



מִשְׁכַּן הַנֶּפֶשׁ  
MISHKAN HANEFESH  
*Machzor for the Days of Awe*

**Sample Sermons Introducing *Mishkan HaNefesh***  
**Change is Hard, Remaining Static Should Be Harder**  
**Rabbi Scott Sperling**  
**Erev Rosh HaShana 5776**

On the very first day of our first Human Relations seminar, the psychiatric resident who ran the seminar, looked out over the eager second-year rabbinic students and said, “The most important thing that I have to teach you is that human beings naturally resist change.” Nothing that I’ve experienced in the past 43 years would lead me to disagree with these wise words.

And yet, what should bring us back to the synagogue for each New Year is the sincere and ever-present hope that in fact, though change is difficult, we can alter the course of our lives.

Clearly, we understand that change is hard not simply for individuals but even more so for any institution that brings together so many people of such disparate expectations, experiences and beliefs. Especially for our High Holy Days, continuity and tradition seem to be woven into the very fabric of these 10 Days of Awe. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that even among Reform Jews our new High Holy Day *machzor*-prayerbook is only the third *machzor* that our movement has produced in the past 100 years. I hope – for this High Holy Day season and for many, many more -



that it will prove to be a deeply spiritual and deeply meaningful companion to this time of change.

For the next few minutes, I am going to try and outline some of these changes and how, during this

first and only High Holy Day season that I will be on this bima leading our services from this new *machzor*, I will try and help us find our way onto this exciting new path.

Some thoughts about our new *machzor*. Along with my own observations and research, I have been particularly influenced by two of my colleagues, Rabbis Edwin Goldberg and Elaine Zecher, both of whom were intimately involved with creating the *Mishkan HaNefesh*. Rabbi Goldberg was one of the editors and Rabbi Zecher was part of the editorial advisory team. Over the course of almost 5 years, I sat in many seminars at rabbinic conferences and participated in several webinars and conference calls, studying with and listening to Rabbis Goldberg and Zecher as they shared the process of creating this new *machzor*.

In one of his early presentations about the new *machzor*, Rabbi Goldberg used the analogy to zero-based budgeting. He described it thusly, “Zero-based budgeting requires the budget request be justified in complete detail by each division manager starting from the zero-base. The zero-base is indifferent to whether the total budget is increasing or decreasing.” From there, Rabbi Goldberg describes the process of creating *Mishkan Hanefesh* as ‘zero-based *machzor* building’. It is clear that



previous versions of Reform *machzorim* had, as the saying goes, a voice, not a veto. Everything was up for review, change or reinvention.

What resulted was a seemingly simple goal – a *machzor* that “...inspires Reform Jews to participate in the multifaceted experience of the *Yamim Nora'im* – from feelings of awe to moments of solace, from the solitude of contemplation to the solidarity of song and worship...” and in turn, a *machzor* that has the most potential to reach, as Rabbi Goldberg, put it, an “Ultimate goal: transformation of person (genuine *teshuva*).” Rabbi Goldberg also asks the important question, “How does the worship experience help that happen?” And finally he asks, “How does the *machzor* fit in to that plan?” It is my belief that *Mishkan HaNefesh* fits beautifully into that plan because it is carefully and lovingly designed to maximize the useability, spiritual possibilities and liturgical options for our Reform synagogues and the people who come to them during these and future High Holyday seasons.

The second avenue that I wish to pursue is the inherent tension in Jewish prayer as so eloquently expressed by Rabbi Zecher, “... in Judaism, prayer contains two parts, the *keva*, the structure handed down, and the *kavannah*, the creative intention we bring to the experience.” In a recent newspaper article about *Mishkan HaNefesh*, Rabbi Zecher “pointed out that, although the High Holidays are a time when the community gathers, this community is the collective of the personal intention of the one who walks through the door. We want that individual to ask: ‘Am I going to make these Days of



Awe meaningful and have an impact on me? What is the sacred work that I'm going to engage in as a member of this community?"

The physical, spiritual and literary structure of *Mishkan HaNefesh* reflects the 'zero machzor building' approach as described by Rabbi Goldberg. As you've already seen, *Mishkan HaNefesh* reflects the physical structure of *Mishkan T'filah* with facing pages, traditional and Hebrew texts on the right and alternatives readings and interpretations on the left. I was very much taken with a comment made by another rabbi who wrote, "Some of the material speaks to me and some does not. Being able to scan the two pages is a plus, because while we're here for a common experience, if someone is drawn to a different piece than the one we're reading, it encourages the introspective nature of the holiday."

We are off on a grand adventure for this High Holydays and for many more to come. It is my hope that each year, the congregation will be challenged to bring incremental, sustainable change to the worship services as different readings, new music and new service orders and structures will be tried. Not surprisingly, I hope, Angela and I have opted for some new readings, using the new order of shofar service for our morning services tomorrow and Tuesday and a few new musical pieces. We want to introduce *Mishkan HaNefesh* to you as a fully realized prayer book and not simply as a one-off, photocopied pamphlet. Yet, we don't want to overwhelm you OR us with change. I hope that we can



successfully follow that middle path for this year's High Holyday services...and in doing so, successfully walk the tightrope, that fine line between a static status quo and a dizzying, disorienting

level of change that buries the best of familiar traditions with an avalanche of innovation. I hope that during and after these High Holydays, you'll let me know if we've managed to achieve that goal.

I want to conclude my comments tonight with a brief moment of reflection. 43 years ago tonight, I stepped onto the bima of Temple Beth Israel of Aberdeen, Washington as another in their long line of student rabbis. I had returned only two months before from my first year of rabbinic studies in Jerusalem...I was 22 years old and to be truthful, I was filled with anxieties about this first effort to lead a congregation in High Holy Day worship. Looking now, it is hard for me to grasp how much has happened in those years, what I've learned, what I wish now that I had known then. Throughout the remainder of these High Holy Days, I look forward to sharing some of those lessons with you. Here is one of them...after that first Erev Rosh HaShana service, I was speaking with one of the 10 remaining temple families whose adult children had returned to Aberdeen for the High Holidays. "Yes," they told me, "it was a long way to drive to get back to Aberdeen for services." But, as they explained, this is where their children grew up, where they learned about what it means to be Jewish and where their family and friends and community were all located...this was their spiritual home



and they were not prepared to give that up – it was simply too important. Truly, the good doctor that taught our Human Relations Seminar was exactly right, human beings do naturally resist change. But that resistance to change can sometimes be for the good as we hold tight to deeply meaningful and

important customs, ideas and experiences or it can be a way to dig in one's heels and refuse to see possibilities for growth.

May it be that over these coming ten days, we can explore our past, analyze our present and with full hearts, look to the future with the same full measure of hope that has brought the generations of our people back to the synagogue so that the ringing voice of the shofar calls to our higher selves once again, offering to us our people's vision of brighter and better tomorrow.

*Shana Tova!*