

5770 ROSH HASHANAH DAY 1

Want to acknowledge that the idea for this sermon came from colleague and friend, Rabbi Arthur Lavinsky.

Once asked to write a full story in six words, legend has it that novelist Ernest Hemingway responded: "For Sale: baby shoes, never worn."

There is a modern, online magazine named [Smith](#). *The editors* recently asked readers to write the story of their own lives in a single sentence. The result was *Not Quite What I Was Planning*, a collection of six-word memoirs by famous and not-so-famous writers, artists and musicians. Their stories are sometimes sad, often funny — and always concise.

The book has some well-known names — writer Dave Eggers (*Fifteen years since last professional haircut*), singer Aimee Mann (*Couldn't cope so I wrote songs*), to comedian Stephen Colbert (*Well, I thought it was funny*).

The collection has plenty of six-word insights from everyday folks as well... try to imagine..... If you had to.... how would you capture your real-life stories in six words — no more, no less.

AND NOW..... (Using my fingers to count)

This – is – a – six –word – sermon!

More accurately, however, this is a sermon about six words, or at least USING six words to convey worthwhile messages.

A woman once called the newspaper to put it an obituary announcing that her husband had died. The newspaper representative says, you have to pay by the word. She answers, "Okay," "write "Max Schwartz

died." The rep responds, "There is a six word minimum." She replies, "Okay, write "Max Schwartz died. Cadillac for sale.""

This is not a new phenomenon.....Economy of language is something towards which people have aspired for centuries. With words, less IS sometimes more! One sage in the Ethics of the Fathers taught, "Emor Me'at Ve'aseh Harbey, say little and do much." I remember a homiletics professor at the Seminary, whose goal was to make public speakers of us advising "Preaching is just like being in the petroleum industry – If you haven't struck oil in ten minutes, stop boring". Mind you, I think he was talking about Shabbat preaching. It takes longer to bore a congregation effectively on the High Holy Days.

But still, what is this whole thing about "six words"? What is this fascination with six words? Think of that Ernest Hemingway story I mentioned a few minutes ago.... "For Sale: Baby shoes, never worn." In six words, he stirs the imagination. The reader of this mini-story is immediately drawn to the image of tiny, new baby shoes. The reader then may ask "Why were the shoes never worn? Was there a tragedy?"

And who can forget the six words that helped change the political landscape of the last part of the twentieth century..... President Ronald Reagan standing in Berlin and declaring six immortal words ***"Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"***

I had never known about this genre of six word literature until this year when Golf Magazine ran a contest for amateur golfers, one of

whom would get to play at the U.S. Open at the Bethpage Black Golf Course on Long Island. Do all you golfers out there know about this? The winner would be the contestant who wrote the most compelling six word essay. The winner was a police lieutenant from Scottsdale, AZ, who was chosen from among almost 74,000 contestants. His winning six word pitch? **“I’m a cop. I’ll shoot low.”**

So today, in this “Six Word Sermon”, I’d like to share a few six word teachings that might do us some good during these Days of Awe and beyond. Every rabbi tries to impress his or her congregation with rabbinic wisdom, mastery of sources, and a rapier wit when the crowds are larger than at any time of the year. But sometimes obscure sources, fancy vocabulary, and run-on paragraphs can dull the message, so I’m going to follow the “Six Word Route”. I’m going to share with you a few Jewish teachings that have been distilled to the six fingers that we have on each hand. OK. Not six.....

You’ll need to forgive me pause - (hey, it’s the season) because I know some of you want to hear your rabbi address the big Jewish issues of the day: Maybe, how we should respond to Healthcare Reform; how the relationship is going between our new President and the State of Israel, and so forth. Maybe I’ll touch on some of those topics before the end of Yom Kippur, but today I want to focus my six word lessons on our relationship to God. We are, after all here, in Beth Hillel Synagogue, and the synagogue is God’s House, and I don’t think that we should ignore God, or how we need to relate to our Creator.

As Rabbi David Wolpe writes, According to our tradition, God is like light. I cannot see light, but I can see things because there is light. I cannot see God, but God is the reason that I can see you. God stands behind our world.”

There are many different conceptions of what God is....philosophy/ kabbalah/ Midrash/ theology – and they all seek to answer the question. And since my Seminary days, the attempt to know God has been the essence of my religious existence. So let us try a little to know God together this morning.

The very first six word phrase is one that any young Hebrew School student should know. Certainly every adult Jew should be familiar with it. If I say the first two words, you can finish the sentence: Shema Yisrael..... (together) Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad. Six words.

In the English translation, there are more than six words, but we usually translate it as “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” This is a pledge of faith to one true God. You, Israel, We, the Jewish People, are here today because of your allegiance to the Almighty. But the challenge today, and every day of the year, is to make that allegiance to God evident, consistent, and habitual.

