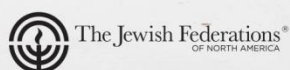


The Orchard



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Jewish Federations of North America Rabbinic Cabinet.....	4
A Rosh Hashanah Dinner Prayer.....	5
Rosh Hashanah Greeting from the Chair of the Rabbinic Cabinet.....	6
Rabbi Lester Bronstein	
Thoughts from the Director of the Rabbinic Cabinet.....	7
Rabbi Gerald I. Weider	
Rabbinic Cabinet Israel Solidarity Mission – August 24-28, 2014 Mission Report..	8
Rabbi Gerald Weider	
 Rosh Hashanah Sermonic Thoughts	
“A Heart Of Many Chambers,” or “Let’s Have An Argument”	9
Rabbi Lester Bronstein	
“Sh’ma Mina: Learn From This.....	14
Rabbi Lester Bronstein	
A Prayer In Time Of Need.....	17
Rabbi Dov Berl Edelstein	
Recovering Judaism.....	18
Rabbi Wayne Allen	
Scandals.....	20
Rabbi Eric Polokoff	
WWJD: What Would Jonah Do.....	22
Rabbi Bonita E. Taylor and Rabbi David J. Zucker	
Building A World Of Love.....	24
Rabbi Fred Guttman	
Ed Koch’s Unique Brand of Judaism.....	28
Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt	
Profiles In Courage.....	33
Rabbi Sid Schwarz	
Someone Is Watching You: Should We Worry About The NSA Program.....	38
Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt	
Comments For The High Holy Days.....	43
Rabbi Paul D. Kerbel	
The Epidemic Of And The Solution To Loneliness.....	47
Rabbi Paul D. Kerbel	
Chosenness.....	52
Rabbi Richard Plavin	
Avinu Malkeinu: Who Does The Inscribing.....	56
Rabbi Amy Scheinerman	
Leaving Is Not An Option.....	59
Rabbi Neal Borovitz	
Superstition And Spirituality.....	61
Rabbi Morley T. Feinstein	
Rosh Hashana Sermon For The First Day Of Rosh Hashana.....	65
Rabbi Robyn Fyer Bodzin	
Change With Sacrifice.....	69
Rabbi Sara Hurwitz	
Kol Nidrei Sermon 5775.....	72
Rabbi Debra S. Cantor	
Rosh Hashana.....	74
Rabbi Michael Melchior	
 Joint Distribution Committee.....	 77
Jewish Agency for Israel.....	79

THE JEWISH FEDERATIONS OF NORTH AMERICA RABBINIC CABINET

The mission of the JFNA Rabbinic Cabinet is to unite rabbis of all ideologies in the work of Kiyum ha'umah, Jewish continuity and tezdekah, acquaint and involve the North American rabbinate with the goals and activities of JFNA, and bring the talents, resources and perspectives of the rabbinate to JFNA and the Federation movement.

The cabinet serves as the rabbinic arm of JFNA, the major agency of North American Jewry for tzedakah. It promotes the unity of the Jewish people in its efforts to support the needs of Jews everywhere by including rabbis from every movement in North American Jewish life.

The Rabbinic Cabinet further seeks to inform colleagues about the most current developments in Jewish life, the needs of our people and the techniques for effective utilization of rabbinic leadership within local communities. In addition, the Rabbinic Cabinet endeavors to apprise the lay leadership of the concerns of the rabbinate, infuse Jewish values and content into the work of local federations and serve Israel and the Jewish people with rabbinical involvement and support.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. Raise the level of knowledge about JFNA in the rabbinate and community.
2. Stimulate and support rabbinic participation in, and relationships with, JFNA and local federations.
3. Assist with and participate in the Federation Annual Campaign by enlarging the scope and intensity of synagogue involvement.
4. Upgrade rabbinic giving and increase rabbinic solicitations.
5. Strengthen the rabbinic, congregational, community, agency and Federation partnership.
6. Engage the next generation of rabbis.
7. Continue education.
8. Develop programs and educational materials about Israel, the Jewish tradition and Jewish peoplehood/community.
9. Serve as teachers and spiritual resources to the leadership and constituencies of JFNA, local federations and the Jewish community.

