

Rosh Hashanah 2 5778

In the year 4063, archeologists unearth what was once my basement. In it, they find thousands of flat, circular pieces of plastic, housed in cardboard sleeves. Intuiting that these ancient discs may be encoded with some kind of information, they reverse engineer a device that will extract that information, and they discover that these ancient pieces of plastic each preserve a piece, or several pieces, of music. Playing it, they hear words from the mid 20th century that they find almost totally indecipherable:

She's got a competition clutch with a four on the floor
And she purrs like a kitten 'til the leg pipes roar
And if that ain't enough to make you flip your lid
There's one more thing: I got the pink slip daddy

The singers seem to be speaking about a woman, but what is a woman's 'competition clutch,' or her 'four on the floor'? What does it mean to flip one's wig? And what is the mystifying reference to getting a pink slip? The scholars are puzzled. Could this pink slip refer to the process of firing someone from their job? Does it have something to do with a negligee, referring back to woman to whom they're singing?

What these future archeologists will not understand are the same things that are obvious to us: That the song in question is the Beach Boys' Little Deuce Coupe, a joyous celebration of a car. After proudly describing the car's special attributes, the singers complete the verse by noting 'I got the pink slip.' Who here can tell me what that means? In California, where the Beach Boys grew up, the certificate of ownership, the title to a car, was issued on a pink slip of paper. It's not only that the young man thinks has the best car around; he owns it in full! None of this will be obvious two thousand years from now (some of it isn't obvious to us, just 50 years after the fact); the few shards of meaning that our descendants piece together will emerge through painstaking

labor, comparative analysis with other sources, and study of mid-20th century, music, idioms and popular culture.

What is true for the that distant future is also true for us, as we look at our own distant past. Judaism has been around for two thousand years, and is itself built on the Israelite practices it inherited that go back at least another thousand years. The language and times of the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, are no less strange to us than English and our current culture will be two thousand years hence. We like to think that the beliefs and practices that make us who we are as Jews have been constant for three thousand years, but the reality is that much more has changed than has remained stable. Acknowledging that takes nothing away from our connection to that past, but it does demand that we understand Judaism as an ever-changing, ever-adapting culture, one that continually strives to maintain the values of the past, and to honor it, even when the rituals that give shape to those values change.

Coming to EBJC at this time in its history is an incredible blessing and opportunity for me and my family. We have been given a tremendous welcome from all of you, and the leadership of the shul has extended every courtesy to us; we thank you for all you have done. It has been a time of change and of renewal for our family. This is also a time of change and renewal for the shul generally. In many ways we are at a crossroad, not knowing exactly the direction we will be going in the near future, but certain we will have to make decisions that have long-lasting consequences. This year will be one of learning, of talking, of relationship building. In adult education classes, in public forums and in private conversations, I want us all to take stock, to reflect on our shared synagogue history, and come to consensus on a number of issues that will take us into the next chapter in our shared story. I have already said, and will

repeat again now, that I will not make major changes in our practice this year, nor will I do so in the future, until I feel that there is sufficient agreement among our members that any potential changes are right for us. I want us to preserve, and where possible, to expand what we are currently doing, in order to meet the needs of our current members and to position our shul as a place where many other Jews want to be.

The place to start that conversation is not with how we davven, or who davvens, or how. Instead, **what we need to do is to talk about who we are and what our values are.** Too quickly jumping to the end of that conversation will only get us mired down in practical matters, in room assignments, in book orders. The first order of business is to talk, to listen, to habituate ourselves to a new orientation to each other. We must first relearn how to address one another with civility, with respect, with love. We need to ask each other why we think what we do, why we feel what we do, and not mask accusations as questions. Assuming the best of each other, and truly listening to each other with open hearts, we will all grow in understanding. We may not always agree, but we must commit ourselves to each other as friends who disagree, not as irreconcilable opponents.

