

Rosh Hashanah... with the Beatles

Rabbi Hal B. Schevitz

Rosh Hashanah Day Two

2 Tishrei 5787 / September 13, 2026

Last year, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, I began by speaking about my love for, and the universal appeal of, the Beatles. If you recall, I then turned to the main subject of my sermon, which was John Lennon's "Imagine." In case you forgot, I would like to remind everyone that I do not like that song, and my sermon last year was my best effort to demonstrate that the world that the song offers is one devoid of connection, love, and identity. As it turns out, there is another song by Lennon that leaves us without a sense of spirituality or the feeling that there is something greater than ourselves. In December of 1970, a year before "Imagine," Lennon released a song simply titled "God," which begins with the statement, "God is a concept by which we measure our pain."

Well, Mr. Lennon, tell me how you really feel! After repeating that first line, the song continues with a mantra-like cadence, as Lennon tells us of all of the things that he rejects. "I don't believe in magic. I don't believe in I-ching. I don't believe in Bible. I don't believe in Tarot..." The list goes on: "I don't believe in...Hitler, Jesus, Kennedy, Buddha, Mantra, Gita, Yoga, Kings, Elvis, Zimmerman (referring to Bob Dylan), and lastly, "I don't believe in Beatles. I just believe in me. Yoko and me."

When one carefully listens to Lennon's song, it becomes clear that it is more than just a song. It is a statement of faith and identity, and the rejection of external saviors in favor of personal truth. Lennon crafted "God" as a therapeutic release, shedding the vestiges of his Beatles persona to lay bare his personal convictions and doubts.

Through this tearing down of idols and slaying of sacred cows, Lennon is not merely attacking religion. He is the ultimate iconoclast, rejecting all higher powers. Human beings seek meaning in all sorts of objects or ideas: politics, celebrities, ideologies, and wealth. Lennon's critique echoes the ancient biblical prophets. Isaiah mocked idolatry and Jeremiah exposed false securities. A well-known midrash (Genesis Rabbah 38:13) teaches that Abraham smashed the idols in his father's workshop. Lennon, however, takes this one step further, and in my estimation, one step too far.

In an effort to free himself from the systems that might box him in or define him, Lennon dismantles everything, even the most meaningful ideas and belief systems that have

sustained and enriched humanity for thousands of years. At the end of this process, only the self remains. Well, the self and Yoko.

Lennon declares that meaning, responsibility, and truth must be grounded in the individual, unmediated by anything beyond it. However, stripping everything down means that there is nothing greater than ourselves: no wonder, no awe, no humility, no connection, and no sense of obligation or responsibility to other people or the world. Instead of simply removing all other idols, Lennon has actually created his own form of idolatry: focusing on, and elevating, the self to the detriment of everything else. This may have been Lennon's personal journey, but it leaves the listener wondering what they should do with their lives and why life has any meaning at all. We can put this song in a category with "Imagine" as Lennon songs that I do not like.

But John Lennon is not the only Beatle who had something to say about God and spirituality. George Harrison composed many songs about the inner life and the search for something transcendent, and his message could not be more different from his fellow Liverpoolian. Where Lennon contracts and tears down, Harrison links together and dives deeper.

One of Harrison's most beautiful ballads is called "Life Itself." In it, he sings directly to God: "You are the One/You are my love/You send the rain and bring the sun/You stand alone and speak the truth/You are the breath of life itself." The song continues Harrison's mystical exploration by recognizing that all peoples address the Divine Presence in equally legitimate ways. He sings, "They call you Christ, Vishnu, Buddha, Jehovah, our Lord/You are Govindam, Bismillah, Creator of all." Where Lennon rejects all of these, Harrison affirms every name that humans assign to Divinity.

Harrison's spiritual attentiveness shines through one of his most famous songs, the megahit "My Sweet Lord," which debuted within weeks of Lennon's "God," in the fall of 1970. In it, Harrison sings, "I really want to see you/Really want to be with you/really want to see you, Lord/But it takes so long, my Lord" and later, "I really want to know you/Really want to go with you/Really want to show you, Lord/But it won't take long, my Lord." Wanting to expand his listeners' understanding of how we speak to and about God, the quiet Beatle pulls a little switcheroo on his audience. At the beginning of the song, the back-up singers respond to his lyrics with the word "Halleluyah," a Hebrew word from the Bible meaning "praise God," with which his predominantly English-speaking, Western, Christian listeners would be most familiar. By the end of the song, the same back-up singers have switched to Sanskrit, invoking such words as Krishna, Vishnu, and Parabrahma, the Supreme, ultimate reality in Hindu philosophy.

With this clever change, Harrison is making the point that he makes in “Life Itself”: while all peoples have different names for the Divine, it is the same underlying Spirit of the Universe which we all long for.