STANDARDS FOR MEMBERSHIP

Members of the Rabbinic Cabinet should:

1. Be involved in local Federation and campaign activities, support federation work and engage synagogues in the community campaign.
2. Pledge a minimum of \$1000. Rabbis who were ordained less than five years ago should pledge at least \$500.
3. Participate in JFNA missions.
4. Attend the Annual Meeting of the Rabbinic Cabinet and/or regional conferences and special meetings.

ROSH HASHANAH FAMILY DINNER READING



We present you with this suggested reading so that it may be shared with everyone at your holiday table prior to beginning your meal. It may be read in unison by all present, or by the leader of the meal.

We present you with this suggested reading so that it may be shared with everyone at your holiday table prior to beginning your meal. It may be read in unison by all present, or by the leader of the meal.

On this Rosh Hashanah we gather as Jews united across the world to celebrate the new Jewish year 5775.

Once again we feel the privilege of welcoming a new year, and as we do so, we look back at our history with profound pride.

At the same time, we look to our future with both the anxiety that comes from our history, but also with the soaring hopefulness of a people whose Torah teaches hope for God's world.

We face the New Year with the hope that peace will once again reign in Israel and throughout the world. We are concerned about the plight of our fellow Jews who are increasingly facing danger and pray that they may know peace and security. We

are hopeful that the Jewish values of truth, justice and the rule of law will be embraced by all humanity.

On a personal level, as we mark the creation of the universe, let us strive to work to be decent human beings, caring members of loving families and communities, and loyal members of the House of Israel.

As we dip a slice of apple in honey, let us remind ourselves that life is worth living and that a life of Torah and holy deeds brings sweetness into the world.

Finally, as we hearken to the wordless prayer of the shofar, let us listen to the commandment only our hearts can hear: Choose life that you may live.

May we join our fellow Jews in choosing life for the coming year, both for ourselves and for everything that God has created.

Amen

The Rabbinic Cabinet of the Jewish Federations of North America

Rabbi Les Bronstein, Cabinet Chair
Rabbi Jonathan Berkun, Vice Chair
Rabbi Fredi Cooper, Vice Chair
Rabbi Tina Grimberg, Vice Chair

Rabbi Frederick Klein, Vice Chair
Rabbi Larry Kotok, Vice Chair
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Rabbi Eli Weinstock, President
Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt, President
Rabbi Matthew Simon, Honorary Chair
Cabinet: Rabbi Gerald I. Weider
Director of the Rabbinic Cabinet



**ROSH HASHANAH GREETING FROM THE CHAIR OF THE RABBINIC CABINET
RABBI LES BRONSTEIN**

Dear Chevra,

Does the title “Orchard” remind you of the four Sages daring to enter the mystical pardes from which only Rabbi Akiva could return unscathed? So it is with our sacred profession. It’s never certain that we’ll come back from a day’s work free of scratches, whether psychological or physical. Rabbinic work is tough. Our people carry many wounds. They turn to us for healing and help. We give it our best shot.

On the Days of Awe, we have a unique opportunity to reach many of our Jews at once. Our words to them can be a profound source of direction and a beginning of clarification. We can give them a start toward the healing they seek.

May the selections you find in this edition of the Orchard give you encouragement as you begin the task of composing your own sacred words for those who eagerly seek your guidance.

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Chair
JFNA Rabbinic Cabinet

THOUGHTS FROM THE DIRECTOR OF THE RABBINIC CABINET, FALL 2014/TISHREI 5775
RABBI GERALD I. WEIDER

The rabbinic role in securing the future of North American Jewry is crucial, especially when coupled with the work of Federation. That is so because I believe that rabbis hold the key to the hearts and minds of this generation of Jews and the next generation of North American Jewry. What rabbis do and say about Federation will make a difference as to where, how, and why the average Jew in North America gives *tzedakah*. That is why the Rabbinic Cabinet of JFNA (and the Boards of Rabbis that are supported by local federations) are so important.

Simply put, federations need rabbis as religious teachers and exemplars of Judaism and rabbis need federations and *tzedakah* work that they do locally and around the world. This became so obvious to the rabbis who have participated in our recent overseas missions. Each of the rabbis who participated in these missions saw “up close and personally” how federation dollars had saved Jewish lives and souls in Hungary, in Kiev, in Tbilisi and in Israel while at the same time they saw how the hunger for Jewish learning, traditions and values needed rabbinic guidance.

