

ROSH HASHANAH FAMILY SERVICE  
TEMPLE EMANUEL – 5771/2010  
RABBI JONATHAN AARON

A young boy was arguing with his father, “I don’t want to go to synagogue tonight. It’s boring, I don’t even know why I’m there.” His father answered. “It’s Rosh Hashanah, one of the holiest days of the year. I went to synagogue with my father, I want to go with my son!” The boy bristled. “I don’t care. I’m not going!” The father was accepting none of it. “Shlomo, you don’t have an option. I sat there as a child listening to all of the prayers and the melodies, having no idea why, and you will, too. That’s the way you learn about it. One day, you’ll understand.”

Shlomo didn’t think he’d ever understand. He reluctantly took his father’s hand and they walked together silently towards the synagogue. He looked around and saw other children being dragged by their parents, some seemed happy to go, others looked how he felt. They entered the crowded synagogue and made their way to the seats. Shlomo couldn’t see anything except the waists of all of the people. It was loud and crowded and he felt trapped.

The next moment everyone sat and the music of the prayers began as everyone sang and swayed together. “I have to go to the bathroom.” He said to his father. “Now?” “Yes, it can’t wait.” His father nodded for him to go, and he hurried outside and sat on the steps in front of the sanctuary. People were still coming inside, old and young, men and women. He could only hear snippets of conversations as they passed him by.

“I’m here, Rachel, I know it will be your first holidays without Samuel, but we’ll make it through together...” one old woman said to another as they walked arm in arm.

“Twins! And we only prayed for one! What a year!” A man said to his wife as they approached the stairs.

“I’ll help you up the stairs, Zedde, just hold onto the railing there” A young man said lovingly to an old man, bracing him as he slowly went up the steps. “I’m sure that no one sat in your seat, you can sit peacefully with all of your friends.”

Shlomo sat listening to all of the stories, one by one, as they entered into the synagogue to be together on Rosh Hashanah. His eyes began to water when, finally, a man was pulling a young boy by the elbow as they reached the steps. The boy tried to grab onto the railing to stop from going in. “Dad, come on, I hate it in there, it smells funny, and I don’t know what to do!”

Shlomo got up, dusted himself off, and said to the boy. "Come on there's room near me, we can sit with our father's together." The boy looked at Shlomo and then at his father and back at Shlomo, "I'm David." "I'm Shlomo. Shana Tova."

They all walked into the sanctuary and sat together. Shlomo sat close to his father that night in synagogue, and together, they quietly walked back home holding hands.



Shlomo discovered that night that there are many different reasons why people come to synagogue on the High Holy Days. This year, we're asking the question, "What are you doing here?" The answers to that question are as diverse as the number of people in this room. But it is a good question to know about yourself. What is the reason you came here tonight? Just imagine...the statistics show that about half of the Jews in the United States consider themselves a part of a synagogue, and 42% of all American Jews go to synagogue once a year. You guys are the ones that are here – a minority of your American Jewish brothers and sisters. So, I ask you, "What are you doing here?"

It may be hard enough to answer that question by yourself for yourself. But I'd like to make it a little harder. This is a family service, I am assuming you are with family. I'd like you to answer that question for each other.

"What are you doing here?" – LETS BEGIN WITH THE CHILDREN HERE. Doesn't matter if you are a child-child, or a grown-up child of the people you're with. Let's start with the youngest and work our way up. "What are you doing here?" Kids go first – and then we'll gather to hear a couple of answers. And when you've got your answers, we will bring around some post-its and pencils, and you can write your answer on the post-it, and on your way out, please put the note up on the scroll towards the front of the room.

#### DISCUSSION

Now it's the parents' turn. I gave you all that time to think about it. Please talk to the others in the family as to why you are here.

#### DISCUSSION

Hopefully, we've been able to clarify for ourselves why we're here. I hope that you can build upon that and let your reason carry you. Devote yourselves to what you said tonight. Latch on to it, and see where it can take you over the next ten days. There is a famous saying by Bachya Ibn Pakuda from the Middle Ages. He said, "Our lives are like scrolls, write on them how you want to be remembered."

For tonight, writing notes on our scroll, perhaps it can be, “Our reason for being here is on that scroll, write on it how you want to direct your heart for this year’s Holy Days.”