

## High Holy Day Speech – 2015 (Bob Ritter)

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha'Olam, Sh'hecheyanu, V'Kiyemanu, V'Higianu LaZman HaZeh. Praised are You, the Eternal One our God, Ruler of the Cosmos, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this moment.

And thank you, our members and supporters for helping Vassar Temple to reach now. One might say, to keep the Ner Tamid light on. I remember Seth Erlebacher saying when he became President how impressed he was by all the people who run things at Vassar Temple. Committee chairs, event planners, and volunteers, religious school teachers, officers and Trustees, staff and contractors. Their names appear in our bulletin, our reminders, on our website, Facebook and blog pages. And some are anonymous, doing mitzahs quietly for the pure satisfaction of righteous acts. Thank you all!

And now, I appreciate the privilege to share my thoughts about VT's transition from the year 5775 to 5776. I've titled my thoughts,

### **Riding the Light - A Balancing Act**

I quote, "In a small patch of sky researchers say they have glimpsed the beginning of time. They have found the faint microwave glow of when the universe was one trillionth of one trillionth of one trillionth seconds old. Or maybe, they found something scientists cannot explain."

In his poem, "Evidence of Holiness" Alden Solovy says,

Suppose G-d  
Plays hide and seek  
Among the stars

Could it be,  
Could it be,

That the Painter,  
The Composer,  
The Sculptor,  
The Author of all Being,

Left us a trace of glory  
For us to find –  
Using ripples in the  
Fabric of the cosmos?

"In Jewish mysticism, this primordial light—what cosmologists might call the Big Bang—is synonymous with God, or ein sof, "a boundless, endless light," says Rabbi Daniel Matt, a renowned Kabbalah scholar.

A familiar Jewish mystical image involves the overwhelming energy of God's light shattering the vessel that held it and scattering into countless "holy sparks" that spread throughout the universe. The mystical tradition of "raising the holy sparks" refers to the Jewish mandate of tikkun olam, or repairing the world.

Light seems to infuse everything Jewish, both physically and metaphorically. Each expression of light in Judaism is a manifestation of the primordial light, the light of God. The righteous people (tzadikim) in the Garden of Eden are said to “bask in the light of Shekhinah [the Divine presence],” and in Psalms (27:1) G-d is described as “my light and my salvation”.

Einstein imagined riding on a light beam. And in doing so "The dividing line between past, present, and future became an illusion". Light is a time traveler. So when we ride light we ride time. When we ride the light, we balance ourselves between the past and the future.

Where we came from is not necessary where we are going to. But where we come from will always be with us. Moses was speaking to US TOO on the plains of Moab before the Israelites entered the promised land. The light and our covenant is timeless.

Yet no matter how far back you look, or ahead you try to see, life is lived in the middle, better know as - NOW. The only sure thing about the future is, it isn't here yet! Which is why we have the opportunity to make some choices about it NOW!

NOW, for the last few years, has been a balancing act. When one is balancing themselves in a physical sense, we hold out our arms. A tight rope walker carries a long pole. But when we're riding the light, trying to find a balance, we need to reach out to the past on one side and to the future on the other. In the context of Vassar Temple, we have to reach back to the reasons VT survived 167 years, and forward to a vision of what will make us a meaningful congregation for a couple in their late twenties or early thirties starting a family and looking to their future. To members like Lila Matlin and Elaine Lipschutz and to members like Dan & Shira Teich, and the Rolands.

NOW, this place in the the middle of time, is a time of transition for Vassar Temple. A transition filled with many choices. A time for decisions. A time to confront the obsolescence that time causes, as we seize the opportunities it offers.

Your Temple Officers and Board understand this. Time took its toll. We have done a lot these last few years to make up for that. A new boiler, mitigated flooding with a drainage system and additional sump pumps, new AC components, we refurbished classrooms, our East Chapel and Balcony, renovated our kitchen, abated mold and asbestos. Led lighting is being planned to reduce our electric bill and our carbon footprint. We'll install heating elements to deal with ice build up which damaged our roof and caused leaks. We hope to give our social hall a face lift this year and offer it to you as an extremely affordable venue for special family occasions such

as major anniversaries and milestone birthday's, bar & bat mitzvah celebrations, and more. Please plan ahead and, won't it be nice to combine Rabbi's blessing with your life's blessings.

