

Letting Loose the Reins: A Message for Rosh Hashanah 2<sup>nd</sup> Day Worship  
Prepared by Rabbi Robert A. Nosanchuk – Congregation Mishkan Or  
September 24, 2025

I don't think of Rosh Hashanah as a date in the Hebrew calendar. For me, it is a declaration, that we are in a committed relationship. Each of us, during these Days of Awe, notices our past vows, promises, and commitments rising to the surface. We honor such commitments, whether or not they still meet a present need. Recipes followed, table settings chosen, thoughts to which we are drawn—all part of a covenantal relationship, even before we pray for God's help.

In the *machzor* we encounter poetry, song, liturgy, and Torah readings. Each paints a portrait of our ancestors in covenant. When their names were called, in nearly every generation, they answered: *Hineni*. I am here. But *Hineni* is not passive submission. In the passage Rabbi Klein reads this morning, Abraham responds to God with presence, but also protest. He insists the Holy One be committed to fairness, justice, and mercy. Calling a partner to account—even God—creates negotiation. Their relationship offers both parties proximate, tangible attention.

This is one of the reasons Mishkan Or was founded: to create a shelter of light, a place of proximate, tangible attention. The light we radiate here shines with *tiferet*—glory to those who seek it. To the recipient, it feels like *chesed*—loving kindness. As one of your rabbis, I hope that as this community evolves, you'll find in Mishkan Or a place where vows and commitments become reality. Some commitments are small, others are miles high. But whatever we bring, we seek the patience of Avinu Malkeinu. To mend what is torn in our world, we need divine patience and human practice. That way our actions here will ripple outward, shaping the vows future generations make to compassion. And if that sounds lofty—it is. But Judaism commands even *tza'ar ba'alei chayim*—compassion for the pain of a stray or injured animal. No exceptions. Holiness is tenderness for all beings. And yet, often we give away all that tenderness and leave ourselves depleted.

My spiritual director, Rabbi Alice Frank Patry, offers another perspective. She invites us this year to hear Rosh Hashanah as *Rosh HaShinnui*—"the changing of our head." A shift in thinking and frame for our orientation. She suggests: before honey ever touches apples, we dip our minds into honey—the honey of self-mercy, compassion, and tenderness. We must ask: do the tools I've relied on still serve me? Or is it time for *Rosh HaShinnui*—a change in orientation?

The call of *Rosh HaShinnui* is to soften the stories we carry about ourselves. To test whether our old suppositions are truly sweet. Rabbi Alice names some of the bitter ones:

- If I'm not successful, I won't be loved.
- If I'm not funny, beautiful, or wise, I won't belong.
- If I don't take care of everyone, I'm letting people down.
- If I don't earn enough, I'm worthless.
- If I'm not the parent, the healer, the teacher—then who am I?

Suppositions like these lead us to repentance but it is a type that doesn't serve our souls. They don't stop us from dreaming of a better world—but they whisper that the world we long for is always out of reach. And that gap is painful.

Here's where a young man known as Huckleberry Finn comes in: At one point in Huckleberry Finn, Huck sits with a letter in his hand. He had written it to Jim's "owner," to turn him in. His

whole life had taught him that this was the right thing, that helping Jim escape slavery was wicked, even sinful. Huck sat there trembling, sweating, torn apart. He thought of all the lessons drilled into him at church, school, and among neighbors. He thought of his father, of the voices that told him he'd be judged and condemned if he chose wrongly. His heart was pounding as he imagined eternal fire, and shame. The rules of society had their reins pulled tight on him.

Then Huck remembered Jim—just Jim as he was- not as an “escaped slave,” but a man who had listened to Huck, cared for him, laughed with him, cried with him. And in that moment, Huck loosened his grip. He tore the letter in two. And with shaking hands he said words that would change his life forever: “All right then, I’ll go to hell.” Huck genuinely thought he was damning himself. But in tearing up that letter, he wasn’t throwing away his soul—he was saving it. He wasn’t choosing hell. He was choosing humanity.

That is *Rosh HaShinnui*. The world tells us to pull harder on the reins, to cling to what we’ve been taught, no matter the cost, and to force the door open to some glorified yesterday. But Huck shows us another way. Loosen the reins. See the person before you. Trust compassion more than conformity. Sometimes loosening the reins is what allows us to hear God’s whisper calling us to our truest selves.

