

Priest, Prophet or Pastor: The Rabbi on the High Holy Days

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I gave the worst sermon of my life on a Friday immediately preceding Rosh Hashanah. 'Tis the season, as they say, but not to be jolly, in this case. Rather, at this time of the year, Jews, and particularly Rabbis, are heavily focused on the High Holy Days. No explanation excuses a bad sermon, and that one was worse than a dud, but perhaps I could ask for forgiveness, because I was legitimately focused on the sermons I would offer on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

So we come, once again, to the Sabbath of Repentance, between our High Holy Days. Tonight is Shabbat, a day holier in our faith than the New Year we celebrated yesterday. This evening, we have come to worship, and you are entitled expect a thoughtful sermon from this pulpit. For many centuries, in fact, rabbis gave sermons only twice a year, on this Shabbat and on the one immediately preceding Passover. Now, though, our "most significant" sermons are on Rosh Hashanah. The best way I know to discharge my responsibility tonight is to welcome you to my world. Tonight, I invite you into the mind of the Rabbi during High Holy Days.

When our people first began celebrating Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, they had no Rabbis. Instead, Priests conducted the penitential rites. The Priest declared the new year. The Priest received the peoples' sacrifices. The Priest recited the formulaic prayers, asking God's forgiveness, for himself, for his family, and for all the House of Israel.

The High Priest, robed in splendor, would enter the Holy of Holies, uttering God's proper Name, in the presence of the tablets of the commandments. Only the High Priest knew the correct pronunciation of God's name. Only he shared that most intimate, even personal relationship with God. The High Priest seemed to know God better than anyone else. The Priest was our ancestors' link to God.

The active priesthood went the way of the sacrifices themselves, with the Temple's destruction in the year 70. Judaism teaches that each one of us may enjoy a direct relationship with God. The Jew requires no intermediary to reach the Almighty. Each of us is part of mamlechet kohanim, a kingdom of priests. Every one of us is equally holy. Nobody knows God best.

And yet, at our Temple, as at Jewish congregations throughout the world, we Rabbis ascend the bimah in our white robes. I declared the new year. I will ask forgiveness before the Holy Ark at the outset of our Kol Nidre service. I do serve something of a priestly function.

Indeed, people often ask me to intercede with God on their behalf. "Pray for me Rabbi," and I oblige, with a full heart. I do not imagine that God listens to me more than God hears their own prayers. I do not believe that I know God best. Nobody needs my particular intercession to reach God. You don't need me to ask forgiveness on your behalf. The Rabbi need not be the one to invoke God's blessing on your marriage, your Bar or Bat Mitzvah, your Confirmation, or your newborn baby.

Still, all of us feel distanced from God, at least sometimes. We do need somebody else to pray for us. We do want a person of holiness to invite God's presence into our lives. Even a Rabbi needs a Rabbi, and I have felt privileged to be blessed, to feel God's presence, as, for example, I look forward to the moment when Rabbi Fox blesses me upon my formal Installation as your rabbi next month.

Like every Rabbi, I struggle with my own inadequacy to serve in that priestly role. I am a flawed human being. I do not enjoy unique access to God. And yet, at this holy season, I humbly invite God's

presence into the life of every worshiper at Congregation B'nai Israel, to pray for each of you, as I ask you to pray for me.

Priests were not always alone in religious leadership of our people in ancient Israel. From time to time, a prophet would arise, called by God, usually to tell the people where they had gone wrong. Often, corrupt priests or kings were the targets of their exhortations. God spoke to the prophet, and the prophet brought the divine world to the people. Some might ignore the prophet, but they would do so at their peril.

Our tradition teaches that prophecy ended with Malachi, more than two millennia ago. God no longer speaks with a clear message, delivered to a particular holy person. When somebody tells you what God wants you to do, quite specifically, in this world, my advice, and our tradition's caution, is that you should run the other way. If a religious leader suggests how you should vote, allegedly on the basis of God's wishes, that clergy person is not only jeopardizing the congregation's tax-exempt status, but is also guilty of blasphemy.

No, we don't have prophets, and yet we still need prophecy. On Yom Kippur morning, we shall hear, this year, as every year, the powerful exhortations of Isaiah. The prophet cautions us not to be satisfied by our ritual observance. Fasting is of no account, if we oppress our workers. Repentance means nothing, if we ignore the poverty that surrounds us.

The prophets of old have left a magnificent legacy, and a terrible burden, for the Rabbis of today. We do not hear God speak to us directly, and yet we Rabbis must continue the prophetic tradition. We abdicate our sacred responsibility if we fail to speak out against the evils of this world. We are not worthy of this storied pulpit, if we do not urge the congregation to make the sacrifices necessary to build a better tomorrow.

Prophets were often unpopular. Rabbis, similarly, may be subject to criticism, particularly when we raise the prophetic voice. Surely, not everyone will agree with any one Rabbi's interpretations of the Torah's message for the issues of today. That difference of opinion, though, doesn't exempt us from the struggle, a striving to make our tradition live, to teach us what we must learn in our own day and age. Worshipers at Congregation B'nai Israel hear no prophet on these High Holy Days. May they hear instead the words of a rabbi, striving to be worthy of the prophetic tradition of Judaism.

Neither Priest nor Prophet concerned themselves with the pastoral care of their people. Moreover, the early Rabbis were scholars of Torah. They taught the laws of Judaism, but they did not specialize in visiting the sick; they did not officiate at funerals; and they certainly did not provide spiritual counseling. In fact, the expectation that the Rabbi serve as pastor is entirely modern, even as it stretches throughout all the streams of contemporary Judaism, including Orthodox rabbis like Rabbi Winnick.

On the High Holy Days, being a good pastor includes staying in touch with at least some of our congregants who are unable to worship with us at Temple. Being a pastor on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur also calls upon the Rabbi to offer sermons that bring comfort to those who are in pain, and to bring healing to a community bruised by tough times.

Our High Holy Day season began in earnest when the Torah scrolls were changed to white and I, not incidentally, donned my white robe for the first time in many months. At this season, your rabbi serves a priestly role, asking forgiveness on behalf of all the congregation. You are hearing at least a bit from a rabbi in the prophetic stance, as you did on Rosh Hashanah morning and will again on Yom

Kippur morning. You may experience messages in more of a pastoral role the Yizkor-Memorial Service. My prayer is that, whether my role is priestly, prophetic or pastoral, I will ever lead and preach as a rabbi, charged with offering God's words of Torah to the Jewish people.

As we all seek to discharge our sacred duties at these High Holy Days, I ask your prayers for me, as I shall pray for you.

Amen.