

THE NEW SHUL / Erev Rosh Hashanah 5769 (2008)

Sermon by Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein

B'ruchim ha-ba'im b'shem Adonai — Blessed are each and every one of you who have come to this sacred space at this most holy of times. We are all anxious, unsettled, and scared by the troubles we see around us. There are *too* many issues today that rabbis can use as springboards for sermons: the economic crisis, the election, Iraq, oil and energy, poverty, climate change. But I want to discuss something *different*, something that is *not* bound by time or place, as we begin the pilgrimage of these Days of Awe. It has become a part of my rabbinic practice over the past few years, to take the opportunity of using this pulpit — and this ancient, beautiful moment at the start of a new Jewish year — to try to set a tone for the next season, and to establish a key *theme* that will run, not just through the High Holy Days, but from this Rosh Hashanah until the next.

I have charged us to open our *tents*, as did Abraham and Sarah, and to welcome the strangers among us. I have urged us to open our *hearts*, as did Rachel and David, and to act with empathy and compassion. Last year, I asked you to open your *minds*, to consider just the *possibility* of God's reality. Now, as we start our **TENTH** season together as a spiritual community — a full *decade* of touching one another's lives, supporting those in need, offering comfort to the bereaved, celebrating each other's joys, triumphs, and accomplishments — and as we begin the new Jewish year, 5769, I implore you to open your *souls*.

I implore you to open your souls in a specific way; I ask you to *trust* — your spiritual tradition, your rabbinic teachers, and the fact that, not only will you be okay, but you might very well *grow* if you question some of your most deep-seated assumptions about Judaism and Jewish practice. Our focus during these Days of Awe, and in the New Year that started at sunset, is on *Shabbat* — its meaning, its observance, its goal. Why Shabbat? Because whether or not you know it, whether or not you can bring yourself to admit it, whether or not you have *experienced* it at its best, Shabbat is something you *need* — an opportunity, a challenge, an anchor, and a gift, a catalyst for personal and communal transformation. I can't conceive of a better time to explore Shabbat than here, now, and together, as The New Shul celebrates its 10-year anniversary. The key to Shabbat is *openness*, exposing our souls to the possibility and infusion of its power. But before I discuss Shabbat in its *own* right, let me share, on a personal level, just what a challenge true openness really is. While an open soul may be the prerequisite for spiritual growth, it is *not* an easy thing to achieve, as I'll try to illustrate with a couple of examples.

Many years ago, in a land far, far away, I sat alone on a bench in the locker room of a dojo in nothing but my boxers. A stiff white robe was draped across my thigh and a tightly coiled, oversize white belt rested on the concrete floor. I started to sweat—what was I about to step into? In the adjacent room, I could already hear the others warming up — the sound of bags and boards being kicked and punched, of people leaping and landing onto varnished wood, of rubber mats being dragged around, and the occasional violent shout. There was a lot of silence, too, but the experience in its *totality* was genuinely frightening — and *I* was about to step onto that *same* floor.

When I began shopping around Los Angeles for the right dojo and martial arts system, and I witnessed for the first time the more experienced practitioners in action, they looked like Jedi masters from *Star Wars*. The simple yet exotic robes, the determination in their piercing eyes, the atmosphere of solemnity and reverence that permeated so many of the karate schools — the whole *gestalt* of the thing came across as nothing less than *otherworldly*.

I was a second-year rabbinical student, and the scene made me imagine what it might have been like for a disciple to bear witness to some ancient spiritual master “in action,” whether that meant engaged in prayer, meditation, or teaching. Stories I’d read about the Jewish sages and mystics raced through my mind.

I put on my pristine, never-before-worn white *gi*, but I couldn’t figure out how to tie the belt, a long, thick band of white cloth that had to be wrapped around my waist in a very specific way. Nor could I create the uniform’s traditional *knot*, no matter how hard I struggled with it. With practice about to start and with no alternative, I rushed barefoot onto the floor of the dojo, holding the belt feebly in my clammy hand, and approached one of the instructors for his help.

There was enormous power in that room, and I felt it — like those potent seconds of electrified air you sometimes feel before lightning strikes. I knew there was a world that was being deliberately withheld from me, a world of possibility and potential I’d be exposed to, but *only* when I was ready for it.

Although it took place nearly 2 decades ago, “Day 1 in the Dojo” was a totally virgin experience that I will never forget, crammed with raw, *primal* emotions and sensations—fear, awe, humility, innocence, vulnerability, *openness*, and an almost boundless feeling of *trust*. Just two years later, I found myself, once again, holding a strange white robe in one hand, along with a matching white belt in the other. But this garment wasn’t a *gi*—it was a *kittle*, the traditional white robe that male Jews wear over their clothing throughout the Days of Awe. I was careful to button up and tie the belt of the ceremonial garment in its proper historical sequence and fashion — after all, I had a *congregation* to stand in front of.

