

RABBI CONN'S SERMON  
ROSH HASHANAH 5770 DAY 2

Yesterday I spoke about Rosh Hashannah as Hayom harat olam—the birthday of the world, a day pregnant with possibilities. I talked about the new beginning we share as rabbi and congregation and the new berit, the covenant that we have entered into. But I only gave you half the story.

Here's the other half. There are also times when the word "hara" means to be born. And so, we understand the words "hayom harat olam" that we recite after hearing the shofar in the Musaf service, as "Today the world is born".

Why then, the rabbis ask, do we say "Today, the world is born". Why do we use the present tense? We all know that God created the world a long time ago—not just 5770 years ago, as the traditional count would have it, but millions of years ago. What sense does it make to talk about the world as if it were being created today?

According to some commentators, the answer is that each year on Rosh HaShannah, God renews creation in its entirety. In fact, not only does God renew creation every year, but according to the Siddur, God renews creation each day.

הַמְחַדֵּשׁ בְּטוֹבוֹ בְּכֹל יוֹם תְּמִיד מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרָאשִׁית

In God's goodness, God renews creation every day, continually. Therefore, on Rosh HaShannah, God actually renews creation, we hope, for the year to come. And in the same way, we seek to renew ourselves for the year to come through teshuvah, repentance and through tefilah, prayer and through tzedaka, acts of giving to others. Our goal of course, is that God will renew our lease on life. But also that we will be renewed in the best sense of the word—becoming better people, closer to the people God gave us the ability to be, free of the bad habits and corrosive vices that have lead us far away from our true selves.

In the same way, this year we may have a new rabbi and some new members, but we are not a new congregation. Nor should we want to be. As a congregation, we too should be seeking to renew ourselves. We want to renew our spirit, renew our energy, renew our commitment to each other and the

community, to Conservative Judaism and Torah. We want to focus our energies on being the best congregation and community we can be in the here and now.

So what do we have to do to renew ourselves as a congregation? The first step is to put the past in perspective. And that means, neither dwelling too much on the past nor ignoring it entirely. In the process of cheshbon hanefesh, taking stock, which we engage in during the High Holiday season, we review the events of the past year. Our goal is to see where we have done well and where we have missed the mark, and what we can do to set things right. We use the past to learn valuable lessons, to learn about ourselves and to help us build a bridge to a better future.

PJC has an illustrious past. We are now entering our 56th year. Some of our member family now span three generations. Our congregation grew very quickly through the first forty or so years, to nearly double the size it is today. Our religious school had 350 students at its height. Services on the High Holidays were so crowded we spilled over to two satellite locations. Since I arrived at PJC, many people have fondly shared their memories of PJC at its height. It has been helpful for me to hear these stories, to understand the experience of our longtime PJC members. We should be proud of our past, but we need to be careful. We need to be careful not to set our sights on being again the congregation we once were. No new rabbi, new program or new marketing can bring us back to those days. We live in a different world. Our demographics are different, the Jewish community is different, people's priorities and commitments are different. When we compare our congregation to what once was, we run the risk of diminishing and disheartening ourselves. That's not fair, nor is it helpful. This is a new era in the history of PJC. We continue to build on the foundation built for us over the last fifty six years. We benefit from the hard work and generosity of those who came before us and owe much of the best of who we are today to our success in the past. The best tribute to our founders is not to try to re-create what we once had, but to renew ourselves for the present with the same spirit and generosity that motivated our founders.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is a tendency with new beginning to want to forget the past and that's dangerous also. I am only the fifth rabbi in the history of PJC, yet, I realize that I walk a trail blazed by my four predecessors. I know that in different ways, their presence is still very much felt in our synagogue. I am very moved today to see Bette Goldberg, the widow of our Rabbi Emeritus Julius Goldberg, of blessed memory, sitting with her family in the same row as my wife Illyse. I recognize that I benefit every day from the work of Rabbi Goldberg and my other predecessors in building and guiding our congregation. I know that our congregation also benefits every day as well. At the same time, I appreciate just how willing the members of the search committee, and so many other leaders and members of our congregation, to reflect on what they have learned about the congregation's needs, style

and personality from PJC's experience with each of these rabbis. I hope that continues to take the results of all this reflection and learn how to become even better partners in this brit, this covenantal relationship between rabbi and congregation that I spoke about yesterday. Again, I don't have any illusions that I am establishing a new rabbinate here at PJC. But I am hoping that with your help, guided by our past experience, I can renew the office of the rabbi and play an important role in shaping a bright future for PJC.

In order to bring about this bright future, though, we have to contend with the realities of the present. Times are tough for everyone these days, including all of us in this room and there is no telling if or when our country will return to real prosperity. As a synagogue, that means that, like everyone else, we are trying to do more with less and at the same time, our Jewish community is changing. Lots of people still identify themselves as Conservative Jews, but not as many as there used to be. Even those that think of themselves as Conservative don't affiliate with synagogues the way they once did. The Jewish family itself has changed. There are more singles, more mixed-marriages, same-sex couples, empty nesters and seniors than ever and the conservative synagogue has never done a particularly good job serving any of these constituencies. There are also more people seeking a more substantial engagement with Jewish life and Jewish tradition in our communities. At the same time, there are more Jews who have little or no Jewish education. People come to us now looking not just for a religious education for their children, religious services and the opportunity to socialize with other Jews, they also come to us looking for spirituality, for a caring community and for hands-on opportunities to help others. As our resources are diminishing, we are called upon to reach an ever wider spectrum of people.

