soulful* as it is intellectual.//  
 Though discussion may serve as the centerpiece  
 of this ritual,  
 it is circumscribed by singing—  
 & Ellen, who leads it, frequently chooses  
*niggunim*, or wordless melodies,  
 that are accessible & participatory.//  
 Some of the *niggunim* are warm & uplifting;  
 some convey blues & longing.//  
 The end result of this mystical concoction  
 is a powerful experience that feeds the heart & mind  
 simultaneously.//

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 Another hands-on, hybrid example of Jewish practice that speaks to the soul & that *we* have  
 adopted  
 is that of *hitbodedut*,  
 best translated as self-seclusion, or self-isolation.//  
 The basic idea behind this ritual is very simple:  
 in a private, preferably natural setting,  
 we address God directly.//  
 Using our own thoughts or words,  
 we express to our Creator whatever it is  
 that is going on inside us—  
 we can pray, plead, confess, repent, cry, meditate.//  
 For this practice to work, all we really need  
 are open minds & open hearts.//  
**Any** emotional expression or feeling will do—  
 whether it be joy, gratitude, serenity,  
 or frustration, doubt, even deep anger.//  
 During *hitbodedut*,  
 we can even pray for the *ability* to pray.//

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 It is the experiential component that is the key  
 to resuscitating contemporary Jewish life.//  
 Men & women in today's society  
 want to do & experience things for *themselves*—  
 take a look at the enormous commercial success  
 of companies like Home Depot & Ikea,  
 or the explosive growth of adventure travel.//  
 The same impulse is at work in the realm of religion;  
 we are tired of being “Jews in the Pews,”  
 of being talked *at*  
 as if we were an audience in a Broadway theater.//

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Judaism should be rooted in fun, not guilt or fear.//  
 It ought to be satisfying & enjoyable.//  
 Although our spiritual tradition  
 is certainly about obligations & duties,  
 it is also about *celebration*—  
 & the 2 are far more interconnected

than many of us realize.//  
 Nobody's going to become a committed Jew  
 in this age & culture if people like me  
 simply try to *convince* them to—  
 they're going to buy into Jewish life  
 only if what they experience is something  
 that they *want* to be a part of—  
 emotion & visceral attachment are fundamental.//

But emotional connection isn't enough.//  
 In order to reach our deepest selves,  
 private feeling must turn into empathy for others,  
 & empathy must lead to *action*.//  
*That* is how we honor & celebrate life—  
*that* is how the “hybrid” models of religion,  
 where heart is joined with head,  
 can lead to *tikkun olam*,  
 to the transformation of our fractured world.//  
 If we learn to face our fear of vulnerability—  
 if we learn to *feel*—  
 then the images from New Orleans, from Darfur,  
 from Iraq, from Gaza, & from elsewhere  
 will not merely stir in us sorrow or fury,  
 but, if placed within a Jewish context  
 & aided by Jewish practices,  
 will translate into social action & political protest.//  
 Then, & only then,  
 will we *truly* walk in the footsteps of our prophets.//

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 Judaism urges us to love & to link with others,  
 to *engage* with all our heart, soul, & being.//  
 When we follow that spiritual charge,  
 passion will fuel *compassion*,  
 & empathy will fire, & inspire, ethical behavior.//  
 If we're *serious* about our heritage,  
 then we have a moral duty not only to each other,  
 but to the world *beyond* these walls,  
 to those we might ordinarily think of as “outsiders.”//

Last year at this time,  
 I challenged all of us to “open our tents,”  
 to welcome friends & strangers into our homes  
 in our pursuit of authentic community.//  
 This year, I challenge us to open our *hearts*,  
 to become *impassioned*,  
 not as an end in itself,  
 but as a *means* of pursuing justice & peace.//  
 Let us confront an administration that,  
 I believe history will prove,  
 has been 1 of the most *inept, arrogant, & corrupt*  
 in modern times—

but let us also act as a *counterfoil* to its sins  
 thru our own righteous behavior  
 & deeds of lovingkindness.//  
 Shouting & blaming isn't enough—  
 we must also *show*, thru personal example,  
 how our government,  
 & those of *other* countries,  
 have utterly failed to adequately combat famine,  
 poverty, genocide, & others forms of injustice.//

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 I ask you, over the following 10 days,  
 to reflect on how, from this new Jewish year  
 to the next, *you* can contribute.//  
 The New Shul itself offers opportunities—  
*help* us to develop a social action committee;  
*link* us with individuals or organizations  
 that share our community's vision & values;  
*volunteer* for or *fund* our emotionally powerful  
 festival & holiday celebrations;  
*make* us a shul that brings together heart & hand.//

I *also* ask you, starting when you leave this room,  
 to perform *one* act of justice or compassion,  
 however small you might think it is,  
 & then *share* that experience, & its outcome—  
 whether on you or on the other person or group—  
 when we sit here again on Yom Kippur morning.//  
 If Judaism tells us that saving a single life is like  
 saving the entire world,  
 it's not such a stretch to treat *one* righteous deed  
 as a salve for, & a corrective to,  
 the many ailments & abuses so tragically pervasive  
 in our land, & across our planet.//