



Sample Sermons Introducing *Mishkan HaNefesh*

Mishkan HaNefesh

Sermon for Beth-El, Fort Worth
Rabbi Ralph Mecklenburger
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Mishkan HaNefesh, “the dwelling place of the soul,” is the title of our new *machzor*, this two-volume prayer book for the holy days, two volumes because you will soon learn that the Yom Kippur volume is more than twice the size of the Rosh Hashanah book. One volume would simply have been too heavy for a lot of people to use. I hasten to assure you, however, that in any given year’s worship services we will skip more than we read—as we do with our Shabbat prayer book, after which this one was patterned, *Mishkan T’fillah*. Most often you will find the traditional text on the right side of each two-page spread, followed by a faithful translation, and faced on the left side by poems, prayers and meditations interpreting the theme, or sometimes radically challenging, the traditional text. This is a *machzor* designed to challenge the worshiper. It embraces multiple ways of understanding God and Judaism, and is truly, in that respect, even more than *Mishkan T’fillah*, a liberal prayer book.

I confess I was not convinced we needed a new *machzor*. I liked the old one. But once I had it in hand, and could read the wealth of materials it offers for our inspiration, I immediately loved it. There are some wonderful passages in here—more than we have time for, and some, which Rabbi Ottenstein or I, or both, did not like, you may or may not ever hear. But you, or another rabbi, may like them! The reason for having more readings than one could possibly use in any given service (you’d still be here the day after tomorrow!) is to meet the needs of traditionalists, radicals and those in between. There are even alternative Torah and Haftarah readings. We are going to be traditionalists in the morning and read about the binding of Isaac, but on Yom Kippur we shall try a non-traditional *parashah*, which will give both preacher and congregation a chance to ponder something different. It did occur to me, though, that the boxes in which these volumes arrived should have been emblazoned with the phrase generations of parents have come to dread: “Some assembly required.” Rabbi Ottenstein and I spent literally hours going through the various services selecting what to read and what to skip.

We hope the duration of services will not be much more or less than usual. But the first time through—forgive us, if necessary, please!—it is very hard to figure. More significant than mere length, however, if you love or hate a given passage, feel free to send us an email; we will keep notes for next year.

Having said all that, I hasten to add that the service is not the book. Our private reactions to the book are part of our worship experience, of course. But those reactions are also shaped in significant measure by the music, and the architecture, the sermon, and the people with whom you are sitting, as



well as your own faith and openness to religious experience. The service is about reaching out to God, and on the Holy Days in particular about pondering the quality of our lives, especially individually but also collectively, and resolving to do and to be better.

What a magnificent, intricate and breath-taking universe you and I were born into! Just within each of us are literally billions of cells, and when we look out to the heavens beyond there are literally billions of stars in a space billions of light-years across. Collectively, much less individually, you and I are but a pinprick of sentient life in a vast sea of being. And scarcely any of this is of our making. We know, especially at this season of atonement for sin, that we are not gods. We have inherited—lucked into!—existence. Yet our biblical forebears had the audacity to teach us that for all of God’s and the universe’s grandeur, and our tininess, we somehow matter—what we think, what we dream, above all what we do.

The words in the book are just words, just ink and paper, unless we are prepared to hear them, and find them expressed in such a way as to touch something within us. One worshiper (me) may respond most to evocations of human potential. Another (perhaps you, or someone with a more traditional background) may like all the royal court imagery of God as King which we inherit from an era of kings and emperors. So the book gives us options, knowing (as we all do) that God is no more literally a king than literally an ever-flowing stream, a rock, or the software of the universe, gives us a variety of ideas to ponder. We—and the machzor—reach for metaphors to somehow make vivid what we know we cannot fully understand.

