

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5767 September 22, 2006  
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*Gut yontef, L'shanah Tovah, Shabbat Shalom!*

Before I begin, I want to offer my deepest thanks to all of my beloved Sha'ar Zahav community for the opportunity to be here with you this year. It is a privilege and a joy, and at this time of year I am especially grateful to God and to all of you.

We stand here tonight without knowing quite where we are. Or more precisely, we don't know quite *when* we are. Shabbat has come in; the sun is just gone over the horizon. During this evening's service light gives way to dark, and the old year and the new year meet. We cannot ever pinpoint the exact moment when the old year disappears forever. But we know that there is a time at sundown when it is no longer the past year and it is not yet the year to come. It is old and new, both and neither one, at the same time. For fleeting minutes on the evening of Rosh Hashanah, time and certainty are suspended, and we who have come to pray are lifted up into twilight and its mystery.

Each of us has arrived in this sanctuary in our own unique place, with our own unique stories. Together, at this in-between time, we give thanks that we have lived to see another year arrive. At this most holy interval between the years, we begin the process of *teshuvah*, of turning towards God and towards our own best selves. Each of us begins to search our souls to understand what we do well and what we might do better. Together tonight, we open ourselves up to new hope and new possibilities as we stand here in between.

This past spring, a college student walked down the streets of a major U.S. city on the way to work. Suddenly shouts came from behind:

"Hey! Hey!"

Since the woman shouting was a stranger, the young person walked on and ignored her.

The woman began to follow the student down the sidewalk.

"HEY! I'm talking to you! Are you a man or a woman?"

Now the woman cut off the student's path.

"I asked, are you a man or a woman?"

The student, now forced to stop walking, said nothing, simply looking into the stranger's face.

"Just tell me what you are!"

When the student did not respond, the woman continued:

"Oh, so you're a woman, right? I knew it, you're a woman."

Now the student finally responded:

"No."

"Well, fine, so you're a man then."

And again the young student replied:

"No."

Now the woman began to scream. “Which are you? Why won’t you tell me?”  
The student swallowed, and said as evenly as they could:  
“I’m not either a man or a woman. I’m neither. I’m both.”  
For a moment the stranger’s face froze, and the student instinctively lifted an arm to protect their face  
from the blow that would probably be coming. Instead, loud peals of laughter.  
“That’s a good one! You’re both! You’re both! You can’t be both!”  
The laughter followed the student, and the student’s classmates, down the street.

The student in the street had defied categories. They faced the question: “Are you a man or a woman?”--and replied that they did not fit so simply into either one. Instead, they lived in a space in the middle. But the woman could not believe that a person could exist outside of the two categories—“male” and “female”—that she knew. “Both” was not an option. She felt compelled to define this person in front of her, even though she didn’t know them.

Like this woman, we have all been taught that knowing the difference between men and women is of paramount importance. From the moment of birth and even before, we instantly and fervently delineate gender for every new human being. What’s the first question we ask about a new baby? We ask, “Is it a boy or a girl?” We continue to ask this question of every person, in one way or another, almost every day, as long as we live. Every form we fill out requires us to check one box—either “M” or “F.” If you do not pick one gender--and only one—you do not get a driver’s license, or a mortgage, or food stamps. We must pick a gender in order to get a job, travel, or enroll a child in school. Is it a boy or a girl, man or woman? We are almost never allowed to imagine that there might be space in between.

As the twilight falls on Erev Rosh Hashanah, it is a most appropriate time to consider what happens in in-between places. Jewish tradition has a unique relationship with twilight: that ethereal moment in every day when dark and light meet. The rising of the sun and its going down are moments that we cannot label with certainty, and all the more so the twilight of the evening of the new year. “Our sages taught: As to twilight, it is doubtful whether it is part day and part night, or whether all of it is day or all of it is night. How long does the twilight last? After sunset, as long as the east still has a reddish glow: when the lower [sky] is pale but not the upper, it is twilight; [but] when the upper sky is as pale as the lower, it is night. Such is the opinion of Rabbi Judah...Rabbi Yosi said: Twilight is like the twinkling of an eye as night enters and the day departs, and it is impossible to determine its length.”<sup>1</sup>

How much more mysterious are the minutes between one year and the next. And tonight is also Shabbat, that great divide between the everyday and the sacred. This, right now, is the twilight of twilights.