Like a *gi*, the kittle is intended to convey innocence, purity, vulnerability, openness, and *trust*. It is meant to express — in an outward and visible way — our inner humility, our willingness to stand *exposed* before God during these Days of Judgment. According to religious tradition, Jewish men are both married *and* buried in them. The kittle is a symbol of the human journey *itself*, a celebration of the New Year and the gift of life, but also a death shroud, an *acknowledgment* of our mortality. *That* is what I was going to teach the Jews of Indiana, Pennsylvania.

I’d just moved to New York to continue my studies at one of our seminary’s other campuses. By day, I put on my *kippa* and studied the Bible, commentaries, the Talmud, Jewish law, Midrash, and pastoral counseling. At night, I put on my well-worn *gi*, stepped barefoot onto the dojo floor, and studied the martial arts. On most weekends, I took a flight to Pittsburgh, rented a car, then drove up to Indiana, where I served as that community’s student rabbi.

One of my major responsibilities, in addition to leading Shabbat worship and teaching, was to guide them through the Days of Awe. It is a high-pressure time for Jewish clergy, when those members of the tribe we rarely see come out of the woodwork — it’s a time when Jews fill pews, and it is an opportunity for rabbis to do our best to teach, inspire, and challenge them. *That* is what I wanted to do by wearing that kittle before my student pulpit all those years ago. It was my first time to do so, and I’ve worn one every year since. Yet because the kittle is strongly associated with Orthodox Judaism, it was virtually unheard of for a future Reform rabbi to don such an “antiquated” garment. Even today, in most non-traditional Jewish contexts, witnessing a service leader wearing a kittle would be a little like catching a glimpse of Bigfoot.

I was viewed immediately as a provocateur. Despite some discomfort at the reaction I could see in the eyes of my congregants, I had *already* achieved my objective, even before I'd uttered the opening prayer. I *did* want to make a point, an unmistakable, in-your-face kind of point: For me, all of this religion “stuff” was profoundly serious, *very much* a matter of life and death. I wasn't just going to go thru the liturgical motions during these Days of Awe — I was going to make a *pilgrimage* into the deepest and darkest parts of my soul, and I was challenging the congregation to *join* me on the journey.

I didn't have to say a single word to convey that message.

Though they end with Yom Kippur — also known as *Shabbat Shabbatot*, or the “Sabbath of Sabbaths” — the Days of Awe begin with Rosh Hashanah. This day that *we* have just ushered in is a time for joy and gratitude, but it is also a time for *openness* and *receptivity*. At several points in the prayer book, we read the following line: *Hayom harat olam*, “This is the day of the world's birth” — and the rabbis who composed that line *meant* it. God did not just create the world as a 1-time event and then disappear — God actively *renews* the work of creation every year, every day, every instant. Rosh Hashanah may be the fixed ceremonial period when we *reaffirm* this truth through rituals and prayers, but the *constancy* at their core is what really matters.

Life isn't a given—it is a *gift*. Each moment we breathe offers us the opportunity for renewal and transformation. In *everything* that we do, we must begin at the beginning — we must be humble, open, receptive. and the Days of Awe, particularly Rosh Hashanah, teach us that it is *always* the beginning. Now, you may be asking yourselves the question, “How does all of this relate to Shabbat?” Let me try to explain.... When I speak with artists, composers, and writers, they often describe their work, not as something that they achieve, but rather that they *receive*. While it is common for religious mystics to describe experiences of having their souls possessed by the divine spirit, even *atheists* in the creative fields often talk about the role of the *Muse* as the mysterious source that inspires their craft.

This shouldn't surprise us, since the etymological root of the word “inspiration” *means* the internalization of spirit — but for that to occur, we must be open and receptive to it. The borderlines between creative *inspiration* and spiritual *revelation* are far more *porous* than most of us usually think.

The *Sabbath* illuminates this very important idea. The psychoanalyst Erich Fromm claims that Shabbat embodies this same *synthesis* of the material and the spiritual. Shabbat, the key observance in biblical religion — and in Judaism over the centuries — is an expression of freedom in its fullest form. Yet, it is a freedom anchored firmly in the concepts of both giving up and of giving *over*, of becoming open and receptive.

In traditional Judaism, Shabbat is a day when we are supposed to refrain from work — but *why*? In Fromm's view, not working “frees” us from the limitations of time, if only for one day a week. With this mindset, or *kavanah*, we are no longer participants in, nor are we bound *by*, the process of natural and social change. Shabbat represents *messianic* time, providing us, if we choose to embrace it, with a taste of *eternity*.

