

Rosh Hashanah 5779 Evening: Why Are We Here?
Temple Sinai, Washington, DC

Rabbi Hannah Goldstein: Why Are We Here?

Well, now we are ready to talk about why you really came here this evening:
Bruce Springsteen.

Bruce Springsteen is in the middle of a wildly popular run of his one man show on Broadway. It is tightly scripted, each performance nearly a mirror of the one before. But earlier this summer, he deviated from the script. He was moved to speak out by the images of children held in detention centers on the US/Mexico border.

He said that night, "I never believed that people come to my shows, or rock shows, to be told anything. But I do believe that they come to be reminded of things. To be reminded of who they are, at their most joyous, at their deepest, when life feels full." He continued, explaining that a rock show is, "a good place to get in touch with your heart and your spirit. To be amongst the crowd. And to be reminded of who we are and who we can be collectively."

He went on to remind the audience of the importance of action. Of acting together in the name of what is right.

I was struck by how closely his words parallel our goal for the High Holy Days. We come here to reconnect with ourselves. The soul searching of the season is less about learning something new but rather about uncovering who you want to be, who you believe you can be. These holy days are about being part of the crowd- singing along to the melodies that fill up our souls.

And that is all very nice, but it raises the question: If you can get all that from Springsteen then what are we doing here? Yes, our tickets are SLIGHTLY cheaper but for some services, they are almost as difficult to come by.

We no longer live under a sacred canopy presuming that our lives are prescribed by religious identity- nor do we live in an era of affiliation- when who we are as people is

determined by the groups of which we are members. So, why be Jewish? Why come here on the High Holy Days- when so much of what faith provides can be outsourced, found in small pieces, a crossfit class, a Phish show, a book club, or a Poker night. We can and *do* find pieces of meaning and community, scattered about the secular corners of our lives.

And yet, we celebrate the Jewish New Year here. In addition to all of our other sources of meaning, we continue to measure our lives in Jewish time.

At the end of Springsteen's remarks that night- he references the famous Martin Luther King quote- that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. And he went on to say, "I've...lived long enough to know that arc doesn't bend on its own. It needs all of us leaning on it, nudging it in the right direction, day after day. You've gotta keep, keep leaning."

Each of us- each of your rabbis- believes that our Judaism offers us something different than Springsteen or any other secular source of inspiration. Tonight my colleagues will share their thoughts on this topic as well. Personally, I believe we absolutely need to push that arc toward justice, and Judaism helps us to come together to do the leaning.

On March 24th- this past spring, buses lined up in front of Temple Sinai early in the morning, to bring us downtown to the March for our Lives. Before we went to the national march, our Temple Sinai group gathered in a hotel ballroom for a Shabbat morning service organized by the Union for Reform Judaism. We were led in prayer by Jewish teenagers from across the country. I will confess, I was worried that it would make for an overly long day, that people wouldn't want to wake up that early for a Shabbat service. But it turned out to be one of the most moving parts of a very moving day.

That service used the words and the music of Judaism to tell the story of why we were there. It used our texts and our liturgy to remind us of our obligation to end gun violence- not only on the day of the march- but in the weeks, months and years to come. It was a morning that reminded us of who we are, but it also reminded us of who

we can be, who we are when we come together. It was covenantal- not an isolated, singular experience but a reminder of the identity that binds us to this work and to each other.

Our Judaism situates us in an intergenerational story, that asks something of us, that guides us, that moves us to act. It gives us a collective narrative and a history- our texts remind us why we shall not stand idly by. In the Haftarah just yesterday, from the book of Isaiah, we read the words, "*I'ma'an tzion lo ech'esh'eh*- for the sake of Zion, I will not remain silent."

I don't dare denigrate The Boss- the experience of a concert can absolutely bring you to spiritual heights, and there is nothing like a deep bass bumping in your chest to remind you that you are alive. We must seek out the experiences that wake us up, and remind us of the gift of living. And our Judaism? Our Judaism asks that we consider what we do with this one precious life. Our Judaism demands that we use our lives not just to do well, but to do good. Our Judaism helps us find the moral minyan with whom we will act for justice. Our Judaism can hold us when we need to be held.

There is a great deal to be done, but we've got to keep moving forward together, never losing sight of the goal, moving ever closer to a better world, because, I agree with the words of The Boss, "I believe in a Promised Land."

Rabbi Adam Rosenwasser

Football Saturdays in Ann Arbor were a major part of my childhood. My family lived and breathed Michigan football, and so did I. One of my greatest memories was travelling to Pasadena, California with my parents, brother, grandparents, aunt, and uncle, to see the Wolverines defeat Washington State in the Rose Bowl on January 1st 1998 and win the national championship. Michigan football gave me, and continues to give me a sense of pride, purpose, and sense of belonging. To this day, when I'm wearing any Michigan gear whether that be in Ann Arbor, Washington, or even Tel Aviv, inevitably someone will shout to me that greeting all Wolverines understand and love,

“Go Blue.” I am a Michigan man through and through, and the only identity more central to my life is being a Jew. What does Judaism give me that I can’t get from a football Saturday in Ann Arbor?

The answer can’t be just pride. I get that when I put on my Michigan gear. It can’t just be about meaning. Following the team over the course of a season and experiencing their ups and downs is deeply meaningful. It has to be more than common customs or language- this exists in many identity groups. I am Jewish because it gives me a vehicle in which to understand and question the biggest challenges of existence. Judaism brings God into my life, and for me, that is something I can’t get anywhere else.

