

EREV ROSH HASHANAH 2026
Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley
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Shanah Tovah and Shabbat Shalom.//

As many of you know, I went on a Sabbatical last fall
after the Jewish holidays.//

While I wrote weekly updates during that time,
some of you may not have read them,
and may not be aware of the wonderful experiences
I had both in this country & overseas.//

As a sabbatical is intended to do,
those experiences renewed me, recharged me,
and enlightened me.//

I'm grateful to all of you for giving me that gift,
a chance to grow as a rabbi & as a human being.//

One of my main sabbatical experiences
involved working with two Progressive synagogues
on the Iberian Peninsula.//

In Porto, Portugal, I spent time with a new,
startup congregation that longtime CBS members,
Tucker and Anita Catlin, helped to create.//
Its members are largely American Jewish immigrants,
but they also had a number of *b'nei anusim*,
or "crypto-Jews,"

Portuguese men and women

who have rediscovered their Jewish roots
and identities after centuries of nonobservance.//

It was a unique community with lots of challenges.//

I helped lead Shabbat services, did some teaching,
and consulted with the synagogue's leadership
about how to build a new congregation
from scratch—something I had some insight about
from my time as the founding rabbi of The New Shul
in the West Village in Manhattan.//

After Porto, I traveled to Barcelona, Spain,
where I worked with another Progressive synagogue
that was only about 20 years old.//

Almost no one there spoke English,
so, at their Shabbat service one Friday night,
Carolyn interpreted my d'var Torah, line by line,
into Spanish as I delivered it.//

It was an impressive feat, very memorable,
and I will always be grateful for that support.//

Taken together, these 2 experiences gave me a taste
of Progressive Jewish life in southern Europe,
which is not easy.//

Orthodox Judaism dominates the Jewish landscape;
most Progressive congregations hold services
in apartments or rented conference rooms;
they rarely have trained, ordained rabbis;

they have no old, majestic buildings, no fancy Arks.//

They truly represent religion in the raw,

with all its challenges & rewards.//

And the rewards are great:

simplicity, cohesion, a shared sense of purpose,

and a pioneering spirit.//

Reform congregations in the U.S. have much to learn

from them.//

The other major Sabbatical experience I had last year,

which in some ways was the highlight for me,

was serving as the resident chaplain

at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia.//

Some of you know that I've worked as a chaplain
with both federal and local law enforcement,
including Napa PD, ever since I was ordained.//

That work has taken me to grim crime scenes
such as Oklahoma City after the terrorist bombing
in 1995 & Ground Zero in NYC after 9/11.//

But I'd never before worked at the "Mecca"
for American law enforcement training & education,
which is what Quantico truly is.//

Quantico is a very unique place: part college campus,
part crime lab, part fortress.//

There are dorms, classrooms, a cafeteria

and even a pub;

but there are also shooting ranges, obstacle courses,

a tactical race track, a hostage rescue facility,

and a mock town built by Hollywood set designers.//

My role as the only chaplain at the FBI Academy—

we rotate every two weeks or so—

was to support, teach, & counsel

hundreds of cadets, special agents, analysts,

and police officers from around the U.S.

and from other foreign countries

while they were undergoing their training

in various programs there.//

I sat in on classes, took part in some of the training,

led Bible study, chatted over meals & at the gym,
and offered what many chaplains refer to
as a “ministry of presence” —
simply *being there* for those in need of our guidance
and help.//

It was a fascinating & rewarding experience,
and I learned a great deal about the work of the FBI.//

As a large federal agency, future FBI agents
can choose from a wide range of areas
in law enforcement: terrorism, organized crime,
counterintelligence, cyber,
white collar crime, civil rights, and a number of other

departments & fields.//

One area that I learned about was *public corruption*,

an important field in federal law enforcement

and one that intrigued me as a rabbi.//

As a key part of their job, FBI agents investigate

and sometimes build cases against

public & elected officials who may be guilty of crimes

that not only break the law,

but betray public *trust*—

a separate & equally grievous offense.//

Some of those crimes include embezzlement & fraud,

bribery & kickbacks, & political extortion.//

To me,

this focus highlights not only a law enforcement issue,
but a philosophical & *religious* issue,
and one that couldn't be more relevant for us
at this time of year,
Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the High Holy Days;
that issue is *integrity*./

Now biblical Judaism, like American justice agencies,
was also very focused on laws,
on creating a social system that was grounded
in trust, truth, &, ultimately, *integrity*./

In the book of Leviticus,

the Torah explicitly commands:

“You shall not steal, and you shall not deal falsely,
and you shall not lie to one another.” (19:11)

Each of these laws involves a betrayal of honesty
and trust,

the breaking of a social contract

that allows people to live & work together

in peace & harmony.//

Such misbehavior & misrepresentation,

whether in business or in daily speech,

erodes the foundations of a just, well-functioning

society, which was a goal of early Judaism.//

Another biblical law from the book of Numbers,
related to the concept of vows,
conveys a similar idea:

“Do not break your word,
you shall do according to all that which proceeds
from your mouth.” (30:3)

Being an honest person,
being true & reliable to those we interact with,
is of paramount importance.//

If we don't honor our commitments,

If we are not trustworthy,

how is society supposed to function in a healthy,
dependable way?//

That would be a recipe for depravity and chaos.//

While Judaism clearly recognizes human frailties
and the need for release from unrealistic vows
(which we express, famously, on Kol Nidre),
following through on our obligations
is a pillar of living an honorable life,
and of building & maintaining an ethical world.//