Given the recent events in Israel, how much the more so is this true. Rabbinic support for Israel and the work of JFNA in Israel has made a significant difference. We, as rabbis, must continue to educate our members in relation to support for Israel and support for world Jewry. Working with, and through, Federation we can make a difference.

Therefore, it is my hope and prayer that this New Year will usher in a renewed desire, on the part of both rabbis and federations that we will work together for the benefit of K'lal Yisrael. In the year ahead, I call upon each member of the rabbinic cabinet to reach out to your local federation leadership, both professional and lay, in order to create a spirit of cooperation in support of Israel and in support of your local community. Let us join in creating an awareness of the world of good that federation does within synagogues and at the same time, let us teach the community about how important synagogues are for federation.

If you will take these simple steps, I am sure that this will go a long way in making 5775 a year of good will and a year of sustenance for the entire Jewish community of North America.

Shana Tovah

Rabbi Gerald I. Weider
Director of the Rabbinic Cabinet of JFNA

Rabbinic Cabinet Israel Solidarity, August 24-28, 2014 Mission Report

Overall, the Rabbinic Cabinet Solidarity Mission was a great success. The rabbis who participated in the mission came away with an up close and personal understanding of the events, personalities and complexities involved in the most recent conflict between Israel and the Hamas terrorists. There were several incredibly moving moments of the mission that drove home the point of our being "*Am Eched*", one people united in purpose and understanding that Israel was fighting for all of us in America and indeed in the entire western world.

Our visits (there were several) with lone soldiers in the IDF, with wounded soldiers at Shebah Rehabilitation Center, and with Racheli Frankel (mother of Naftali, one of the three slain teen age boys) moved us all to tears. When we went to Ashkelon (that was as far south as we were permitted to go) we saw the terrible damage that one rocket did to a house and we all then realized how miraculous the Iron Dome was because if all of those rockets had gotten through, the populace of Israel would have been devastated and the Israeli response would have been harsher.

While we were looking at that damaged house in Ashkelon, with Congressman Peter King and former New York Governor David Paterson, a code red signal went off. We all ran together for shelter during that missile attack which was thwarted by the Iron Dome. Both Congressman King and Governor Patterson noted many times during the mission that the battle against terrorism belongs to all, regardless of political party or particular religion and that is why they were proud to support Israel and to be with us on this mission.

We had numerous briefings by officials and individuals who enlightened us as to the situation and its implications. Tali Levanon came to us in Jerusalem as we were not able to go to and see her work in S'derote. She told us of the ground breaking work that the Trauma Coalition (which is JFNA supported) has done to help Israelis all over the south cope with the constant bombardment and other disruptions in their normal lives. Tal Becker of the Hartman Institute gave us an insight into the negotiations which led up to the cease fire. Col. Benzi Gruber led a program called "Ethics and Dilemma's in the Field". He showed us how the IDF officers and ground soldiers have 8 seconds in which to decide to shoot or not to shoot and what this means for a person's conscience. This truly brought home the heroic work that the IDF did under the most difficult of circumstances.

The JFNA Jerusalem office was instrumental in setting up meetings with the American Ambassador Dan Shapiro, Dr. Jonathan Schacter the Chief Political Advisor to PM Netanyahu, and Michael Ratney the US Consul General in Jerusalem. They, along with David Horowitz, Editor of the Times of Israel and Tal Becker of the Hartman Institute provided the group with additional important insights and understanding.

It is hard to estimate the affect this battle has had on the psychic of Israelis, but every single person we met thanked us for coming to Israel at this difficult time and dangerous time. That, in itself, made a major impact on everyone who participated in the mission. As such, I am sure that the rabbis on the mission will all speak about this experience at the High Holy Days and thus reach out to thousands of American Jews with the message that "*Am Yisrael Cha*".....the people of Israel lives through a symbiotic relationship between *Eretz Yisrael* and the diaspora and that we in the Federation system play a vital role in this equation.

In closing let me note my thanks to Rabbi Joe Potasnik of the NY Board of Rabbis and Rabbi David Seth Kirschner of Temple Emanu-el in Closter, NJ for helping with the organization and implementation of the mission.