What I am challenging us to do is to behave as our sages have shown us in their legal arguments over the last two thousand years. (For those of you who have heard this part from me already, I beg your forgiveness, in this season of forgiveness.) The primary value of Jewish argumentation is that of mutual respect, of seeing those with whom we disagree as potential possessors of truth. The greatest sage of his era, the fourth generation of talmudic sages, was Rabbi Yohanan; his brother in law, Reish Lakish, was his bar plugta, the sage with whom he most often sparred over matters of law. Reish Lakish had a colorful background; prior to

becoming a sage he had been a gladiator, entertaining the masses with displays of violence. In time Reish Lakish put down his weapons, picked up the Torah, and became a master of its laws and interpretations. At a certain point Rabbi Yohanan and Reish Lakish had a dispute over a certain knife, about the point in its construction that it can become ritually fit for use. Unable to win his brother in law over with reasoned argumentation, Rabbi Yohanan made an offhand remark to the effect of “Well, when it comes to knives, I guess you would know.” Reminded of his sordid past, Reish Lakish subsequently died of shame. Rabbi Yohanan was inconsolable. His colleagues sent a young student to cheer him up. The student praised Rabbi Yohanan’s intellectual rigor and wisdom: “I have a hundred proofs for everything you say.” Rabbi Yohanan could only reply “Where is Reish Lakish? Where is the trusted friend who will tell me when I am wrong?”

There are so many ways in which being a Jew can be hard. As the story from the Talmud teaches us, we needn’t make things any more difficult by behaving as if those closest to us are without merit. Instead, we learn, we argue our position rigorously, relying on proofs from our sacred texts, from our beliefs and practices. We consider what things have meant to us in the past and what they mean now, or what we need them to mean. And we do so with the assumption that others who feel differently than we do feel just as strongly about their approach as we do about ours, and admit that no one of us is the possessor of ultimate truth. Dignity, civility, and love will guide us to identify our most deeply held values, and from those values we will decide the practicalities of EBJC’s ritual observances.

A friend here at the shul made a pointed observation about two camps of EBJC members. The traditionalists, he said, obsess over the details of Shabbat services, yet many of them do not

observe the traditions of Shabbat, kashrut or other basic features of Jewish life outside those services. And the progressives, he noted, make a vigorous case for changing things, but then often don't show up for the very things that they have insisted should change. I have some sympathy with those critiques, and this year I want our conversation to reflect a high degree of honesty and integrity. We all need to walk it like we talk it.

These yamim nora'im, these ten days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur, are an exercise in self reflection and in making amends to one another. Engaging in teshuvah is not merely mouthing words about changing our behavior, it is about actually changing. Two thousand years ago the Mishnah established that for sins against God, Yom Kippur atones, but for sins between one person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone until we placate those whom we have hurt. It is not that God will not forgive us until then; God cannot do so. In an astonishing innovation of theology, the early rabbis insist that generalized, impersonal or silent apologies are insufficient to save us. We must tell each other we are sorry, and we must be better the next time.

This year is the next time. We will atone for treating each other as undeserving of listening, of empathy, of respect. We will atone for harsh words and for suspicion. We will atone for inflexibility, and for lack of patience. We will atone for being unresponsive to the needs of our friends, and of creating unnecessary barriers to entry into synagogue life. As we do, we will reset our relationships with each other and with the community as a whole, as we open ourselves up to possibilities we have not considered before. My goal for us this year is that everyone feel heard and that, regardless of the outcome of our discussion, no one feels apart from the community. It is a tall order, but one I feel we are up to.

When we imagine a future thousands of years hence, thinking about us, what will we want them to know about us? What are the Jewish practices that they will learn we took part in, and what are the values that drove those practices? What will what we do now teach them about who we were? And what will they discover about the way we arrived at our practices? We want to make it obvious to those who follow us that the primary value that drove our decision making was not simply reproducing the past, nor forsaking it, but rather conserving the ethics and beliefs that make us Jews, and finding the path that best expressed our synagogue identity. We need to take ownership of that process, to take possession of the values and the practices that show us at our best, so that our descendants will clearly understand the song of ourselves: We got the pink slip, daddy!

Shanah tovah tikateimu; may you be sealed in the book of life for good.