

Mindful Repetition

9/28/11 – Erev Rosh Hashana

Do any of you have books that you have read more than once? More than twice? More than five times?

I have three: Summer Sisters, The Perks of Being a Wallflower, and Watership Down. Two angsty coming-of-age tales and one story about a bunch of rabbits. They're the books I read when I can't fall asleep, when I'm not already reading anything else, or when I'm tired of reading anything else. They are dog-eared, marked up paperbacks. They haven't won any awards, and they aren't literary masterpieces, but they are fail-safe. They are fail-safe because they are comfortable, like an old sweatshirt. There is a feel-better ease about reading something you already know. The characters are familiar and the story speaks to you, even after the seventeenth read.

Oddly enough, I also find that each time I read one of these books, I find something new to appreciate. I was fourteen when I first read most of my re-readable novels. Now, ten years later, I find I am able to pull different things out of the same texts.

Repetition is fundamental to Judaism. Shabbat, for example, comes like clockwork every seven days, reminding us to rest and recuperate, reminding us that God created the world and then took a well-deserved nap, reminding us that we are Jewish. We keep Shabbat as a ritual, repeating those tasks that make Shabbat Shabbat – for some people that means coming to services, or lighting candles, or baking challah (or eating challah!) For some it simply means eating dinner with the whole family, and for others it is the night they succumb to silly TV shows they wouldn't usually allow themselves to watch. What makes Shabbat a holiday, what makes Shabbat something we “keep” and “protect,” is its repetitive ritual.

Our liturgy, [AKA our prayer service] is also pretty repetitive, something I understand a lot better after a year's worth of translating prayers – there are only so many words in the English language for the verb “to praise”, but boy do they all come into use when translating from Hebrew and Aramaic! Take the hatzi kaddish, for example. Part of the prayer, which I'm sure you'll recognize, goes as follows: **“Yitbarach v'yishtabach v'yitpa'ar v'yitromam v'yitnase v'yithadar v'yitaleh v'yitalal shmei d'kudsha bri'chu”**. Now listen to it in English: “Blessed, praised, honored, exalted, extolled, glorified, adored, and lauded is the holy name of God.” There is no getting around it, we all know exactly what to do with God's name.

Another big “repeat moment” in Judaism, speaking of re-readable books, is the Torah! For thousands of years, we have been reading and reciting this ancient text. You'd think we'd get tired of it, that we'd want to move on to something else, but as the most awesomely-named rabbi of the 1st century, Rabbi ben Bag-Bag, says in Pirkei Avot: “As for the Torah, we must turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it. Pore over it and wax gray and old over it. Stir not from it for you can have no better rule than it.” Like my go-to comfort novels, the Torah never fails to provide new insight, if only we are diligent in looking for it.

I chose to speak about repetition tonight because, as I was preparing to lead my first High Holy Day services, I noticed how much repetition there IS in this time of year, in these services. I'll be honest, I was afraid that I might look up from the bima at some point and find that all of you had fallen asleep!

Then I asked myself, what is the point of all of this repetition? How can I convince everyone here tonight to stay awake and perhaps even glean something from all of this?

Repetition carries us through the High Holy Days in three major ways: as a vehicle for life, a vehicle for remembrance, and a vehicle for improvement.

The roundness of the challah symbolizes the cyclical nature of the world and of our lives. Rosh Hashana is the Head of the Year, the Birthday [or Day of Birth?] of the World. What more is a birthday than a celebration of the ability to repeat? The rosh hashnah kind of birthday acknowledges not just that we've made it from Point A to Point B but also primes us to start us out on the right foot toward Point C. Remember how we recited the Shehekhiyanu at the beginning of this evening, thanking God for making it possible to "higianu lazman hazeh", to arrive at this holy time...again!

In Proverbs 27:19 we read: "As in water face to face, so the heart of a person to a person." The great medieval French commentator Rashi's explanation is that "Like water, at which a person gazes and sees in it a face like his face, if he is smiling, it is smiling, and if he is frowning, it is frowning, so the heart of a person to another person – if he loves the other, he too loves him." Every time we come to the water we look a little different, and so does the water. Similarly, each year we come to Rosh Hashana from a little bit of a different place, and the world we are looking into is a little different. Rashi's message is that what a person sees in a reflection depends on how that person comes to the water.

Think for a moment about where you were this time last year in your lives:

How are you different?

How are you the same?

Repeating the ritual and observance of Rosh Hashana every year reminds us to take that time to reflect on and to celebrate 5771, just as our birthdays give us an opportunity to celebrate the past years of our lives. Repetition is the way we go around and come around.

Rosh Hashana is also known as Yom Hazikaron, the Day of Remembering.

Throughout the service we ask God again and again to remember us and remember our ancestors. We ask God to keep us in God's "thoughts" – more than anything, we want to be written into the Book of Life, and we are very aware of the potential that God will decide not to do so.

We plead, "Remember the covenant you made?"

"Remember how much you love us?"

"Remember that time you saved our ancestors from Egypt?"

"We know we're fallible human beings but we'll be better next time, just please, please remember us!"

If God may sometimes be confused as to what the Jewish people really want, we can at least do everything we can to give a clear message on Rosh Hashana: we want to be remembered so that we can make it to the next year. We want a chance to do it better next time.

Which brings me to the third role of repetition in these Days of Awe: as a vehicle for improvement.

The repeated blasts of the shofar that we will hear tomorrow morning have three distinct sounds. Tekiah is a short complete blast. It wakes us up, it calls us to attention. Shevarim, three broken blasts, symbolizes the beginning of our t'shuva, for repentance requires a breaking of sorts. Truah consists of nine quick biting blasts. It represents the complete shattering that follows the initial break. It is the heartbreaking sob, the hardest part part of saying we're sorry. But we always end with a repeat of tekiah, a reminder that after brokenness comes a return to wholeness, that the whole point of this season is tshuva. We acknowledge our

problems, try to right our wrongs, apologize and forgive and redouble our efforts to do it better, to BE better next time.

Repetition creates room for progress, an opportunity to take stock and create a sort of “soul development” plan. Knowing that 5772 comes directly after all of this painful soul-searching lifts us up, lets us work toward an improved future.

There is one cautionary note: Repetition only works if you actively engage. Mindless repetition IS boring. It feels like a waste of time, and it can be dangerous. Many unhealthy habits are born out of mindless repetition.

The key is to recognize all the tools and opportunities of repetition, to re-read that book not ONLY because you can't sleep but also because you know that you are comfortable and familiar enough with the characters and the plot to understand that sentence at the bottom of page 276 in a whole new way.

May this be the year we celebrate Rosh Hashana not only because we are supposed to, or because we always have, but also because we are ready to become better people -- better "us"es.

As we enter 5772, may our repetition be mindful and our prayers be properly directed.

Shana tova u'metukah.