

**JOSHUA BELL SERMON**  
**KOL NIDREI 5768**  
**Rabbi Suzanne Singer**

He positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket in the Metro station. By most measures, he was nondescript: a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and a baseball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money, and began to play. It was 7:50 a.m. on a Friday, the middle of the morning rush hour. In the next 43 minutes, as the violinist performed six classical pieces, over 1,000 people passed by. Almost all of them were on their way to work. Each passerby had a quick choice to make: Stop and listen? Hurry past with a blend of guilt and irritation? Throw in a dollar, just to be polite? Does one have time for beauty? On that Friday in January, those private questions would be answered in an unusually public way.<sup>1</sup>

No one knew it, but the fiddler was one of the finest classical musicians in the world, playing some of the most elegant music ever written on one of the most valuable violins ever made – handcrafted by Stradivari during his golden period. The musician was Joshua Bell, a onetime child prodigy. At 39 Joshua Bell is now an internationally acclaimed virtuoso. He's also tall and handsome. Interview magazine once said his playing "does nothing less than tell human beings why they bother to live." This incognito performance was arranged by *The Washington Post* newspaper, as an experiment in priorities. Bell decided to begin with "Chaconne" from Johann Sebastian Bach's Partita No. 2 in D Minor. Bell calls this piece "one of the greatest achievements of any man in history." Composed on the eve of the European Enlightenment, it is said to be a celebration of the breadth of human possibility. Bell played with acrobatic enthusiasm. The sound was nearly symphonic, carrying to all parts of the Metro arcade as the pedestrian traffic filed past. So, what do you think the response was to this amazing performance?

In preparing for this event, editors at *The Post Magazine* discussed how to deal with likely outcomes. The most widely held assumption was that there could be a problem with crowd control. In fact, the opposite happened. There was no crowd. In the three-quarters of an hour that Joshua Bell played, seven people stopped to take in the performance, at least for one minute. Twenty-seven people gave money, most of them on the run. That left 1,000 people who hurried by, oblivious, many only three feet away, few even turning to look. People scurried by with cups of coffee in their hands, cellphones and iPod buds in their ears. The adults who rushed by said they were busy, had other things on their mind. Ironically, one man was listening to a song on his iPod by the British rock band,

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Rabbi Ed Feinstein, senior rabbi of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, CA, for making me aware of this story during a Board of Rabbis of Southern California High Holy Day seminar in 2007. I am also grateful to *The Washington Post*, for its detailed coverage of this story, from which I drew extensively.

The Cure, about failing to see the beauty of what's plainly in front of your eyes. A shoeshine man who works at the Metro station noted: "People walk up the escalator, they look straight ahead. Mind their own business, eyes forward.

Everyone is stressed. Do you know what I mean?" In his 2003 book, *Timeless Beauty: In the Arts and Everyday Life*, British author John Lane writes about the loss of appreciation for beauty in the modern world. The Metro experiment may be symptomatic of that, he says – not because people don't have the capacity to understand beauty, but because it is irrelevant to them. Now, there's a scary thought. "This is about having the wrong priorities," Lane said. If we can't take the time out of our lives to stay a moment and listen to one of the best musicians play some of the best music ever written; if the surge of modern life so overpowers us that we are deaf and blind to something like that -- then we must ask: What else are we missing?

Interestingly, every single time a child walked past Bell's performance, he or she tried to stop and listen. And every single time, a parent scooted the child away. The poet Billy Collins observes that all babies are born with a knowledge of poetry, because the beat of their mother's heart is in iambic meter. As we grow older, however, Collins says, life slowly starts to choke the poetry out of us. But this does not have to be so.

I believe that one of our goals during the Days of Awe is to try and recapture that sense of poetry, that "radical amazement" described by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. "Wonder, or radical amazement," he writes, "is the chief characteristic of the religious man's attitude toward nature and history. One attitude is alien to his spirit: taking things for granted, regarding events as the natural course of things." Religion, for Heschel, is not primarily about accepting a set of beliefs, or following prescribed rituals. Religion, for Heschel, is a way of knowing the world. To quote another great rabbi, Edward Feinstein, the opposite of religion is not doubt or disbelief or secularity. The opposite of religion is boredom – to look at the world and find nothing engaging, nothing surprising. The opposite of religion is to miss the mystery and grandeur of reality. The opposite of religion it is to witness a spectacular sunset and push down the car's sun visor without a moment of amazement and wonder. For Heschel, "Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of happiness lies in understanding that life without wonder is not worth living."