The trick (if I may call it that), is to realize that public worship is not systematic theology to be argued with, but poetry and drama. We enact a service! Let yourself go! —As you would if you were listening to Hamlet, or Beethoven. Centuries, yea millenia, of *kavanah*—the sincerity and inner intention of poets, prophets and rabbis, have been organized, shaped, translated, to move your heart, to touch your spirit. This is not really a new book, just a new way, for a new generation, of organizing traditional ideas and blending them with some newer ones, with the intent of touching our hearts, moving us emotionally as well as rationally. This rabbi—and most others—can talk biblical interpretation or theological abstraction with you ‘til the proverbial cows come home. But that is for the classroom, not the sanctuary. Here the point is to evoke our spirituality. Here the music matters as much as the words. The sense of community, of belonging, of joining our souls to an unbroken chain of tradition back at least to Moses, even to Abraham and Sarah, adds, too. We—not just you and me as individuals, we together as a community—are Israel, a people trying to better ourselves, and our world, for 4000 years!

Is God listening to your prayer? Is God sensing our yearning for transcendence? Fancy word, “transcendence”: let’s say getting beyond routine daily concerns to our yearning for peace, and love, for belonging, for direction, for meaning and holiness in our amazing but sometimes frustrating, and usually unpredictable, lives. It is Holy Day season, and we each know, when we are honest with ourselves, that we have disappointed loved ones, hurt people who did not deserve it, failed to praise the Holy One lurking within as well as beyond each of our lives and all humankind’s world. The very vision, the idea,



of God challenges us to be more worthy of the many blessings we have. So maybe God is literally “hearing” or maybe God is more like a magnet pulling at us, challenging us to sing hosannas and to be better. That is what is at stake as we inaugurate a new *machzor*. Not whether the book is perfect, for no book is, or whether God “hears,” for that will ever remain a mystery, but whether the worship experience which the book helps to shape, but which has to come down to our subjective reaction, works for us. Can my and your spirituality be evoked?

I would conclude tonight with an old story. It is a mitzvah in Judaism always to tell a story or insight *b’shem omro*, in the name of the one you heard it from, who was the preacher at an interfaith service I—and our quartet (they sang beautifully!)—attended early this past summer, Dr. Brent Beasley of Broadway Baptist Church told it—but he told me later that it was not original to him, but “just an old story.” He was not, of course, applying it to a new *machzor*, but some truths are blessedly universal.

Johnny was maybe 12 or 13 years old in a small town in rural America years ago. He heard one day that the circus was coming to town. He had never been to a circus, but he knew it was wonderful—animals and acrobats and clowns, a pageant! He just had to go, he told his father. Now the family did not have much money, but the father saw how much it meant to the boy, and so he told him that if he’d be good, and finish up his chores first, on the day that the circus came he would give him the money to go.

The day Johnny had been dreaming of finally arrived. He did his chores, and reminded his father of his promise. The father pulled out a dollar bill (enough in those days, for a ticket to a small town circus), and told Johnny to be careful and to have a good time. As Johnny came into the center of town he heard a band playing, and crowds of people had gathered. He worked his way through the crowd to the front and here came the circus parade! Trailers with a tiger and a bear. Jugglers. One wonder after another! And at the end of the parade was a clown—huge feet, painted face, and a red bubble of a nose. Before the clown passed Johnny stepped forward, took the dollar from his pocket, and gave it to the clown. Then Johnny went home, satisfied, thrilled by his experience of the circus!

There are worse things than to find a part of something so satisfying that you mistake it for the whole show. But when the goal is somehow sensing God’s presence in life, it would be more than merely poignant, it would be sad, to mistake the parade, the advertisement, for the show. “O taste and see that the Lord is good!” says the Psalm—to which I add: and don’t mistake the appetizer for the feast. The new *machzor*, with its classic prayers and modern meditations, the uplifting music from our cantor and musicians, the Torah readings, the place, the crowd and sense of community, rabbis’ words: all are designed to point beyond themselves, to capture our spirits—to remind us, as we ponder our lives, that there is more to existence than we normally take time to notice.



Let us open our hearts and minds to the glory and the challenge of the divine. A new book, God willing, may help. May it help us express our souls, and improve our lives, not only tonight, but again tomorrow, and on Yom Kippur, and for many years to come. But the book—love it or hate it—is just the parade that beckons us to God, Torah and community. May our services be a circus of self-transcendence and spirituality to attend, God willing, year after year!

Amen