I dream of a patio garden connected to our front portico where there are two huge bushes today. A patio where we can gather and schmooze, for example when we pour out of HHD services, or wait for our children or grandchildren in school. And where a Sunday school teacher can take their students on a nice day to sing songs.

Time has led to other changes and opportunities. We've seen the retirement of Rabbi Golomb and welcomed Rabbi Berkowitz. We are strengthening ourselves through inclusivity as interfaith families and the LGBT community enjoy full rights and acceptance here. We redid our website and expanded our use of social media. We hired a new office manager, organized our office, and better leverage software. We're updating our bylaws. We will enjoy new musical sounds aided by our new electric piano thanks to a gift provided by the Lipschutz fund.

And sometimes we need to make time. We are committed to attracting new members and new leadership. (I can think of 4 new families this past couple weeks.) We just need more people to say Heneni, here I am! Here I am, to chair a committee or help with its mission. Here I am to sing, learn, or pray. Here I am to provide my children a Jewish identity. Here I am to help Vassar Temple in other ways.

We also need to be out in the community saying here we are! Here we are to help you discover or rediscover the beauty and greatness of Judaism, and in the process find a new family ready to greet you with loving acceptance.

We also have heard you! We are refocusing on our religious school. We are seeking ways to make the spiritual life at Vassar Temple even more meaningful. Again, we have heard you, and we are determined to make the temple as affordable as possible.

Perhaps the most profound and proud achievement during my time as one of your Temple's leadership is something you have been looking at. Our Stained Glass Windows. Which we restored this summer. And will be dedicated this coming Hanukkah.

To do so, we reached back to the past, to the families for whom the windows were dedicated, the Matlin's and the Gross's, and to my VT religious school classmates, the Efron children, in order fund the restoration that would allow light to stream through these magnificent works of art again.

These Stained Glass Windows (in our sanctuary) are a time portal. To me they symbolize the light that the Devine gave the world, the light that is the Jewish people, the light of the love that was the inspiration for the windows, Dr. Melvin Matlin, and the love that funded the windows in the first place, and that built and sustains this temple. As one looks out through those windows they are a prism through which we should see the world. We can imagine the future as a better place by virtue of the Jewish values they stand for when we step outside this temple to be as it says in the Book of Isaiah, "A light unto the nations," (I'goyim). And, when one is outside, coming down our walk, and one day through the patio garden, trying to look in through these windows, if you really look, you can see the soul (neshama) of Vassar Temple.

Now, please, look up over our ark. See the Ner Tamid, (which is a gift of the Matlin family). It is a symbol of Israel's ancient temple, and God's eternal and imminent presence. Who keeps that symbolic and real light of Judaism lit? Does God keep that light lit, or do we? We do!! Through our deeds of loving kindness - chesed. As well as from a practical, yet still religious standpoint, through our contributions and gifts, as God commanded us to in Deuteronomy.

Last year, at this very time from this very spot, I finished my president's speech by saying, all that matters, all that matters, is that being a Jew matters to you. In my final Rosh Hashanah speech as your temple president, I want to append to that. If being a Jew matters to you, then this temple does too. Because this temple is those windows. It is the ner tamid. It is the light. It is the past, and it is the future. It is the NOW!

Finally, someone I was communicating with recently was trying to make a distinction between prayer, blessing and the mystic's attempt to commune with God. He told me "To pray, is to summon Divine light. To bless, is to attempt to bend that light toward holy purpose, including consolation, healing, joy and peace. Communion is the attempt to enter that light."

And with that concept on our mind I'd like to conclude with (excerpts from) a poem by Alden Solovy he calls: Inside the Light

**A rainbow shines  
Inside the light.  
If you could be the dew drop  
You would always see it.**

**Stillness waits  
Inside the light.  
If you could be the sky  
You would always feel it.**

**The sunrise dawns  
Inside the light.  
If you could be the horizon  
You would always find it.**

**Freedom flows  
Inside the light.  
If you could be the wind  
You would always ride it.**

*Beauty rises  
Inside the light.*

*If you could be the sparrow  
You would always reach it.*

*Mystery pulses  
Inside the light.  
If you could be the wonder  
You would always know it.*

*Majesty reigns  
Inside the light.  
If you could be the wisdom  
You would always hear it.*

*Faith rests  
Inside the light.  
If you could be the eagle  
You would always hold it.*

**Your soul glows  
Inside the light.  
If you could be yourself  
You would never leave it.**

**Shana TOVA!**