

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5767 (2006)

My friends, this evening we come together in solemn assembly. We have united in prayer and song; we have entered a period of spiritual challenge and sublime mystery. Our tradition demands of us now that we put aside our ego centered self, drop all pretenses of perfection or greatness, and look at ourselves as we truly know we are. We look in the mirror and sometimes we do not like what we find there.

But it is only in facing ourselves as we are; in painting an honest picture, in telling the hard truth, that we can step towards the other side of this High Holiday season -- the aspect of embrace, of healing, of wholeness, of peace. One small step for each of us, is one giant leap... towards what Ernest Kurz has called - the spirituality of imperfection.

Spirituality. Everyone's after some sort of spirituality. So often people say: "Oh, I'm not *religious* or anything. But I am a *deeply spiritual* person." But no two people seem to mean the same thing when they use the word. Or why they prefer it to religion.

What is spirituality?

To have an answer is to misunderstand the question.

Lao Tzu taught;

Those who know, do not say;

Those who say, do not know.

His students asked him what the words meant.

He replied;

"which of you knows the fragrance of the rose?"

All of them knew.

Then he said, "Put it into words."

All of them were silent.

Truth, wisdom, goodness, beauty, the fragrance of a rose; all resemble spirituality because they are intangible, ineffable, and often subjective realities. We may know them, but cannot grasp them with our hands or with our words.

Wisdom has no color or texture, cannot be measured by pounds or ounces, has no distinct feel like wood, or steel, or silk, emits no fragrance, has no taste, occupies no space.

And yet, wisdom exists. Love exists, beauty exists, evil exists, spirituality exists.

They are the higher realities that define human existence. We cannot define well these realities. We cannot PROVE them. Indeed it is they who prove us in the sense that it is against these qualities that we often measure our human BE-ing.

That way of be-ing often defies definition. It is elusive in the sense that mere words do not adequately describe what we know in our hearts to be true.

So when words alone fail what do we do? We must imagine (image –in) what the state of being we wish to articulate might be like. We form a picture, a representation (re-presentation) of what the experience might feel like. But to do this we need a deeper level of language to express the experience. So we turn to metaphors, images, and as most of you who hear me speak often know, I turn to stories.

I tell stories because in the moment of story, the listener, who cannot articulate the deepest wisdom of his heart, hears the story and says; “It’s like THAT!”

And that is the moment of enlightenment.

Stories open the gates of understanding by modeling the idea that the unknown and ineffable can best be understood by describing an activity that one knows something about.

For example;

Spirituality is a lot like health. We all have health; we may have good health or poor health, but it’s something we can’t avoid having. The same is true of spirituality: every human being is a spiritual being. The question is not whether we’re spiritual but rather how does our spirituality manifest itself in our lives and the world. Is it a negative one that leads to alienation and estrangement or positive affirming and life-giving?

The core paradox that underlies spirituality is the unsettling sense deep inside that we are somehow incomplete, that comes from the reality of living as a part of / yet not a part of / the world.

To be human IS to be incomplete, yet yearn for completion; it is to be uncertain, yet long for certainty; to be imperfect yet long for perfection; to be broken and yet crave wholeness.

All of these things we yearn for are unattainable because of the very nature of the human condition.

Because we are perfectly human, we are humanly imperfect. This is the essential paradox of human life.

Paradox is the essential nature of being human. Paradox is the way it is meant to be, the way it should be. It is the way we are made.

The search for spirituality is a search for reality, for honesty, for true speaking and true thinking.

From the time of the Oracle at Delphi's first admonition; *know thyself*, the arch foe of spirituality has been recognized to be – denial-

the self deception that rejects self by attempting to repudiate the essential paradox that is our human be-ing.

Our first step in journeying the spiritual path involves facing oneself honestly, and seeing what is.

That all of us without exception are incomplete, paradoxical, mixed up and imperfect.

Flawedness is the first fact we learn about human being and paradoxically, it is in that foundation that we can find not despair, *but joy*. It is only within the acceptance of our imperfections that we can find the peace and serenity that we crave.

Rabbi Elimelech of Liszensk said; "I am sure of my share in the World to Come. When they ask me at the Heavenly Tribunal, "Did you learn, as in duty bound?" I shall answer; no. Again I will be asked; "Did you pray as in duty bound?" And I shall again answer; no. The third question will be; "Did you do good as in duty bound?" And for the third time I will answer; no. Then judgment will be awarded in my favor, for I have spoken the truth.

Speaking truth is the first is the beginning of our journey. And when we have the courage to speak the truth about our doubts, our sins, our darkness, our shadow, that is the beginning of our search for the spiritual. We admit that we are powerless over the chaos that inhabits our lives and we seek help to achieve that which we cannot accomplish alone. And in that acceptance of our imperfection and the admission that we are not in control, spirituality is born.

In telling and hearing stories we identify our imperfections and we affirm that it is alright to be imperfect.

When we hear stories we hold up a mirror so that we can see ourselves. Stories are mirrors of human be-ing, reflecting back our very essence. In the story we come to know that the world is not either/or, but both/and.