Poet and activist Maya Angelou lived out this lesson too. As a child, life told her she was undeserving. People over and over again told her she wasn’t enough. She made an impossible vow: to be perfect so she could be worthy of love. That vow bound her. But when she loosened her grip, she discovered a deeper truth: “I am human, and therefore I am already worthy.” And from that freedom, she claimed her voice, her artistry, and her incomparable song.

Neither Huck nor Maya Angelou found freedom by pulling harder. They loosened the reins. They trusted tenderness more than tension. Can we? I hope so!

In the coming year, I hope we resist the urge to pull harder out of fear. Let us instead loosen. This is not passivity. It is *Rosh HaShinnui*—a new way of thinking. It is basing our worth not on relentless striving, but on the simple truth of our being. As Rabbi Alice Frank Patry writes: “Release the story. Drop the role. Meet this moment as your essential self. Not obligated or bound. Simply available, present, and alive.”

And she goes further: “We think we are a small cup of water—limited, fragile, easily polluted. But the New Year says: capsize the cup. You are not the cup—you are the ocean, infinite and alive. Failures, shortcomings, confusions—none overwhelm you. They dissolve in the vastness of what you are. The mind is finite. The soul infinite. Loosen your vows. Fall back into the sea you already are.”

This vision overturns the old idea that holiness happens only in a prophet’s vision by a river or in an encounter with a burning bush. Annie Dillard once wrote: “At any instant the bush may flare.” In her compelling book *For the Time Being*, she was striving to communicate how every instant is alive with presence. Our task is to notice, and like Moses, to answer *Hineni*—bringing all of

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ourselves, our doubts and fears, our recriminations along with our hopes, our yearnings and our determined commitments into a living breathing covenant.

We see this too in Torah's hardest stories. Ishmael, cast out with Hagar, cries out in despair. Hager's previously avowed loyalty to Abraham and Sarah, she thought would secure her son's future—but due to a cruel instinct on the part of Sarah, those loyalties no longer held worth. God intervenes, saying in essence: lift Ishmael up, hold his hand and loosen the reins. Let go of promises that no longer serve you. God instructs her to open her eyes, to a well of water already present to her as a source of sustenance. That is *Rosh HaShinnui*. To see the well, the replenishment that was always waiting. To claim dignity where we thought there was only rejection.

Let me close with the story that several young people at our temple have teased me for telling again and again—they say I seem to believe it holds the answer to everything. I can't argue. It does.

The story takes place in the ocean, where there were a big wave and a little wave. The big wave was crying. The little wave noticed and asked, "Why are you crying?" To which the big wave responded, "You don't get it. I can see over your shoulders to the dangers ahead. There are rocks at the shore where our brother and sister waves are crashing. We are going to reach the shore, crash, and die." Well upon hearing this, the little wave paused, then said, "I can teach you something that will take away your fear of death." The big wave, suspicious, asked, "What will it cost me?"

"Nothing," said the little wave. The big wave asked: "Will I have to chant or sing prayers I don't know?"

"No," said the little wave. And the big wave decided he had nothing to lose and he asked her for the solution to his fear. The little wave...she then replied in six simple words: "You're not a wave. You're water." You're not a wave, you're water.

Friends, we must hear those words today. We are not our doubts, our boiling over anxieties, or our tight reins. We are not small paper cups that spill out or wear out once filled with contents, too fragile to manage and hold up. We are not waves. We are water—vast, alive, uncontainable. We have within us the capacity to reshape the shore.

So, this year, let us declare it boldly: We will not be bound by vows that shrink us. We will not pull harder on reins that keep us stuck. We will loosen. We will change our thinking, dip our minds into the honey of self-compassion, soften our stories, and listen for the truth, which is that we are already enough. Already worthy. Already whole. That's the *Rosh Hashinnui*, the dimensions of a changed perspective. Let the heavens and earth be witness that on this 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Tishrei in the year 5786, we are in a relationship, a committed relationship with the source of life, with a community and culture that add meaning to our life, and with love for being alive itself. Amen.