So how do we renew ourselves to become the congregation we can be and need to be today and in the future? As I said yesterday, the answer to this question will ultimately come from the work we do together as rabbi, staff and congregation. I am looking forward to beginning this work with you in earnest after the holidays. In the meantime, though, I want to share a few thoughts based on my experience as a rabbi these past few years and my nearly seven weeks at PJC.

First of all, we are blessed to have a corps of knowledgeable, Jewishly committed people here at PJC. We hold services twice a day, every day. We have an excellent group of Torah readers and minyan leaders. For me, this is paradise, because as a knowledgeable and committed Jew, my needs are getting met and I have lots of people around me who feel the same way. At the same time, we know that there are lots of other people that find a traditional service to be inaccessible and "off-putting". There is a reason we have a Family Friendly Friday night service every month that draws lots of people. There is a

reason that the Family Service in the Silver Room today has to run in two shifts and there's a reason that just a few years ago, PJC High Holiday services were dramatically shortened. The reality is that when it comes to services, one size no longer fits all and in our very individualistic, consumer oriented culture, people are looking for experiences designed to suit their specific needs. They want to participate, be inspired, and be moved by services they attend.

If we want to reach more people in the future, and help more people access the rich experiences of prayer and observance our tradition offers, we are going to have to expand our offerings even more. We are going to have to be okay with different kinds of services where the rules about what prayers we say and how we say them may be very different and at the same time, we are going to have to jealousy guard the integrity of our more traditional services, so that people who are growing in their Jewish commitments don't feel the need to head down the street in search of authenticity.

Second, we need to continue to cultivate a warm welcoming approach to newcomers and a caring and inclusive attitude toward everyone. One of the first things that impressed me during my visits to PJC this year was the warm reception that my family and I received from all of you. The warmth of our congregation was one of the main reasons we chose to come to PJC. I have heard the same thing from many other people who have visited our synagogue. Let's keep it up. Let PJC be a synagogue where everyone who enters our building for the first time is greeted—and welcomed—over and over again. Let us welcome everyone—no matter what their personal status might be, Jew and non-Jew and the not-yet-Jewish. It's what, above all, people are looking for in a synagogue. It's who we are and it's a mitzvah—hachnassat orchim, welcoming guests.

Hopefully, some of our welcomed guests turn into members of our community. As members of our community, we all have the same basic need: to feel cared for and valued. We especially need this level of caring from our synagogues today because our families are often spread out all over the metropolitan area, the country and even the world. For some of our members, we are a primary support system. When there is a crisis in the family, an illness, a death, a job loss, they need our support. They need us to make hospital visits, to pay shiva calls, to offer to pick up kids or provide meals. We do some of these things already, we could do even more. It is especially important that at times of crisis we reach out to those who are on the margins of our congregation. Sometimes, the most important mitzvah is the one we perform for someone we don't know or don't know well. I strongly believe that there is nothing that builds community more effectively than caring—and not just community, but sacred community. The most vibrant, dynamic synagogues of the future will not be the ones with the most impressive

facilities or the widest array of programs. The most vibrant, dynamic congregations will be those that take the best care of their members.

I could spend another two hours sharing with you my ideas, hopes and dreams for our future. But I know you are getting hungry for lunch. So let me introduce just one more concept. I believe that our future depends on us becoming a congregation of learners. This catch phrase comes from the noted Jewish educator Isa Aron. I take from her work two main points; first, that each of us should be engaged in Jewish learning throughout our lives, at whatever level we are at. Learning is vital to our growth and engagement as Jews. I hope to bring more learning opportunities to everything we do here at PJC—and do so in a creative and stimulating way. Specifically, I would like to see us engage our teenagers in some serious Jewish learning and expand our offerings for adults. Even more important, becoming a congregation of learners means becoming people who relish the opportunity to learn from our experience. To meet the changing demands of the future, we will need to be even bolder about trying new programs and new approaches. Rather than worrying about doing something that has never been done, we will instead embrace the opportunity to learn from our experience. We will be less beholden to what has always worked in the past, and more willing to be innovative. Congregations in the future will succeed, because they are willing to learn from the process of trial and error, to risk near term failure in the pursuit of long term success. I hope we at PJC will put ourselves on the forefront of both kinds of learning.

The High Holidays attest to our firm belief as Jews that each one of us is capable, with God's help, of renewing ourselves through repentance, prayer and act of generosity. So too, we as a congregation are capable of renewing our synagogue and embracing the challenges of a new era. We are an amazingly strong synagogue with dedicated and caring members committed to our community and to each other. We have a rich past to build on and to learn from. We have a realistic view of the present and all its challenges. We have an amazing opportunity to shape our future in this very vibrant Jewish community. Let us move forward together—united by our love for each other, for God, the Torah and the Jewish people. We may not know yet how we will chart our course, but together we will find the way