Work and production cease to be our highest values; they become superceded by “rest.” In the context of Shabbat, it is this state of rest that sets us free, that *humanizes* us, that allows us to experience life in its purist manifestation. As a vehicle for self-actualization and inner growth, Shabbat is about more than rest in the conventional sense — it is about *restoration*, about gaining the pause, perspective, and power that will enable us to *transform* our everyday lives. There are

other, more mystical ways to view Shabbat, and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel offers us one. For Heschel, unlike Fromm, Shabbat synthesizes the psycho-spiritual *and* the aesthetic. On Shabbat, each one of us is given the opportunity to act as an *artisan* of the soul, to participate in the creation of what he calls “a palace in time.” Yet that spiritual architecture is contingent on our helping to *construct* it — without its builders doing their job, the sacred palace cannot *possibly* become a reality.

The paradox of the Sabbath is that our “work” and our transformation are the consequence of merely *being*. When we take up residence in the palace, and when we allow the palace to dwell inside of us, we create a *harmony* of mind and spirit, of human and divine — we live fully in the moment, in the eternal *now*.

Fromm claims that, whether or not there is a God, cultivating this kind of attitude toward life can be of immense benefit to us. He writes about the power of letting go, of rest, of making ourselves *empty* — “To make oneself empty,” he argues, “does not express passivity, but *openness*.” It is only when we empty ourselves and give over that our lives can become freer and more fulfilling.

Shabbat is a practice that can help us in this effort. Though it may strike us as counterintuitive, it is *precisely* in the areas of emptiness and openness that we will find our deepest reservoirs of power, the hidden strength and stamina we all need if we truly want to change ourselves, and our world.

In our lives, and particularly on the Sabbath, we must learn to choose self-surrender over self-control — *even* if it places us in a zone of discomfort. For it is through *vulnerability* that we become more open as human beings, that we create new spaces through which new forces can find a path inside of us in ways that will enrich and empower our souls. The great lyric poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, writes that “beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror.” I know from firsthand experience that witnessing a master martial artist perform an intricate *kata* with majestic precision, or being exposed to a profound mystical text from the Kabbalah, can be absolutely awe-inspiring; it might even induce a feeling a fear and trembling. That is precisely why it is so vital to be open, to *trust* our teachers and our traditions — as well as ourselves.

Intimidation is an impediment to personal growth. It takes *guts* to try something for the first time, whether walking onto the floor of a dojo or reading from a seemingly impenetrable book. and it takes *courage* to try out a new practice that you’ve never experienced before, like the observance of Shabbat. I’m well aware that, for many in this room, Shabbat observance is as far away from our postmodern lives as is South Ossetia, or Wassila, Alaska — it seems more like a distant land than it does an accessible idea, or a realistic weekly practice.

And that is exactly the point—let’s *not* be resistant. Together, as we mark The New Shul’s 10th year, let’s get *over* our baggage and our suppositions about religion and religious practice; let’s *insert* ourselves into a zone of unfamiliarity, even discomfort; let’s explore *Shabbat* as a community. There is nothing primitive or irrelevant about finding a place of restoration and liberation, about creating a safe space where we can simply *be*. Our feelings of resistance and vulnerability will dissipate with time, but we must go thru them, and we must embrace our innocence as if it were *itself* a teacher.

Each and every moment offers us an opportunity, a *gift* to become learners and seekers all over again, to treat life’s many and varied experiences as first-time, conversion-like events. Striving to engender in ourselves a condition of *perpetual* innocence — of wonder and amazement about the most ordinary of activities or contexts, like “resting” on Shabbat—is not an easy task. Yet the

fruits of this effort will be an *openness* and a *receptivity* so profound and powerful as to transform our souls. To work toward that goal, we must cultivate the courage to *open* our souls and expose ourselves—through *trust* — to the unknown and unfamiliar. I invite you to walk with me as we begin our journey toward Yom Kippur, the Sabbath of Sabbaths. As far as your homework assignment for 5769, *that* will be a surprise I'll save for tomorrow, so please don't be tardy.

For now, all I ask is that you reflect on my words, and on the notion that, as I said at the outset, Shabbat is something that you *need* — an opportunity, a challenge, an anchor, and a *gift*, a catalyst for personal and communal growth. It is only those who are willing to *push* themselves who truly evolve as human beings. All of us here are great at questioning authority — *this* year, let's try a bit harder to question *ourselves*, our assumptions, and our commitments. We may just discover that what we need most in this time of stress, uncertainty, and fear, is right in front of us, yet blocked by our own eyes, and obstructed by our own egos.