Appreciating life, in all its wonder, is something we tend to place at the bottom of our priority list. Most of us are, indeed, very busy and very stressed out. I don't know if you find this to be the case, but I have an exceedingly hard time getting people to respond to my emails and my phone calls. Often people don't even read the emails or, if they do, they get distracted by other pressing matters and forget all about getting back to me. Or people make commitments to become involved in one thing or another, but, with all the good will in the world, they are simply unable to come through. Have you tried to get together with a friend for

lunch lately? The earliest they can squeeze you in is in about 3 weeks. And have you noticed how many people are exhausted, lacking sufficient sleep to remain healthy and productive?

We are all so drained. We are all in need of spiritual renewal. Which is why the Jewish Holidays and Shabbat are such a gift. They virtually force us to stop and smell the roses – if we would only let them. Jewish tradition insists that we appreciate and enjoy life's many offerings. Torah's attitude towards art and beauty is unmistakable. Look at the incredible detailed instructions for the materials and construction of the Mishkan, the moveable sanctuary in the desert. These include multi-colored jewels and gems; fine linen and skins; rich yarns, and woods and metals; intricate patterns and texture for the priestly garments; elaborate details for the making of the ark, the cherubim, and the menorah, which was to be fashioned with extraordinary precision, including calyxes and flowers.

The Torah's discussion of the Mishkan dispels the mistaken notion that the Torah instructs the individual to restrict himself to the internal, spiritual realm, and that a person's duty is to involve himself solely in Torah and mitzvot without expressing interest in other, external areas, without developing the deep, natural sense of beauty, imagination and aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Torah views depriving oneself of life's pleasures as a sin. As you know, we don't have monks or nuns in Judaism. As I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah, the closest we come to such an institution is the *nazir* – someone who sets himself [or herself] apart for God by abstaining from wine and other intoxicants.<sup>3</sup> When the nazirite's term is completed, the Torah says that he [or she] must go to the entrance of Mishkan and sacrifice a sin-offering to God.<sup>4</sup> So why a sin-offering? According to Maimonides, the 12<sup>th</sup> century rabbi, physician, and Philosopher, the sin was in taking the vow in the first place.<sup>5</sup> Thus, we have a duty, to enjoy the gifts of God's world. Judaism asks no one to take a vow of poverty, chastity or self-mortification. Living life to its fullest, benefiting from the natural pleasures God has granted us, exalting in our humanness, and elevating our self-esteem -- these are the mandates implied by Maimonides' response. Indeed, in the Talmud, Rabbi Abbun says: "In the next world, a person will be judged for all the fine fruit that he saw but did not eat."

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<sup>2</sup> Parshat Tetzaveh, *Beauty In Judaism*, Torah MiTzion web site, Avromie Brauner, Montreal Kollel, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> (Numbers 6:1-4)

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<sup>5</sup> From Naso Commentary on URJ site, 5763, "RAMBAN AND RAMBAM: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME SIN," Rabbi Bradd H. Boxman.

A Chassidic tale – a simpler one than I told on Rosh Hashanah – illustrates this point. Once a pious Jew applied for a teaching position at a yeshivah and without too much prodding revealed certain points about his character. Even in the coldest days of winter, he only dressed in the thinnest of white linen garments. Every Monday and Thursday, when the Torah was read, he fasted. And if lust tempted him, he rolled in the snow until he turned blue, freezing his desires in the ice. The Rosh Yeshivah – the head of the academy – took him to the window and pointed out a white horse in the distance. "You wear a linen garment, but this animal doesn't even have that," he said. "Like you, it also rolls in the snow, and I wouldn't be surprised from the look of those ribs that this horse fasts more than twice a week. So should I hire the horse to teach in our yeshivah?" The Rosh Yeshivah then told the pious Jew a midrash. In the next world, he said, God will ask us four questions: Did you allocate time for the study of Torah? Did you deal in good faith with your fellow man? Did you hope for salvation? And: did you enjoy the pleasures of My world? "I know what you'll say to the first three," said the Rosh Yeshivah, "but what about the fourth?"

As we have journeyed through the Ten Days Of Awe, we have asked ourselves some tough questions about our behavior over the past year. Were we generous or selfish? Were we honest in our business dealings? Did we try to do our best? But we must also ask: Did we take the time to enjoy a glorious sunset? Did we savor the flavors of a good meal? What role did art, and poetry, and music, and dance play in our lives? As we move into the year 5768, let us heed these beautiful words in Gates of Prayer :

*Days pass and the years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles. God, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing; let there be moments when the lightning of Your Presence illumines the darkness in which we walk. Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns unconsumed. And we clay, touched by God, will reach out for holiness, and exclaim in wonder: How filled with awe is this place, and we did not know it! Teach us to recognize Your presence in creation. Grateful then for Your gifts, we will declare: Blessed is the Eternal One, the holy God!*

After the concert in the Metro, Joshua Bell headed off on a concert tour of European capitals, then back to the States to accept the Avery Fisher prize, recognizing him as the best classical musician in America. Next time a Joshua Bell performs before us, let us not be deaf to his music.