

I begin tonight with the words from one of my favorite children's books:

"I wish we could do what they do in Katroo. They sure know how to say, "Happy Birthday to You!" In Katroo, ever year, on the day you were born they start the day right in the bright early morn when the Birthday Honk-Honkers hikes high up Mt. Zorn and lets loose a big blast on the big Birthday Hor. And the voice of the horn calls out loud as it plays; "Wake up! For today is the Day of all Days!"

I received Dr. Seuss' *Happy Birthday To You!* when I was eight years old and I still remember the joy I felt in this imaginative tale of a bird, A Great Birthday Bird, that takes you on a journey to a day of complete Birthday bliss. Along the way, as in all Dr. Seuss' books, you encounter creatures and machines with names like "Who-Bubs" and "Hooded Klopfers," you eat hotdogs by the spool and then wash off in a "Mustard-Off Pool," and everybody whose anybody, announces "Happy Birthday To You."

Well, I'm hear to tell you that we can do what they do in Katroo!

While Rosh Hashanah may feel less exuberant than a Birthday in Katroo, it is, perhaps, as close as we come in the Jewish calendar. Here, we are surrounded by friends and family, eating the many delights that we have prepared for the holiday, and announcing with our horn, our *Shofar*, to "Wake up! For today is the Day of all Days!" Or, as Maimonides writes, "Arise from your slumber, you who are asleep, wake up from your deep sleep, you who are fast asleep."

"Hayom Harat Olam," "Today is the Birthday of the world." On Rosh Hashanah we return to the first six days of creation and, in a mystical tradition, the world is recreated in front of our eyes. As Isaac Luria one of the primary figures in Kabbalah taught some six hundred years ago, "Every year, on Rosh Hashanah everything returns to its very beginning. Creation is renewed. All that was created in the beginning comes into being again. Thus each Rosh Hashanah the world is recreated."

More than just a New Year, as the direct translation of Rosh Hashanah implies, Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world. And, as such, even if this is not our actual birthday, we all get our wishes for the

New Year. As Dr. Seuss writes, "Today is your birthday! You get what you wish."

I invite you to imagine a very large round cake, round to symbolize the world and the New Year. On it, sits a single candle, perhaps two, like we have here tonight. As a community, we must decide what to wish for together. Let's take a few minutes to think. Afterward I would like you to offer suggestions as to what our wish or wishes should be.

According to the Psalmist, our wish should be easy. As we say in Psalm 27, our Psalm for the month leading up to the High Holidays, the month of Elul, "One thing I ask from God, this is my request: to sit in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to view the sweetness of God and to be a visitor in the Temple."

What does it mean, "to sit in the house of the lord." Where is the "House of the Lord" and how do we find it? Is it the Temple in Jerusalem? Is it the Holy Tabernacle that the Israelites transported through the wilderness? Is it a synagogue building? Is it our own home? The word house, Bayit, implies a place that is simple. There are many Bayits in the Jewish world: a Be'et Midrash or a house of study, a Be'et Sefer or a school, and a Be'et Keneset, or a synagogue.

Luckily for us in Bordentown, we sit tonight in a house that also happens to be a House of God. There is nothing fancy about our surroundings. This is a two-story structure almost indistinguishable from the outside from the other houses in the area. Built in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century it became our home almost exactly 90 years ago.

Tonight, we sit in the same sanctuary praying the same prayers as our forbearers here in this community. And, just like them we have the pleasure of experiencing on Rosh Hashanah a newly renovated sanctuary. Let us appreciate the hard work this summer that went into making this possible.

This is a community of doers. We do not have the money to hire a team of laborers. Together, we are the people that set up before services and clean up after they are over, we are the people who care for this infrastructure and beautify it. We are the people that collect its bills and we are the people who handle its funds. We are the people that will ensure B'nai Abraham will survive and thrive for many generations to come. We are indeed the builders of community, the Bonei Kehillah.