“Life Itself” is like so many biblical psalms that praise God for the mere existence of creation. “My Sweet Lord” is a prayer of yearning, disguised as a popular song that is frequently still played on Classic Rock and Oldies radio stations. All human beings naturally look for transcendence. And sometimes, the search is enough. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook taught that “...holy longing is the foundation of everything and the highest spiritual apprehension.” (Sh’monah K’vatzim 2:186) and “Divine yearning within the heart is the soul revealing itself.” (Sh’monah K’vatzim 4:55)

This day, Rosh Hashanah, encapsulates the best of Lennon’s and Harrison’s theologies, but our holy day then asks something more of us. Like Lennon, Rosh Hashanah rejects all other commitments as idolatry, but it elevates God over everything else. Like Harrison, Rosh Hashanah answers our need for relationship with the Divine, but it responds to our yearning by requiring us to live up to certain moral expectations. Understood rightly, we might say that the strengths and deficiencies of their perspectives match up with the choreography of longing that we find in Musaf: Malkhuyot – longing for something beyond ourselves; Zikhronot – the desire to be known by it, and Shofarot – reaching towards it when words are unable to express our yearnings.

In Malkhuyot, we express our longing for a world to be governed by God’s moral and just vision. Whereas Lennon’s iconoclasm ends with the self, Malkhuyot refuses to allow the individual to become the final authority. We proclaim God’s sovereignty, but then, we plead to God, מְלִיךְ עַל כָּל הָעוֹלָם בְּבִבְדוּדָךְ, “Reign over all the world in Your Glory.” We implore God, וַיֵּדַע אֱתֶה פְּעֻלָּתוֹ, “Let every being know that you created it.” We do not just affirm or observe; we make a demand of God for divine closeness.

Like Harrison, we desire to be part of something greater than ourselves, but we want God to have a claim over us, holding us accountable to something beyond our preferences, instincts, and constructed meanings. Where Lennon wants to protect our individual freedom by removing any sort of obligation, and Harrison wants to transcend the self by dissolving into the unity of the universe, the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah insists that we stand in relationship with God, and ask to be held responsible, with the freedom to respond.

In Zikhronot, we wish to be recognized, known, and remembered. We say to God, אֲתָה זֹכֵר מַעֲשֵׂה עוֹלָם. וּפּוֹקֵד כָּל יְצוּרֵי קֶדֶם. “You remember the deeds of the world and are mindful of all creatures from the beginning,” and then, כִּי זֵכֶר כָּל הַיְצוּר לִפְנֵיךָ בָּא, “For the memory of every

creature comes before You.” The One who reigns over the universe also remembers each and every one of us. Harrison wants to see and be with God, but the *mahzor* expresses the much more powerful sentiment that God wants to see and be with us. The Zikhronot section of Musaf tells us that the transcendent, cosmic God of Malkhuyot cares about every individual. We do not just melt into the unity of the universe. Each of us matters, and we are noticed and remembered.

In Shofarot, we acknowledge that our longing is so powerful that words cannot express it. Instead, we sound the shofar, an articulation of our desire to be in relationship with God, so pure that we don’t even try to use words. We create a sound that is deeper and more visceral than anything John Lennon or George Harrison could compose. More importantly, tradition teaches that when we sound the shofar’s calls, God listens. A relationship has been created and a covenant is renewed.

We call out to God, and God calls us to account. Our covenantal response is Teshuvah: changing ourselves, Tefillah: cultivating our relationship with God, and Tzedakah: changing the world around us.

Malkhuyot, Zikhronot, and Shofarot demonstrate for us that we are claimed, we are known, and we are listened to. We do not disappear into a divine unity.

Perhaps it is not fair to compare our ancient rabbinic sages, who composed our liturgy and gave us the language to express our relationship with God, to the poetic musings of a couple of 30-year-olds from Liverpool, England. On the other hand, they were the most famous and beloved musical artists in the world when they composed their songs. John Lennon was right when he said in 1966, “We’re more popular than Jesus.”

But popularity does not make someone a theologian, and a great song cannot tell us everything we need to know about how to live. Lennon reminds us to tear down the idols that falsely claim our allegiance. Harrison reminds us that even after we have stripped those idols away, something within us still yearns for transcendence, for connection, for God.

Rosh Hashanah asks us to take the next step. Malkhuyot reminds us that we are in relationship with something greater than ourselves. Zikhronot assures us that we are known and remembered. Shofarot gives voice to the yearning that words cannot express. And then the shofar stops sounding. The service ends. We walk out of this sanctuary and return to our lives.

The question is what we do next. The answer of Rosh Hashanah is Teshuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah. We change ourselves. We deepen our relationships. We take responsibility for the world around us. Our longing for God becomes meaningful when it changes the way we live.

John Lennon sang about what he could no longer believe. George Harrison sang about the God he desperately wanted to know. On Rosh Hashanah, we are asked something more. Not simply: “What do you believe?” or “What do you long for?” But rather, “What will you do because of it?”

The shofar will call to us again this morning. In its wordless cry, may we hear our own longing to be in covenant with God. And when its final note fades, may we carry its message with us and answer it.

A year before Harrison and Lennon composed their meditations on the Divine, their fellow Beatle, Paul McCartney, wrote “The End,” the conclusion to the Beatles’ final recorded album. Fittingly, he ended with a reflection on a reciprocal nature of love. “And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.” Rosh Hashanah asks something similar of us. We have been claimed. We have been remembered. We have been heard. The question is what we will give in return. May the year ahead be measured not only by what we receive, but by what we give back: to God, to one another, and to the world. Shanah Tovah!