

## Rosh Hashanah 5783 - New Beginnings

A story is told of a mother who walks into her son's room and tells him it's time to get up and go to services. The son whines at her, complaining that he's too tired and wants to sleep in just this one morning. "I'm sorry," said his mother, "but you'll have to go."

This time the son pulls the covers over his head and says, "I refuse."

The mother, growing more impatient, pulls the covers down and demands that he get out of bed, get dressed, and go. At this point, very bothered, the son asks "Why?" The mother says, "I'll give you two reasons:

Number one, you're 53 years old; number two, you're the rabbi..."

That was certainly not **this** rabbi's reaction today! I am so excited to be standing here as your senior rabbi after more than 21 years of rising daily to serve this wonderful community. After these past few years, I recognize that we all have times in our lives when we wish we could just stay home, curled up in our favorite spot with a warm blanket and a cup of tea or coffee.

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People often ask, “When did you know you wanted to be a rabbi?” I knew at sixteen years old. My grandfather was a rabbi, and during one of my last visits with him when he was in the hospital, I shared my thoughts and dreams of one day following in his footsteps. It was one of the last conversations I had with him, and one of the most meaningful of my life. It was only many years later that my parents shared that the day *they* realized I would follow in his footsteps had occurred much earlier.

It was Yom Kippur afternoon, 1971, in the middle of the children's service. The Webster Avenue Sanctuary of Temple Israel of New Rochelle was packed. I couldn't wait any longer. As soon as we reached the aisle, my mother, then seven months pregnant, began to lead me towards the rear of the sanctuary. I pulled on her arm impatiently, in an effort to change directions, knowing full well that there was a bathroom in the Rabbi's study located behind the bema. My mother gently pulled me back, hoping that I would willingly follow her. I stopped dead in my tracks, oblivious to the fact that my grandfather, Rabbi Jacob Shankman, was in the middle of his sermon.

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In a booming voice (as my mother recalls) I broke the hush, "No! I want to go where Papa is!" My mother was mortified, but my grandfather calmly peered down from the pulpit and reassured the congregation, "It's perfectly okay, don't worry, this happens all the time. This time it just happens to be my own granddaughter."

I didn't fully realize the significance my words would hold in eventually leading to my decision to pursue a career in the rabbinate. To me it always seemed as though becoming a rabbi was not a profession I had chosen, rather, it was something to which I felt called.

I feel incredibly blessed. I stand before you the product of generations of rabbis—Papa Jake traced rabbis on both sides of his family back to the 14th century. While my grandfather certainly played a big role in inspiring my journey; my father, who chose a different path, provided the inspiration for how and what I would choose. When he started at NYU, he joined ROTC, and faced with the choice of AirForce or Army, nonchalantly asked the counselor –what's the difference? The counselor responded, "one's a blue uniform, one's a green uniform." My dad said, "I'll take the blue uniform." He fell in love with flying, and always said it brought him closer to God.

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Most significant were the words he shared often when I was growing up: “I can’t believe someone pays me to fly airplanes. If you love what you do, it will never feel like a job.”

From my first days at Washington Hebrew, I have felt blessed every day to serve as a rabbi of this congregation. And my heart is full as I stand before you this year as your senior rabbi.

Rosh Hashanah provides the perfect opportunity for us to reflect upon **our individual, personal connections to Washington Hebrew Congregation, our commitment to each other as members of this community, and the bright and inspiring future we are going to build** for the generations who will follow.

### **Personal connections:**

Many of you may be familiar with the “I am From” poetry project inspired by the author and teacher George Ella Lyon<sup>1</sup>, which has been used by teachers around the country as a method through which students share where they are from, and provide insight and images that help illustrate their core essence.

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<sup>1</sup> [Where I'm From, a poem by George Ella Lyon, writer and teacher](#)

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My daughter Evie recently created such a poem to introduce herself to her English teacher, and it inspired me as I contemplated what Washington Hebrew Congregation, and you, mean to me:

I am from The Processional Statues in Kreeger Lobby,

From the Congressional Charter and the Menorah in front of Macomb Street.

I am from confirmation photos and history that line the walls

And sunlight filtering through stain-glassed windows on Rosh Hashanah morning.

I am from the dogwood tree outside my office window whose white flowers always bloom the week leading up to Confirmation, and from the maple trees along the driveway at JBSC, whose golden and red leaves herald autumn's arrival.

I am from Kamy Loren Nathanson Kiddush Cups, and candles in the sand tables,

From a long line of WHC Senior Rabbis: Stern, Simon, Gerstenfeld, Haberman, Weinberg, and Lustig,

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From all the dedicated staff who care for each one of us and our buildings.

