

“Happy Birthday”

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Bet Mishpachah

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Happy Birthday. You’re now four years old. You really are becoming a big girl. Birthdays are so much fun for you. All your friends and family come to the party. They all give you such nice gifts. And everyone eats your favorite foods.

Your family takes you with them to the synagogue regularly. That’s fun, too. You all get to sing, hear interesting stories, and play games. Every so often you and your friends parade in front of the adults in the sanctuary.

Hey, nineteen!¹ It’s your birthday. It’s not the one you are really looking forward to. That will come in two years, when you and your friends can go to a bar and you can get a drink – using your own legal ID. But you will still get to have a great party with your new friends at college.

¹ Steely Dan (1980).

Indeed, it's your first birthday – and first High Holy Day celebration – away from home. You wonder what to do. You remember the Bar Mitzva speech you gave six years ago. You said how important Judaism was to you, how it would always be such a central part of your life. You wonder about that now you are away from your family and the friends you grew up with. Your best friends now are not Jewish. A Jewish religious service seems so intimidating to go to by yourself. It's nothing like the youth services you attended in high school – where everyone was so enthusiastic, clapping hands and singing energetically. All those adults seem so serious, dour, eager to return to their Blackberries during the daytime and ready for their early bedtimes at night. Plus, you're gay. Adult synagogues seem so centered on families with children. Is there any place for you?

Happy Birthday. You are 31 today. You're old enough that older adults – even your parents – take you seriously. You're young enough that no one mistakes you for being middle aged.

It's the High Holy Days, so you will be going to synagogue. It's for your parents. You love them, and they are so pleased when you tell them

you've been to services. It's certainly not for you. You wonder whether religion is really a force for good in the world. All those devout people, purporting to pray for peace and justice. Yet there is so much acrimony and ill will in our own country and warfare and downright evil in the world at large propagated in the name of God. What good is prayer in such a world? What if the "real" God is the Christian Coalition's – or al-Qaeda's?

You've now been on this earth for a half-century. My goodness, you are old! You don't really look forward to birthdays any more. It just means that you're getting more wrinkled and grayer, have to undergo more "routine" medical tests, and are moving farther out of the age group at which popular entertainment is directed. You're old enough that you sometimes get nostalgic for the "good old days."

Sometimes your visits to synagogue bring out that nostalgia. On good days, your trips there allow you to revisit the enthusiasm and joy of your youth. On bad days, it seems like an empty ritual. You really don't want to hear again from the pulpit why you should admire how much some historical or biblical figures struggled on your behalf. What you do want to hear is how religion can help you when your life is comfortable but not

powerful. You neither confront sufficient obstacles that you need a higher power to help you through the day nor possess sufficient fame, fortune, or talent that you look for guidance on how to exert your authority.

Eighty-five years. That's how long you've now been alive. Some of those years in the past were fun. Not any more. Your body is barely holding on – something new seems to fall apart every day. Your mind has seen better times as well.

You won't be alive that many more years. Who will remember you when you are gone? You have no children, no spouse, no partner. Fortunately, there is your synagogue – it provides you a sense of community. You go there regularly. You hope the people there remember you. Perhaps they will say yahrtzeit for you when you are gone.

Happy Birthday to you, to me, to all of us. It's not merely a religious celebration today. Instead, our liturgy tells us, it is the birthday of the world. We come as both celebrants and guests. What can we learn from our five hypothetical birthday boys and girls, aged 4 to 85?

Some pointers for our 5767th birthday commemoration should seem obvious. First, wear novelty hats. Many of us are in fact doing this. Second, don't light birthday candles! Really, where are you going to find a cake that large?

On a less frivolous note, we should not be surprised if the commemoration is something less exuberant than “shiny, happy, people holding hands.”² As our birthday examples demonstrate, birthdays can be a cause for joy, a mark of status. But they can also be a source of irritation, a sign of mortality, even a cause for sorrow when the birthday must be celebrated absent loved ones or alone. The celebrant does not always want to be at the birthday party.

Sometimes neither do the guests. Many – one hopes most – times the guests are there because they seek to honor the celebrant. But nearly all of us have attended an office function for a co-worker we may not even know well simply to have a piece of cake. And just as many have probably been to a function for a less than beloved family member or boss because our attendance was required.

² R.E.M. (1991).