Rabbi Gerald I. Weider
Director of The Rabbinic Cabinet
The Jewish Federations of North America

“A HEART OF MANY CHAMBERS,” OR “LET’S HAVE AN ARGUMENT”

Rabbi Lester Bronstein

My dear teacher, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, loves to tell this story. He was a rabbinical student in New York, having come from a classical Reform background in Detroit and three years at the equally classical Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. One afternoon – this was the mid-Sixties - he was sitting in a little hole-in-the-wall milchig restaurant in the Lower East Side, parked at one of those Formica tables of yore, enjoying a bowl of borscht and working his way through a big tome of Talmud, trying to negotiate his Gemara assignment.

An older man with a just-off-the-boat hat and garb – and *accent* - was sitting a few tables away. There was practically no one else in the place. “Nu, young man,” said the onlooker, “I see you are a student.” “Yes,” said my future teacher, startled by the interruption in his train of thought. “So,” said the older man, “if you are a student, let’s have an argument.” “But I believe in God,” retorted the young Kushner, now thrown entirely off balance. “Okay,” said the old Jew, “so I don’t.”

It was as if the old fellow had invited the young Talmud student to a game of chess. “You want the white pieces? I’ll take the black.” Kushner simply didn’t understand the point at the time, but he used it later on as a standard example of religious dialogue within Judaism.

In some religions, I suppose, there is only one color of pieces in the game. Everyone plays one side of the board, or they can’t play at all. That’s also the case in many secular societies, where a certain expression of ideology constitutes patriotism, while any variation spells treason. Or in certain towns or neighborhoods, not unlike our own, where most people share a political and cultural point of view and anyone who veers very far from the norm gets *politely* shunned.

In Judaism – at least in the Judaism created by Hillel and Shammai and Yohanan ben Zakkai and Akiva and Ishmael and Yehuda Hanasi – there is simply no “belief” without a back-and-forth discussion; without an argument, a “*mahloket*,” literally a “parting” between two sides, one *helek* and another *helek*, thus a *mahloket*.

Here is the locus classicus of this great Jewish idea, in Pirkey Avot in the Mishnah: *kol mahloket shehi l’shem shamayim, sofah l’hitkayem*; Any argument that is for the sake of Heaven, in the end it will succeed; *kol mahloket she-lo l’shem shamayim, any sofah l’hitkayem*; any argument not for the sake of Heaven will in the end not succeed.

Now, “succeed” is not exactly what the text says. It says *l’hitkayem*. That term carries the sense of “existing,” as in “the argument will continue to exist.” What can this mean?

Rabbi Amy Eilberg, leading us through five days of texts on conflict resolution at a rabbis’ and cantors’ retreat this past summer, suggested the following: An argument fought for the sake of Heaven – i.e. for ultimate Truth and Goodness – will in fact *never* end. It will never cease to exist. It will continue to generate more and more Torah of truth and goodness, for as long as the parties stay in the game and continue to argue in good faith, trusting one another not to try and pull a fast one and “win” the argument. As long as both parties push each other toward a truth that is greater and more profound than any small-minded agenda either party could bring to the table, then the argument itself – the *mahloket* – will keep producing holy meaning, holy energy.

In serious Judaism, we don’t “resolve” good important arguments. We keep them going. Without our arguments, we would cease to exist, not as human beings, of course, but certainly as Jews.

Let’s raise the stakes. Here’s a harder text. This is from the Tosefta, which was sort of an early beta version of the Mishnah:

One may say to oneself, “since the House of Shammai says ‘impure’ and the House of Hillel says ‘pure’ - one prohibits and one permits - why should I continue to learn Torah?” Therefore the Torah says, *d’varim, had’varim, eleh had’varim* – “words, the words, these are the words.” All the words were given by a single Shepherd, one God created them, one Provider gave them, the Blessed Ruler of all creation spoke them. **Therefore make your heart into a many-chambered room**, *lev hadrey hadarim*, and bring into it both the words of the House of Shammai and the words of the House of Hillel, both the words of those who forbid and the words of those who permit. [Tosefta Sotah 7:12]

Now for some context. There’s a long tradition of these Hillel-Shammai “controversies,” going back to the 1st century BCE founders of these two opposing schools of Rabbinic Judaism. One school is supposedly more liberal, while the other comes off as “strict constructionist,” to employ an anachronism. Yet it’s the juxtaposition of the two schools, rather than the eclipse of one by the other, that largely shapes and colors the Judaism we inherited from the Rabbis. Clearly the Rabbis wanted this “controversy” or *mahloket* style to typify their Judaism. They even invented an Aramaic term for their tennis-match or chess-match style of studying Torah: *shakla v’tarya*. Give and take. Parry and thrust.