When Eliza was born, we took her to the mikvah to welcome her into the Jewish people with a custom that goes back thousands of years. Shalom and I were married under a chuppah. When I turned 13, I marked that occasion by reading from Torah and leading my community in prayer. And all of this transcends me. These rituals do more than link me to generations, to Eliza, and to generations to come, they connect me to God.

God is at the center of what it means to be a Jew. Shema yisrael are the words that we sing to Eliza every night before we put her to sleep. They declare the central truth of our faith- Adonai is our God, Adonai is One. Though I’m still not certain of many things about God, Jewish theology reminds me both that I am only a speck in this vast universe and that I am uniquely important.

Legendary Michigan football coach once said, “Those who stay will be champions.” Indeed, Every Michigan football player who played for Bo Schembechler and stayed at Michigan for four years left with at least one Big Ten championship ring. That’s pretty good, but Judaism and Jewish belief in God gives us something that spans all time to eternity and something more significant than a championship. Long ago the psalmist wrote: “I lift my eyes to the mountains, from where does my help come? My help comes from God, maker of heaven and earth.” In times of happiness and trouble, we are wont to look to familiar things that impress us - the mountains, or Springsteen, or

Jim Harbaugh. But behind all those things is something beyond, God who created those mountains and created each of us.

Judaism reminds me of this every day. And on this sacred day when we all gather to celebrate, to catch up with old friends, to shmooze, we remember that there is a higher purpose. Whatever God may mean to each of us, we are here today to celebrate life, to celebrate the start of a new year, to celebrate that God is with us now and always.

Rabbi Jonathan Roos

I appreciate God and Bruce Springsteen as much as the next rabbi, but I came here seeking earthly wisdom and I come back for it every year. Before rabbinical school, I was working towards a Ph.D. in American History hoping to become a professor. But what I really wanted were answers to some of life's big questions. I believed the world could be better. I believed that smart people directing their talents to study, explain, and help find solutions for problems was a great calling and I wanted to work on ending inequality, poverty, and the human proclivity to hurt one another.

The further along I got in my studies, the closer I came to understanding that wisdom wasn't what I thought. I began to see that there were no secret keys to solving the vexing problems of being human and certainly no American history monograph would make the world a better place.

Around that time, I recall reading a few books and articles that confirmed my growing understanding. I felt deeply sad at the end of *The Education of Henry Adams* and upon completing a review of the life's work of my mentor and advisor. If they couldn't figure out the world, I surely couldn't either. I started re-exploring Judaism in my late 20s and found that Kohelet, the author of *Ecclesiastes*, expressed what I was feeling 2,000 years ago. He wrote: "I found that wisdom is superior to folly for a wise man has eyes in his head whereas a fool walks in darkness. But I also realized that the same fate awaits them both. The fate of the fool is also destined for me; to what

advantage then, does one gain wisdom? There is nothing new beneath the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1:4-9).

I recall learning two Jewish stories around that same time. One, in the context of studying *Genesis* told of a person who would protest alone in the public square of Sodom, carrying signs about the horrors of society and the need to change course. People would pass by and sneer, spit. The person’s friends would ask: “What do you think you can do? The people will never change.” Decades pass and the protester continues the vigil carrying some of the same signs across the years. People pass and still sneer, spit and friends would ask: “What do you think you can do? The people will never change, why keep this up?” To which the person responds: “I used to rebuke society in the public square hoping that I could change what people do. Now I stand in the public square hoping only that what people do won’t ever change me.”

The other story was about a person walking along the beach, where low tide had left thousands of starfish washed ashore, stranded in the hot, drying sun. The person would walk along picking up starfish and throwing them back into the water. Another person, coming upon the scene, asks, “What’s the point of that? This is the course of nature, and besides there are too many of them for you possibly to save. What you are doing won’t make a difference.” At which point the first person picked up a starfish and threw it back to the water and said, “It made a difference to that one”

I have come to understand that learning is a personal endeavour as much about understanding myself as it is about understanding or fixing the world. In that sense, what I seek in my learning is not wisdom in the classic sense of the word but comfort and a sense of peace. The pursuit of Intellectual growth for the sake of classical wisdom can be done in many ways and settings but the commitment to learning as a search for inner comfort and peace is best done in a special context: with loved ones, true fellow travelers, and a discipline that inevitable limits the course and the means of study. I have found no better way to reach for that aspiration than to study the unfolding dialogue between my ancient people’s books and those who have come before and sit beside me.

I also gained humility during those years to see that I would not have been a great, game changing historian and that my learning will not solve the problems of human civilization. Yet, like the starfish thrower, I could make a difference to people other than myself. I could cultivate a spiritual discipline of kindness and tikkun olam based on the principle that one life is as good as the entire universe; and that this community (you and I together), our history, these scrolls and those prayer books, and the ways we help each other live better lives is the greatest gift of wisdom any one of us needs. I'm less cynical than Kohelet. All is not vanity. The start of a new year is more than just a turning of the calendar page. We are in a process of renewing ourselves and clarifying what we mean to do with all that we have learned in the past year. We are here to re-learn the most ancient Jewish lesson, again from Kohelet, "God is in heaven and you are on earth... and no person can guess the events that occur under the sun." (8:17) We are not here to pray for divine intervention, or supernatural assistance. From the outset, in its first verses the Torah tells us that this earth and this life and all that we do it in it is ours or, as Springsteen put it, "the arc does not bend on its own." We come here to learn in humility about our limits and our agency. We come here to learn, if we turn to the right sources, how it went for us in the past year. We can see from here that, in a world where a time is set for every experience under heaven, that simply to recognize the good moments we had in the past year and to commit ourselves to at least that much in the year ahead, it will be enough. That gives me comfort and hope and all the wisdom I need for the new year we begin tonight.

L'Shanah tovah.