In the mirror of another's story we can discover our tragedy and our comedy, and therefore our very human-ness, the ambiguity and incongruity that lies at the core of our condition.

But we have to claim and live our story and resist allowing it to be dictated by someone else or worse, living someone else's story.

I know a man who is one of the most brilliant people I have ever met. Hard working, sharp, insightful, loyal, wise, articulate and handsome, he could have become anything he wanted to be. But he never got to live his own story.

When he was in High School he loved science and wanted to become an inventor or an engineer. But in the summer of his junior year, his father, a Russian Jewish immigrant who owned a dry cleaning business, took sick. The young man spent the summer running the business while his dad recuperated. He did a good job of it too and his father rewarded him for it, but also gave him the message that he needed him now and always. So giving up his own dreams he entered the family business. He never got rich, but he made a decent living... and always wanted to be doing something else. He came to resent his work. Unable to express his anger to his father, he turned it instead on his wife and children and gained a reputation as having a violent hair trigger temper.

Later his younger brother came into the business. The brother was somewhat lazy and scatterbrained which only added to our loyal young man's resentment. When the family patriarch lay on his death bed some years later, he obtained a pledge from his oldest son that he would stay in the business, look after his irresponsible younger brother, and not allow that which the father had worked so hard to build, collapse.

So now as CEO the son took over the business, expanded it in good times, and downsized it in bad times, for over fifty years. Last year he retired at the age of 70, returned to college and began to study physics. He recently confided in me that he was now truly happy for the first time in his life.

How sad. He was so busy living his father and brother's story, that there was no room for his own.

Some of us may have similar tales to tell. But we can reclaim our personal story by telling and listening to other stories.

The wisdom stories of the Jewish tradition hold out the hope within the possibility of real change.

"Once upon a time I did not understand this idea very well, but then I heard this story and now I understand it differently."

Nowhere is this format clearer than in the great stories of the hassidim. The righteous rabbis rarely answer questions, more often than not they tell stories and stories within stories. And the story, as it is told and retold, creates a community of those who have been touched and transformed by the story.

One of the best illustrations of this is the story of the Baal Shem Tov and his storyteller. Many of you have heard this story, many more of you have probably not heard it.

Once, the Baal Shem Tov came to his disciples and said, "This is the last year of my life. Each of you will have a role to fill after I'm gone." He pointed to one of his followers, saying, "You will be the leader of the community here." To another he said, "You will explain the teachings to those who come here and ask." One by one, he told each of the disciples what they should do.

The last he turned to was Reb Yaakov. "You will be the storyteller. You will travel from village to village and spread the stories of what has happened here among us."

Reb Yaakov cried out, "Holy master, I would do whatever you want, but please! Give a different task to me! As a storyteller, I would be poor! And travelling from place to place, I would never have a home or a family."

The Baal Shem Tov replied, "As for your poverty, perhaps you will be surprised. And as for settling down, one day there will be a sign - and then you will know that your job is completed and you may cease your wandering."

It all happened as the Baal Shem Tov. Reb Yaakov wandered from town to town spreading the stories.

But when he arrived in a village, and announced that he had stories to tell of the Baal Shem Tov, he found that the word of the Baal Shem Tov had preceded him, and people were hungry to hear these stories. And after the stories were told, people were happy to feed him and give him lodging. All in all he made decent living but longed to settle down.

One day, Reb Yaakov heard word that in Italy there was a rich man who so loved stories of the Baal Shem Tov, that anyone who told him a story of the Baal Shem Tov would be given a gold florin!

Reb Yaakov thought, "I know thousands of stories of the Baal Shem Tov! I will tell them all. I will be rich!"

And so, working his way from village to village by telling stories, Yaakov came at last to that rich man's home.

He was greeted enthusiastically. "You not only know stories of the Baal Shem Tov, but you knew him personally? Welcome! In your honor, tonight I will give a banquet. I will invite all the people of this village, and they will share in your stories."

That evening, Yaakov sat at the head of a long table. When the dinner was done, his host turned to him. Yaakov stood up to tell a story.

For the first time, Yaakov could not think of a single story of the Baal Shem Tov.

Reb Yaakov said, "I feel like an impostor. You must allow me to leave!"

"Please, Reb Yaakov; said the rich man, stay here tonight. Perhaps in the morning you will remember a story."

But in the morning it was the same, and Yaakov wished to leave. His host pleaded, "I beg of you! Stay the day. You don't know what your presence here means to me."

The next morning, Yaakov could still remember nothing. Again, his host insisted that he stay. But on the third morning, Yaakov said, "No, I cannot continue to accept your hospitality without giving a story in return. I must go."

"Then please, Reb Yaakov, allow my coachman to take you on the first leg of your journey."

Soon, Yaakov sat in unaccustomed splendor ... and in unaccustomed humiliation. After four hours of travelling in the coach, suddenly a story of the Baal Shem Tov emerged in Yaakov's mind. "Driver! Driver! Turn around quickly!" He told the story over and over to himself, so that he wouldn't forget it.

Standing outside the wealthy man's door, Yaakov began to speak. "Kind host, I have remembered a story. No, we will not wait for the banquet. I will tell you now, lest I forget.