And clearly the Rabbis wanted Hillel’s gentle and inclusive approach to “win” most of the time, and thus set the halakhic standard for the future, but not to win in a way that would end the discussion. What was supposed to “win” was Hillel’s tone. Thus, in another Talmudic passage [Eruvin 13b] we read, “Why was the law set according to the House of Hillel? Because they were gentle and humble (*nohin v’aluvin hayu*) and they taught both their own words and the words of the House of Shammai. And not only this, but they taught the words of the house of Shammai before their own.”

In our Tosefta passage, the speaker expresses frustration over the seeming futility of continuing the *mahloket*. If one always says yes and the other always says no, then what’s the point? If the two sides never see eye to eye, then why go on learning Torah? Why not abandon the whole Jewish enterprise?

Their answer is subtle. The anonymous collective voice of the Rabbis says, in effect, “I get your dilemma. But you’re looking for the wrong kind of resolution to these arguments. The answer is not in the yea or nay, but in the relationship created by the two sides as a result of hanging in. The resolution happens when the dominant side incorporates the needs and worries of the weaker side into its own argument. And furthermore, victory is achieved for everyone when both sides continue to recognize the legitimacy and sincerity of their counterparts.”

In the end, says this text, each of us has many chambers in our heart, i.e. in our capacity to integrate multiple concepts and emotions. If we are to have any hope of continuing as a people, we’ll need to implore each person to use all of those storage rooms to incorporate the many conflicting “words” that ultimately flow from the same unique source, i.e. from the Creator of *everything*, every word.

And don’t forget the important pun that Biblical Hebrew offers us when it employs the same word for ‘word’ as it does for ‘thing’ or ‘item,’ namely *davar*. Language pushes us to think of words as something real. D’varim are d’varim: Words are things. Words matter. Words create worlds. Words can hurt and words can heal. *And words that you disagree with come from the same source as the words you concur with!*

Therefore, “make your heart a heart of many chambers” in order to absorb a multiplicity of arguments, ideas, opinions – and in order to remain open to morphing your position before it ossifies and you lose all hope.

We would do well to get our entire Jewish people to make our collective heart a “heart of many chambers” a *lev hadrey hadarim*. I say this not because I believe we have lost civility in our dialogue across the many streams and factions of Jewish life. Rather, I say it because I think that in our effort to create a more civil tone in the Jewish world (and in the larger world, too), we’ve begun to shy away from any dialogue, any true *mahloket*. We quickly hush up crucial dissent about Israel, about our relationship to American and world politics, about deep matters of faith (or our crises of faith), about the shifting

boundaries of Jewish identity, and the rapid morphing of the very *meaning* of Jewish identity among our youngest Jews.

About the last thing we would want to bequeath to our next generation is a Jewish people who can't bear to hear each other's heartfelt opinions. Indeed, a Jew who separates him- or herself from the community may be dallying with treason, but Jews who argue from an existential core of identification and love should not be silenced in the name of unity, or of civility.

And, my fellow American northeastern liberal New York Democratic upper middle class two-advanced-degree secular-leaning Zionist-but-not-religious-Zionist civil libertarian Reconstructionists, I'm not only preaching to them, the Jews who don't fall into the ten or so key categories I just rattled off. I'm talking to us as well. I'm saying that we have more or less stopped contributing to the *mahloket* because we find it too frustrating and too impolite. Or too dangerous. Or too threatening, too apt to make us take stands where we've been able to avoid taking a stand.

I believe we should use the Hillel-Shammai model to retrieve a vibrant Torah of dialogue about crucial subject matter – a dialogue that stays polite and civil, but that goes *beyond politeness and civility toward true speaking and listening*.

That would be a *mahloket* in which AIPAC people and J-Street people would have lively debates defined by great gulfs of belief and policy, but even greater feelings of mutual trust and a shared dream. That would be a *mahloket* in which young campus Jews on two sides of the occupation question could come together for Shabbat dinner, and perhaps band together to stand against those on campus who seek to delegitimize the Jewish people's national liberation movement with their insidious "BDS," or "boycott, divestment, sanction." For sure, BDS relies on creating a sordid caricature of Israel, but one which, in our current stifling of true dialogue, becomes more and more difficult to debunk, and more and more compelling for our young adults to believe, heaven forbid.