Post-biblical Judaism was focused less on laws,
and more on *values*,
on helping to bring our individual actions
and our personal characters

into alignment with ethics & rectitude.//

You can't force someone to be honorable;

and, after all, can you really *legislate* integrity?//

But what exactly *is* integrity,

and how do we know if a person possesses it?//

Like many big ideas, it's complex & multi-faceted;

many Jewish thinkers associate integrity

with honesty & moral uprightness,

with a person who both speaks & acts

in reliably ethical ways.//

According to Maimonides,

who wrote in the 12th century,

a person should not be "one thing in the mouth

and another in the heart.”//

He teaches that a person’s inside

should match their outside,

and he warns against using deceit, flattery

or manipulation to get what we want;

integrity is a value that prevents those offenses.//

Another medieval thinker, Yechiel ben Yekutiel,

writes that a person with integrity

is one who does not lie or cheat,

“whose mouth and heart are equal.”//

Like Maimonides, he links integrity with ethics

and argues that it represents the synthesis

of both outer action & inner intention.//

The person among us whose “word is gold”

(in private and in business matters)

is someone who speaks the truth

and does what he or she promises—

and the reward will be great.//

“Such a person,” Yechiel claims,

“will live in calm and security like wine as it ages.”//

Judaism teaches us that we should aim for integrity

not only in ourselves,

but also in our public leaders.//

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the late chief rabbi of the UK,

argues that, in addition to honesty & ethics,
transparency must be a key feature of leadership.//

He highlights the actions of Moses who,
in the book of Exodus, gives a meticulous & open
public accounting of all the donations
that are collected for the construction of the *Mishkan*,
the Tabernacle that the Israelites carry with them
while they journey through Sinai:

“These are the amounts of the materials
used for the Tabernacle,
the Tabernacle of the Testimony,
which were recorded at Moses’s command
by the Levites under the direction

of Itamar son of Aaron, the priest.” (38:21)

According to Sacks, Moses issued a detailed record

to avoid coming under suspicion

that he had personally appropriated

any of the donated valuables or money.//

It’s worth noting that the accounting was made

not by Moses himself, but by the Levites

“under the direction of Itamar,” —

in other words, by independent auditors.//

The rabbis emphasize elsewhere

that people in positions of public trust

must be absolutely transparent in order to avoid

any hint of corruption.//

Sacks writes:

“Trust is of the essence in public life. A nation that suspects its leaders of corruption cannot function effectively as a free, just, and open society. It is the mark of a good society that public leadership is seen as a form of service rather than a means to power, which is all too easily abused. Tanach is a sustained tutorial in the importance of high standards in public life. The prophets were the world’s first social critics, mandated by God to speak truth to power and to challenge corrupt leaders. Elijah’s challenge to King Ahab, and the protests of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah against the unethical practices of their day, are classic texts in this tradition, establishing for all time the ideals of equity, justice, honesty and integrity.”

For a society to thrive & to be truly free & open,
it must be built on moral foundations,
and those foundations must be unshakeable.//
Moses’s personal example,

in giving a transparent accounting of the funds
that had been solicited
for the first collective project of the Jewish people,
set a vital precedent for all time.//

Yet, as we know, not all people,
including public officials & political leaders,
will follow the path of integrity.//

Like modern-day regulators, independent counsels,
and even FBI agents,
ancient Judaism had its own enforcement division.//

The Talmud tells us how, in order to apply integrity
in a concrete, practical way,
the Jewish community established a system

of market inspectors or overseers

(*agardamin* in Aramaic)

to enforce honest weights & measures so as to
protect consumers from deceitful business practices.//

We know from the news that the quality of integrity
is woefully lacking in many of our political
& business leaders today.//

Deceitfulness, self-dealing, corruption,
abuse of power, & nepotism are widespread
and pervasive—

in the U.S., Israel, and in nations around the world.//

In response—as the Jewish tradition shows us how—

we need to *strengthen*, not weaken or eliminate,
independent oversight & regulatory agencies.//

We *need* watchdogs & guardrails to protect us,
entities & laws designed for the public good
and meant to maintain a free & fair society.//

Trust is everything; it is our anchor & our North Star.//

The question is, does integrity *matter* any more?//

As most of us know,
the midterm elections are coming up in November,
and we should all be asking ourselves:
what kind of people do we want to govern us,
to lead us as a society into the future?//

Do we want to elect men & women who are honest,
morally upright, & transparent?//

Or does character no longer matter—
are we content to be led by those who care nothing
about ethics & truthfulness,
whose only real motivation is self-interest & power?//

And tonight, on Rosh Hashanah,
we should also be asking *ourselves* this question:

What kind of people do *we* want to be,
as Jews & as Americans?//

Do we take moral & religious values seriously,
or do we just pay lip service to them twice a year

during the High Holy Days?//

This gets to the heart of what it means to be a Jew.//

Fighting antisemitism is crucially important;

having a connection with the State of Israel

can be deeply meaningful;

but neither is enough to ground us, guide us,

or inspire us as a holy people,

a covenanted community whose values & traditions

have sustained us for 6,000 years.//

As we begin these Days of Awe together this year,

may our faith & its teachings

direct our steps, lift our hearts, elevate our souls,

bring us together, & help us to change the world.//