If you were part of the project this summer I invite you now to stand up and be recognized. Thank you for helping to give us a sense of newness here on Rosh Hashanah. Thank you for helping us imagine what it must have been life for the first High Holiday service here, some ninety years ago.

(You may be seated.)

A house is also a place of family. Looking around the room we see many generations that have come together. We have families that have been part of B'nai Abraham for decades and we have families that this is their first High Holiday experience in our building. Together we are a family. We must care for each other in times of need, and celebrate with each other in times of joy. We must also be there for each other every day - caring, nurturing, loving - this is what it means to be family, this is what it means to be community.

But, where is God in our house? Is God in the blue sky walls or the tin plated ceiling? Is God in the stained glass windows or the Torahs behind the ark? Or is God in all these things and inside all of us?

In the back of our regular prayer book is a poem by Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali poet and Philosopher, in which he writes:

“I find God, wherever the mind is free to follow its own bent, wherever words come out from the depths of truth, wherever tireless striving stretches its arms toward perfection, wherever people struggle for freedom and right, wherever the scientist toils to unbare the secrets of nature, wherever the poet strings pearls of beauty in lyric lines, wherever glorious deeds are done.”

A Bayit can also be a vessel, a holding container, such as a cup or a pitcher, or... our very own bodies. We are a vessel a Bayit for God. As Tagore writes later in the poem, “I find God in the pulsebeat of a life that comes from eternity and dances in my own blood.”

Here inside this House of God, we are all our own Houses of God, little imprints of Gods image manifest in the world. We are, after all, as our Torah suggests made in the image of God. Our words, our prayers, our very breath connects us with a force that is beyond our understanding, but yet is all that we are. What an amazing gift this is, to live always in the House of God.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great 20<sup>th</sup> Century Philosopher, writes about this experience in the following way: “How marvelous is my home. I enter as a supplicant and emerge as a witness. I enter as a stranger and emerge as next of kin. I may enter spiritually shapeless, inwardly disfigured,

and emerge wholly changed. It is in moments of prayer that my image is forged, that my striving is fashioned. To understand the world I must love my home. It is difficult to perceive luminosity anywhere if there is no light in my own home. It is in the light of prayer's radiance that I find my way even in the dark. It is my prayer that illumines my way."

Our prayer here on Rosh Hashanah is our ultimate celebration. We demonstrate to ourselves and to the world the wonderful gift that we have been given, the gift of life. Another Rosh Hashanah has arrived and we are all here tonight to greet her. This is the intention of the psalmist when he writes, "One thing I ask from God, this is my request: to sit in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to view the sweetness of God and to be a visitor in the Temple."

In front of you is a Xerox of a page from *Happy Birthday To You!* This page is from the beginning of the book, when the Birthday Bird takes the little blonde boy representing you, up the stairs to the highest peak of Katroo, and says the following,

"If we didn't have birthdays, you wouldn't be you. If you'd never been born, well then what would you do? If you'd never been born, well then what would you be? You *might* be a fish! Or a toad in a tree! You might be a doorknob! Or three baked potatoes! You might be a bag full of hard green tomatoes. Or worse than all that... Why, you might be a WASN'T! A Wasn't has no fun at all. No, he doesn't A Wasn't just isn't. He just isn't present. But you... You Are You! and now isn't that pleasant!

Please rise and we'll read the next part with me. This will be our mantra for this Rosh Hashanah. Anytime you get lost in the prayers or are unsure what to think or what to do, I want you to read over the words to this poem, for it captures the true essence of Rosh Hashanah. A Bayit can also be a stanza of poetry. May this simple Bayit in a book written for kids, be a way for us to "Shivti B'Vait Adonai," "To Sit in the House of the Lord."

"So we'll go to the top of the toppest blue space, The Official Katroo Birthday Sounding-Off Place! Come on! Open your mouth and sound of at the sky! Shout loud at the top of your voice, "I AM I! ME! I am I! And I may not know why/ But I know that I like it. *Three cheers!* I AM I!"

Shanah Tovah. A Good and Healthy New Year!!!