I am from Macomb Street Shabbat and Falls Road Shabbat

From brisket and kugel bakeoff, and Blanca brownies at Oneg,

From Mitzvah Day, Sunday Stuffings, and MLK Work Day,

and from dancing with the Torah, dreidel spinning competitions and edible dreidels, Purim shpiels and Purim Carnivals,

From standing under the portico at Macomb and Bindeman on rainy mornings during Religious School dropoff, and from singing, clapping, and dancing at Shabbat Sings, Tot Shabbats, Fun Fairs, playground playdates, and more.

I am from the sacred moments we share - moments of joy and sadness, moments of learning and discovery, moments of engagement and connection, ordinary moments when we experience holiness, and a sense of belonging.

I am from each one of you, for we together are Washington Hebrew Congregation.

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### **Commitment to each other as members of this community:**

On Rosh Hashanah, we recall the very beginning, when God created the world... I first learned about the mystic Isaac Luria about 30 years ago, while studying at the University of Chicago Divinity School. The Ari, as he was commonly known, was a famous 16th century kabbalist who lived in the mountain top city of Tzfat in Northern Israel. He taught that our task on earth is to bring holiness into the world, which we can best understand through the story of creation.

Rabbi Luria explained that when the world was created, God formed vessels to hold the Divine Light, but God's Light was too powerful. The light that was meant to radiate and illuminate the world with holiness burst forth and the vessels exploded into shards. That force blasted sparks of divine light throughout our world. These holy sparks became embedded in the material world around us, and our task is to free these sparks and allow God's presence to bring light back into the world. We do that when we engage in acts of blessing, both spiritual and physical, and by liberating the sparks of holiness - when we advocate for the unhoused, when we pack food and share it with those

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experiencing hunger, make blankets for those struggling to be warm due to illness, when we bring a meal to a friend or a fellow congregant who is unwell or in need of support.

We free those divine sparks through physical acts, as well as through our relationships with others. Through acts of loving kindness, compassion, and social justice we bring wholeness and holiness and the possibility of repair to what is broken in our world.

Today we go back to our collective beginning. As I reflect on Rabbi Luria's ideas, I recognize that those sparks of holiness are present in everything we do at Washington Hebrew:

We experience sparks of holiness when we share the joy of Judaism through our vibrant celebrations of Shabbat, and as we strive to enhance our worship experiences. Our clergy team continues to explore innovative ways of connecting spiritually, while simultaneously engaging individuals to our community. If you have not yet experienced our inspiring and engaging worship, join us!

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We have transformed our services with Macomb Street Shabbat and Falls Road Shabbat while honoring our classical Reform legacy, and plan to expand further based on your enthusiastic response.

Imagine walking into the building for one of these energetic Shabbats. As you enter you have multiple opportunities to connect. You can join fellow congregants in Edlavitch Hall to briefly engage with the week's Torah portion over beverages and a bite. Or reconnect and make new connections in Kreeger Lobby over a glass of wine and a nosh. We all come together to light candles, and then sing our way into the chapel or Sanctuary with our incredible Macomb Street and Falls Road musicians, who bring heightened energy as they complement and enhance the voices of our cantors. We share our simchas and support those who have come to mourn. As a community, we welcome Shabbat into our hearts and our spiritual home.

I feel sparks of holiness at each and every Lifecycle event I am blessed to share with you: wrapping a newborn baby in a tallis and offering blessings, celebrating as a young person is called to the Torah for the first time as B'nei Mitzvah: children of commandments, Standing

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under the chuppah with brides and grooms at that intimate moment of commitment, holding those who have lost loved ones and supporting them in their grief, and escorting the mourners back into life. Standing beside someone who has committed themselves to the Jewish people and holds aloft the Torah for the first time at the moment they first recite the Shema as a Jew. I feel sparks of holiness when I have had the privilege to join in multiple lifecycle moments with you - even more so. Watching families' lives and legacies unfold has been one of the most rewarding and most powerful aspects of sharing these many years as one of your rabbis. What a blessing.

Together we encounter those sparks of holiness when we reach out to one another in support and love. Time and again, so many of you contribute to the creation of a caring, compassionate, inclusive community in which everyone feels seen, heard, valued, and loved. So many of you have reached out to connect with new members while simultaneously strengthening relationships with long-time friends. When you engage in any of our ever-growing list of auxiliaries, affinity groups, youth groups and now WHC Connections, you contribute to the depth and diversity of our congregation.