I admit, most of what we usually focus on during these days of repentance is the sins which we have committed against other human beings, and most likely against the people we love the most because we have the most frequent contact with them. By and large, as

Conservative Jews, as Jews of a liberal, non-fundamentalist stream of Judaism, we tend to focus on Mitzvot Bein Adam L'Havero, Commandments as they relate to other people - ***Tzedaka, compassion, fighting for the dignity and rights of all people, showing respect to parents, and the elderly, and many other such Mitzvot, but we often forget that we also have obligations to God.*** The rhythms of our live, our work or play schedule, what we choose to eat and when we choose to eat it, how often we commune with God through prayer – **all of those things are up to us.** Does the language of God or even the use of the NAME OF GOD ever pass our lips, except after we stub our toe? Is our belief in God something that we focus on just a few days a year in our High Holy Day pews, or something that we grapple with every day of the year? And it's okay to grapple. Nobody expects perfect faith. But what we need in order to pass our faith to the next generation is REGULAR engagement with the Almighty.

Sure, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur represent fine “Quality Time” with God. But what every Jew also needs is “Quantity Time” with God. It may be found in Shul, or in regular study, or even in acts of Gemilut Chassadim, acts of loving kindness to others. But it demands consistency and reliability.

If we have a genuine allegiance to God, if Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai Echad is more than a slogan, more than Nike's “Just do it”, AT&T's “Reach out and touch someone” or Kentucky Fried Chicken's “It's finger licking good” (and let me remind you, also

finger licking TREIF), then God beckons our attention and our spiritual presence even on days when we don't need a ticket to get into Shul, and even when we're not in Shul!

Just how do we do that? Let me suggest that the next six word formula that we consider is the building block of every Bracha, every Jewish Blessing. Let me start the first two words again, and then you join in with me: *“Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheynu Melech Haolam.”* Again the English stretches it out to “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe.” What do those words teach us? First we address God personally – ATTA – You, not some third person, far removed. But also – the Ruler of the whole Universe. And who made God King? Nobody. God earned it by creating this magnificent world, which we must love and preserve and cherish. And today, Rosh Hashanah is Harat Olam, the birthday of the world. At least we recognize it as such in our liturgy. When we wake up in the morning, those six words repeat themselves multiple times as we recite the early morning blessings – for having awakened, for being able to stand up, and get dressed, and to walk.....and all the other activities of daily life.

Before taking a bite of bread, consider saying those six words before concluding “Hamotzi Lechem Min Ha'aretz”. After a meal, make it a habit to say Birkat Hamazon, which starts with those six words and continue “Hazan et Ha'olam Kulo Btuvo” – who feeds the entire world out of His goodness. Those six words “Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech Haolam” form the beginning of the Beracha that we say when

we witness a rainbow. That blessing concludes: **zocher habrit vine'eman bevrito vikayam bima'amaro.** It thanks God as the one who faithfully recalls the covenant by keeping the divine promise and not destroying the world again. In a most beautiful way when we recite this Bracha it reminds us not only that we need to recall the many blessings of life, but that God makes it a point to remember us, and to consider us too. To know that God considers us, and loves us, makes the blessing that much more special and precious.

And that's why the blessing before the Shema begins "Ahava Rabbah Ahavtanu" – God loves us with GREAT LOVE. That's why He redeemed us from Egypt. That's why He gave us the Torah. That's why He made us His People. We need to reclaim and proclaim that love. We need to do that, at home and at Shul, on the street, at school and in the workplace – in word and in deed.

I know that I have gone well beyond a six-word limit with this sermon, but I promise that this will not rival my longest sermons (which I clocked at about 40 minutes but one of my congregants reported was 3 days, 2 hours, and 11 minutes), but I'd like to share with you a final thought that I read online in "Six word memoir" assigned to a public school class.

The author was a young girl named Andie Grace. She wrote: "Wasn't born a redhead. Fixed that!"

Mind you, I have no intentions of becoming one myself! What do you think.....? I think that the gray hair that's left allows me to age

gracefully and rabbinically. What I like about Annie, is that when she wrote “Wasn’t born a redhead. Fixed that!” it meant that if there was something about herself that she didn’t like, she could change it. That is probably the most profound lesson that we can learn on the High Holy Days. Not only that. We can put that lesson into practice starting today.

I don’t care how self confident you are or how sure you are of yourself. There’s got to be something in your life that needs some improvement. It may be as superficial as hair color, like it was for Annie Grace, or as internal as pride or greed. And I dare say that everyone in this room, myself included, can look at our Jewish lives, and our relationship with God, and we can and should improve upon it.

On this first day of Rosh Hashanah 5770, let’s renew our relationship with God. We’ve all heard the expression “Give the Devil his due”. Don’t you think that God deserves His due as well? Let’s bring God into our lives more often. Bring God into our day-to-day routine, wherever we find ourselves. And let’s bring ourselves to His house a little more often too, right here at Beth Hillel Synagogue. Remember the Rabbi Hillel for whom it is named, who teaches, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”

In addition to being the best people that we can be when it comes to those around us, let’s make sure that we’re right with God as well. We should marvel and delight in the love that God has for us – for the magnificent world in which we live, for the Torah which is our unique

heritage, and the Mitzvot that are our sacred charge and challenge. And we should bless God much as God blesses us, for every time we do so, we become God's partners, as well as God's lovers.

And to conclude with six final words of my own:

There's no better time than now.

Iris and I wish you all a Shana Tova U'metukah, a Happy, Healthy, and Sweet New Year.