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<sup>1</sup> BT Shabbat 34b, trans. William G. Braude

Our rabbis believed that twilight held great and unique power. Demons abounded in these minutes between night and day. One was especially vulnerable to the many forces of evil. Our sages, of great intellect and tremendous spiritual gifts, seem to have been a little bit afraid of what they could not define. Like the woman shouting in the street—like all of us at different times—our rabbis wanted to categorize and label. They desired to understand when day ended and night began--which was which, and what to call it. But ultimately, many of them acknowledged that they could not draw a simple line between one and the other. That middle place between light and dark could never be boxed in. It was not day, and it was not night. Twilight was something else all its own.

With their concern about demons, we might expect that our rabbis would have warned us of the grave dangers of twilight. Perhaps we should not leave our houses at the time of sundown. Twilight could have been considered an inauspicious time for important activities. Perhaps the inscrutable twilight is when God hides God's face. In other words, our rabbis could have shut down twilight for us. Or they could have ruled it away, artificially dividing night from day with no possibilities in between them. But they didn't. Instead, the rabbis taught that twilight, and dawn, are the best times to pray.<sup>2</sup> They concluded that these times that are in-between and indefinable are when our prayers are most likely to be heard. The place in the middle that made them afraid was also for them the place where miracles were most likely, where divine forces rise, where transformation is most possible. Rather than shutting down the twilight hour, they opened it and elevated it. It is not a degraded middle place. It is exceptionally holy.

This approach to intermediate time is also, in many instances, Judaism's approach to intermediate space. Places in the middle are not places to rush through. They are places to be sanctified. At the Red Sea, our ancestors sang songs of praise to God for that miracle of passage. Thus our people were named *ivrim*, Hebrews, from the root *avar*—'to cross'. At our essence, Jews are a people who cross over borders that previously seemed impossible. And when these boundary-crossers came out from the sea, they did not emerge right into their promised destination. They came forth into many years of wandering, in a vast desert between one place and the next place. This wilderness is where the majority of our Torah takes place. It is where we received our laws and our ethical teachings, where God came down in fire and in the great blast of the shofar. In between one place and another, our ancestors became the people that we now know. Today we still inscribe God's name in our places of passage. In a Jewish home, we hang *mezuzot* that contain our most sacred words. And the place where we are commanded to hang them is in the doorway. Stopping to see or kiss the mezuzah reminds us of who we are: boundary-crossers, people in the middle. In the place between two places, we affirm the oneness of God.

And what about people in the middle? Our tradition knows middle time and middle space—how does it treat human beings who do not fall neatly into a gender category?

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<sup>2</sup> M. Avot 2:13; BT Brachot 29b

Yes, our rabbis of ancient times knew that humanity did not fit into two boxes. Just as day and night cannot be clearly divided into two, according to some of our most ancient texts, neither can people. In approximately 100 C.E., it was written in the Mishna: there are people who “are in some ways like men, and in some ways like women, and in some ways like both men and women, and in some ways like neither men nor women.”<sup>3</sup> It goes on to say that people of intermediate sex and gender were not to be harmed; their lives were of equal value to any other person’s. A few hundred years later, the Talmud<sup>4</sup> describes our ancestors Abraham and Sarah as *tumtumim*—as people whose gender or genitals could not be clearly labeled. Today it may be almost hard to believe that the Talmud could envision Sarah and Abraham in this way. They are the ancestors of our people, and we are told that their gender could not be determined. Dozens and dozens of other Jewish texts speak of sex and gender in similar ways. Twilight cannot be defined; it can only be sanctified and appreciated. People can’t always be defined; they can only be seen and respected, and their lives made holy. This Jewish approach allows for genders between male and female. It opens space in society. And it protects those who live in the places in between.

Unfortunately, this traditional understanding has been muffled in the last thousand years. Today we are taught that there are two and only two options, male and female, that are determined by anatomy and do not change. But transgender, intersex and gender-queer experiences are beginning to challenge this belief. Transgender people, Jews and non-Jews, *ivrim*, border-crossers, people in between—are standing up and telling our truth. One may be born with a ‘male’ body, and know herself to be female. One can feel that they encompass qualities called ‘male’ and qualities called ‘female.’ Others identify as another gender entirely—not male, not female, but a third gender. Some people choose to change their bodies or names to reflect their inner identities; some don’t. People might know themselves to be transgender as children, or in their twenties, or forties or eighties. Some people are deciding that they do not have a gender, or do not wish to choose one. Transgender experiences are asking us all to question some of our most basic categories.