Whether we are here because we enjoy services, feel obliged to attend to satisfy parents or partners, or fear the wrath of God, there are several things we can do to make this birthday occasion both more enjoyable and more fulfilling.

First, we can celebrate. The Jewish people have made it through another year. So has each of us. No matter what our age, or our physical or mental powers, we each have the ability to accomplish something. We should take pride in that.

The High Holy Days are a serious time. But Rosh ha-Shana is not the day for guilt and self-denial. That will come soon enough next week. So take some time to enjoy yourself. Greet friends. Visit your family if they are here, call them if they are not. There is an old tradition that one should greet the Jewish New Year by eating a new food. Go to a grocery store or farmer's market and find a new type of fruit or vegetable to try. It will be kosher.

Even if you are here to satisfy your family, or are not sure about the merits of organized religion, the efficacy of prayer, or the nature of God, there should be something in Judaism or this service that should provide comfort or satisfaction. Some will see it in the precepts of Judaism, which teaches us that although we are flawed, we are not doomed. Instead, each of us is capable of improvement and of leading a better life. Underlying Judaism are basic concepts that have withstood four millennia: justice, ethical behavior, compassion towards the less fortunate. It is true that many of us cannot subscribe to all aspects of Jewish ritual and law. Nor will each of us find every prayer in the liturgy equally meaningful. But nearly everyone can find something of value in Jewish teaching, and portions of the liturgy that engage the mind or tug at the heart. Focus on these during the High Holy Days.

Others may find satisfaction in the physical surroundings of this service and space: the wonderful singing of the choir, the dramatic blasts of the shofar, and the pageantry of the Torah processions. Still others may see it in the people around them, be they family, friends, people with common aspirations and interests, or the cute person in the next row.

The second thing we can do for this birthday is to contemplate. This should be a fairly natural reaction. Except for small children, birthdays typically involve some degree of self-reflection. Rosh ha-Shana can and should be an opportunity for each of us to examine where we are and where we want to be in a spiritual sense. Our liturgy for the High Holy Days aims to provide both the opportunity for self-assessment and guidance on how to achieve our objectives.

According to a prayer we said earlier this evening, our ultimate objective should be no less than *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world. Taken literally, this seems overly ambitious, perhaps even ludicrous. None of us here tonight is likely to solve the problem of easily finding some place to park on Friday nights in Dupont Circle, much less to create Middle East peace, or eliminate poverty throughout the world.

But we can make a small start towards healing the world by healing ourselves. Each of us certainly has the capability of improving our own conduct in some way related to God, family, friends, or co-workers. By improving ourselves, we are able to make the world in at least a little bit better.

We can also be sensitive to issues of larger concern. We should not succumb to the excuse of the victim – assuming it is our plight to suffer because we are Jewish or gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender – or, as we say here at Bet Mishpachah, *gelibte* (derived from the Yiddish word for “beloved”). In some respects, it’s easier to be a victim. Victims need take no personal responsibility for their plight. But the essence of the High Holy Days is taking personal responsibility for actions. Each of us as an individual may lack the power to improve the world more than incrementally. Does that mean that we must stand by and await a savior? No, that’s for the groups that meet along this street on Sunday. Does it mean that we should be “holding out for a hero, who’s gotta be strong and gotta be fast and gotta be fresh from the fight?”³ No, that’s bad 80s rock. Instead, *tikkun olam* will only come if we work collectively and work deliberately. It won’t come overnight or even after ten days. It will take the entire year – if not more.

This suggests a third objective of our birthday commemoration – we can be part of a community. In Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*, the

³ J. Steinman & D. Pitchford (1984).

protagonist exclaims at the end of the play that he has made the great discovery that the strongest man in the world is he who stands alone. This is certainly a great exit line, and there is much to be said for standing on principle. But this strong, solitary man is unlikely to be effective unless he can persuade others of his views. So it is in our High Holy Day quest to repair the world and to meet our own spiritual needs. We are no more likely to satisfy these by solitary action than we are to have a great birthday party alone. Instead, we need to find the right group. Perhaps it is a political or social action group. Perhaps it is a neighborhood association. We hope that for at least some of you, that group will be Bet Mishpachah.

We can all do our part to make this Rosh ha-Shana not merely a box we check off our “to do” list but a satisfying and happy birthday celebration. So enjoy the remaining birthday “songs,” and join in the cake at the oneg afterwards. *L’shana tova tikateivu*. May all of us have a happy and healthy new year.