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We discover those sparks of holiness when we pursue Jewish knowledge and wisdom together, learning at every age and stage. In our early childhood classrooms, in our religious school t'filah, on the 9th grade Sexuality retreat, in Confirmation, in Torah study, Wednesday Study, in Amram Scholar Series, 12JQ, Academy, and the many, many learning opportunities we have shared over the years.

I witness those sparks of holiness when we demonstrate our commitment to living our Jewish values through acts of Tikkun Olam. When we Study, Engage, and Act to ensure that equity runs through every thread and fiber of the beautiful tapestry that is Washington Hebrew Congregation. When we pray as if everything depends upon God, and act as if everything depends upon us. When we pray with our feet, by standing up for the voiceless, and acting as God's partners in repairing the broken pieces of our world. When we join with our brothers and sisters in faith, who share our commitment to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the unhoused, and create a world that reflects the divine image in which each one of us was created.

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I find those sparks of holiness in the excitement and enthusiasm you bring as you enter our buildings each and every High Holy Day season, reflecting and promising.

I invite you to consider your own meaningful moments and connections to WHC, and to share them with us in the coming weeks. Stay tuned for opportunities to do so in the follow up to the High Holidays.

### **The bright and inspiring future we are going to build:**

On Rosh Hashanah we reflect, and simultaneously turn to the future. As we do so, I ask each of you: What do you want our community to be? Even in the midst of celebrating our 170th year, we look towards our 175th. Let's take the time to ask who we want to be and examine every aspect of who we are and how we are viewed both inside and out. From our programming and worship to the physical buildings we call home, we have a unique opportunity over these next 5 years to consciously decide our path forward and ensure that we will continue to be a vibrant and warm community well into the future.

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We need Washington Hebrew, we need one another. Look at what is happening in our chaotic world. We can't help but reflect on the past two and a half years, and while we find ourselves at a much different place than the High Holidays of the previous two years, there is still much uncertainty. So many of us are struggling with anxiety, and loneliness. Less than a week ago, the New York Times reported that an advisory group, called the US Preventive Services Task Force recommended that doctors screen all adult patients under 65 for anxiety.

We are clearly in need of spiritual input in a world that is bombarding us with negativity, fear, and division. While vaccines and boosters can protect us against Covid; our Judaism, through engagement and involvement with Washington Hebrew can provide us with the deep healing, strength, and resilience that so many of us seek.

A favorite story tells of a mountain village in Europe many centuries ago, where a nobleman wondered what legacy he might be able to leave for his townspeople. At last he decided to build a synagogue. No one saw the plans for the building until it was finished. When the

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people came for the first time they marveled at its beauty—the beautiful high ceilings, the intricate carved wood of the aron hakodesh, the holy ark, and the finely woven Torah covers. They admired the synagogue's completeness until someone asked, "Where are the lamps? How will it be lighted?" The nobleman pointed to brackets which were all through the synagogue on the walls. Then he gave each family a lamp which they were to bring with them each time they came to the synagogue. "Each time you are not here," he said, "that part of the synagogue will be unlit. This is to remind you that whenever you fail to come here, especially when the community needs you, some part of God's house will be dark."

This simple story powerfully illustrates the idea Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh bazeh: All Israel is responsible for one another. We are not whole, unless all are present. We need your voice, your presence, your light. Bring your light, those sparks of divinity. Help us build a strong, vibrant community of connection here at WHC, and join us as we venture forth together to repair the world.

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This story reminds me of that little girl standing in the middle of that packed sanctuary just over 50 years ago. I am humbled to think of what that little girl—tugging and pulling to “go where Papa is” would think, and what Papa Jake would think, if they only knew. I am committed to making them both proud, along with each and every member of this sacred, historic, dynamic, and amazing community that I have called home for the past 21 years, and which I feel so incredibly blessed to now serve as your senior rabbi—something that little girl could not have imagined.

On this Rosh Hashanah, I find inspiration in the words of Martin Buber who taught:

In spite of all similarities, every living situation has,  
like a newborn child, a new face,  
that has never been before and will never come again.

It demands of you a reaction which  
cannot be prepared beforehand.

It demands nothing of what is past.

It demands presence, responsibility; it demands you.

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In this new year 5783, bring your light, your heart, and your full self, and be present. Be from here, not just in word and prayer, but in thought, deed, and action. Welcome Home to Washington Hebrew Congregation.

May this be a place and community where each one of us experiences sparks of the divine and the light of holiness. May we bring that light out into the world and together may we find healing, wholeness, and peace.