For those who have never known someone who is transgender, all of this might seem difficult to understand, or even a little crazy. I invite us all to question what it is that we’ve always believed. I invite us to fully embrace that great promise of the High Holy Days: that the way things have been is not the way that they always have to be.

All of you here are needed in the work of opening minds and hearts; because for those who live in these gender-places in between, our ancestors’ twilight demons can be real. It is dangerous not to conform to gender categories. People whose gender is unclear suffer high rates of violence, discrimination and abuse. But in the face of this, trans people—like gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer people before us and alongside us—are standing up every day to insist that the world is bigger than what we’ve been taught, more complex and wonderful than two simple fixed categories. Like the wide spectrum of sexual identities, gender diversity is a gift to be celebrated. Some transgender experiences are about finding holiness in a journey from one gender to another. Other

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<sup>3</sup> M. Bikkurim 4:1

<sup>4</sup> BT Yevamot 64a-b

people choose to sanctify some place in between, or another identity entirely. No one can define twilight, but we all know its power and its beauty. Each human being, no matter what their gender identity, is created in the image of God. God's image transcends all categories.

It is not only transgender people who can live in difficult and sacred middle places. Every person has been there, in their own way. Some of us here may be between jobs, or have just left a relationship. Perhaps you're awaiting a birth, or in recovery, or planning a move. Or maybe you are struggling to survive in a desert that lies between old pain and new promise. Perhaps you enter the new year knowing that you face great challenges ahead, and wondering what that journey will look like.

It is not only transgender people whose lives demand room in the middle. Every person has had profound experiences of the in-between. Maybe it's a sunrise; or perhaps you've witnessed the moments when life begins, or when it ends. Most of us here have found ourselves in some kind of wilderness—maybe without knowing how long we might be there. These in-between places can terrify us, as they frightened our rabbis. And these are often the experiences that most deeply change our lives. In our rushed, stressful world, where we race from one obligation to the next, we are rarely encouraged to find holiness in the in-between places. We feel so much pressure to achieve, to get to the next level, to find a new relationship, to finish school—to 'get where we're going.' There never seems to be time to make sacred whatever lies in between here and there. How often do we linger in the doorway and feel the presence of God? How many twilights have passed by without us offering some kind of prayer—a pause to marvel at the sunset; to hug a loved one; to reflect on the day?

As the High Holy Days begin, each of us confronts in particular that uncomfortable space between who we are and who we would most like to be. Our tradition sanctifies these intermediate places, where we *all* dwell. At this season, we are even reminded that it is better to have made mistakes and repented for them than never to have made that mistake, never to have made that journey, at all. The journey towards our best selves continues all our lives; and Judaism makes each one of us holy as in-between people. What places are each of us in between tonight? Can we use this new year not only to consider where we're going, but to sanctify where, and who, we are right now?

Tonight, at the twilight of twilights—this is the time to imagine. Let us take this opportunity to open ourselves to possibilities in the middle that we may never have thought about, or never believed we would live to see. This is the time to throw out last year's fears; to question all the little boxes that tell us what, or where, or who we're "supposed" to be; to reconsider whatever categories prevent us from exploring or becoming our full authentic selves. This is the time to envision the change we might begin in our own life and in our own soul during the Days of Awe.

We began our service with a song, a liturgical poem, set to a melody by the Jews of Casablanca. Once each year, as the last day of the old year fades and disappears, we chant *Achot Ketanah*, "Little sister." One should begin singing it when it is still barely

light, and finish just after the sun has gone down. At this very moment, as day turns to night and ushers out the last day of the year five thousand six hundred and sixty-six, thousands of Jews in houses of prayer across the globe sing this song with us. This is the melody that hallows our passage from year into year, and opens up the twilight hour in all of its potential.

I invite you in a moment to join together and sing again the melody for the twilight of the new year. Offer up your prayers, whatever they may be. Let us open ourselves at this holy hour to new ways of being and new ways of seeing—even those we may not yet understand—to new places, even those that may seem too frightening to go. Each of us is invited to make holy whatever in-between places we are in.

God of all times and places, God of all people in between—be with each human being here tonight, whoever and wherever we may be. May the twilight that brought our new year in lift our prayers up; and sanctify our journeys for a year of life and peace.