"It is a very strange story. I do not even know the end of it. But I can promise you that you will not have heard it from anyone else.

For only my master and I were there. And I have never thought of it from the day it happened until this day."

Yaakov paused a moment, then began his part of the story.

One night, the Baal Shem Tov woke me from my bed and asked me to come with him on a journey. This was not unusual. But this time, he asked only me. I sat facing him in his carriage. He drew the curtains over the windows, and I could hear the wheels rattling over the cobblestones. Then I could not hear that sound, but only the wind rushing by. And then, after hours, I heard again the sound of wheels on pavement.

When the Baal Shem Tov drew open the curtains, I could see that we were in a land completely unfamiliar to me. I could see, too, a great square, with tens of thousands of people gathered. But our carriage continued beyond it to a small, winding alley, where every door and every window was barred.

"Yaakov, this is the street of the Jews."

And it was here that the carriage stopped. My master got out and knocked on one of these boarded-up doors. "It is I, Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Shem Tov. Open the door!"

Then we heard whispers. "Go away! Are you mad?" But at last the door opened part way, and we were ushered up a narrow stairway. Once on the second floor, we saw only a boarded-up window, but my master strode to the window and threw open the shutters.

Our host became agitated once again. "Do you not know? This is the day of the year they will kill the first Jew they see. We will be murdered!"

"It is safe." My master pointed out over the square.

I could see the crowd. I could see a great dais at the far end - and on it, a bishop spewing the worst sort of invective against the Jews, attempting to incite the crowd to violence. The Baal Shem Tov turned to me. "Yaakov, bring me that man."

Our host cried out, "Don't send him there! He'll be killed!"

But if my master asked me to walk on fire, I would do it.

I went out onto the square. The people were standing shoulder to shoulder. But somehow, a pathway opened for me. Soon, I stood looking up at that bishop. I spoke to him in my language: "My master, Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Shem Tov, wishes to speak to you."

And to my amazement, the Bishop spoke back to me in Yiddish. "Tell him I will be there in two hours."

For the second time, a pathway opened for me through the town square. But my master was furious. "Tell him to come now!"

For the third time, I made my way across that square. When the bishop saw me coming, he interrupted his speech - and he followed me back to the Baal Shem Tov. The two of them went into a room, and they talked for three hours.

Kind host, that is all I can tell you of that story!

When Yaakov looked at the wealthy man, there were tears streaming down the man's face.

"Yaakov, I can tell you the rest of that story. For I was that bishop." And now the wealthy man began his story:

You see, my parents raised me as a Jew, and they raised me well. But when I was a young man, something came over me and I converted. I found that by speaking ill of my people, the Jews, I rose in my new countrymen's esteem. In time, I began to speak with hatred of the Jews. And in time they made me a priest.

Then, one year, I had the idea for this annual festival, during which we would sacrifice the first Jew who we saw. Then they made me the bishop.

Every year, I stood and I addressed the crowd. I incited them to murder. I felt the power of my words.

Then, one night, I had a dream. I dreamt of a room with a long table. And seated around it were people

I knew, in my dream, to be my ancestors. They were looking at a thin, dried object. In my dream, I knew this object to be a human soul.

One of my ancestors spoke, "Is it not clear that the force of evil has completely overcome the force of good in this soul?"

Then one man spoke who - I knew in my dream - was not one of my ancestors, but was the Baal Shem Tov. He stepped forward and touched his finger to that dried soul. Where his finger touched it, it became moist. Slowly, the moisture began to spread. "Is it not clear," he said, "that there is still hope for that human soul?"

When I woke, I knew that the dream meant that one day the Baal Shem Tov would intercede for me. And so, Yaakov, when you came across the square to me that day, I knew I must go with you. But I wished to feel the power one more time.

When you came the second time, I knew I could put it off no longer. In that little room above the square, I asked the Baal Shem Tov, "What must I do to be redeemed?"

"Your sin is very great. There is no guarantee that your prayers can ever be answered. But if they are ever to be heard, you must do what I say. Sell all your property. Divide the proceeds into three parts. With one part of that money, buy your freedom from your obligations as a priest. The second third you must immediately give to those around you in need. With the third portion, you must go to some distant land and set up a home where it is known that anyone may come and be given food, shelter, and clothing. Perhaps, after years, you will be made whole again."

"Holy master, how will I ever know if my prayers have been heard?"

"When someone tells you your own story, you will be saved."

And so, Yaakov, when you came to my home, I recognized you as the messenger who had come across the square so many years before. I knew that you alone could tell me that story. And I took it as a sign that my prayers had been answered.

When you could think of no story to tell, I was certain that my prayers would never be answered. But now ... you have told me the story I have waited all these years to hear.

Within the week, the rich man had sold his home. He gave half of the value to Reb Yaakov.

Yaakov took that money and bought his own home. He started his own family. He stopped his life of wandering - just as his master, the Baal Shem Tov, had always intended.

When a person comes to you and tells you your own story, you know that you are forgiven. When you are forgiven, you are healed.

May all of us hear and claim our story this High Holiday season.

L'shanah Tovah Tikateivu.