Now you know our young adult Jews. You know them well. You raised them. You should be proud of them. They have fully absorbed the humanitarian values and ideas we breathed into them. They believed us when we taught them that the core of Torah was *v'ahavta l'reyacha kamocha*, "love your neighbor as yourself." They did less well getting our message about *pikuah nefesh*, the principle that survival takes precedence over most other commandments.

Therefore, when they see such things as a shutting down of dissent about Israel's settlement policy, or a reluctance to deal with the lack of spiritual vitality in our shuls and schools, or our tendency toward pat answers about core religious and political issues, they fail to see in these matters the threats to Jewish survival that we older folks tend to see. Unless we quickly bring our kids into a vibrant "heart of many rooms" dialogue about what bothers them and us, we will have no more Jewish legacy to bequeath.

I know that everyone spends at least ten minutes at their Rosh Hashanah lunch talking about their rabbi's sermon. Invariably, you will ask each other if your rabbi addressed the hot-button issue of the moment, whatever it happens to be. I think you can tell from my presentation up to this point that I believe we face hot-button issues much greater than the Park51 controversy, which everyone hopes their rabbi will at least mention.

But let's for a moment put *that* discussion into the context of my *mahloket l'shem shamayim* framework. I personally signed petitions supporting the right of the Muslims to build their center on Park Street without fear of scorn or reprisal. My argument is that defending their right represents the absolute best of American principles. That feeling stems from my deep belief that the United States is every bit as much a "concept" as it is a "country" in the traditional sense. But because it is also a country, it needs to defend itself. I believe that the Islamic center poses no bodily threat – and no political threat, either – and therefore does not put into play our *pikuah nefesh* clause, our survival factor.

I also believe that anti-Muslim slurs and fear-mongering are terribly wrong, not because they're uncivil, but because they're immoral. They go against our every belief in seeing the *tzelem elohim* or "image of

God” in all persons, and our commitment to avoid making others “the other.” And groups I belong to issued statements to that effect as well. I’m proud to have weighed in publicly on the side I think is right.

That said, I fully believe that the project came about in a spirit of bad faith, of obfuscation, of dissembling. I say this as someone very involved in the New York Board of Rabbis, who are at the forefront of interfaith dialogue in the most religiously diverse metropolitan area in the world, and as one who therefore knows more than he wants to about the back-story. At its best, this project was a missed opportunity to make a statement of positive identification with the multivalent religious tradition in American culture. At worst, it was a cynical testing of our Constitutional gumption.

We will pass that test. The center will be built on its intended site, or at least not far away. Good things will be done there in the name of the best of Islamic values and American values. And I have no doubt that great *interfaith* work will come about on that site as well. But our good will was depleted in the process.

And, as you see, most Americans have not been able to pose as Hillel to the other’s Shammai. Civil libertarians – that’s my side - smirk at the small-minded jingoism of the opposers. Opposers mock the snobbishly insensitive smugness of those of us who would put something as abstract as constitutional law before their own offended sensibilities. So all *shakla* but no *tarya*. All thrust and no parry. All talk and no listening. No one valuing their beloved opponent’s point of view, their opponent’s pain, their opponent’s longing for truth.

Enough on the mosque, whether or not it’s a mosque, at Ground Zero, whether or not it’s at Ground Zero. Trust me, if this had been resolved by August 1, rabbis would be expected to address the next burning issue on Rosh Hashanah morning, whatever it would have been.

And I think I know what that “next thing” should be: to explore how our influential American Jewish community can get behind Prime Minister Bibi and give him the courage to defy his right flank and extend the moratorium on settlement-building past the middle of Sukkot, at least to give the other side no ground to back out of these fragile, precious talks. Although I recognize that some of you will certainly want to make a cogent argument against my position! I personally believe your opinion to be dangerous for Israel and world Jewry, BUT I believe the squelching of your argument to be even MORE dangerous. So I will listen, and I know you will do the same.

Here’s my rule of thumb for the New Year. First, when approaching someone with an obviously different approach to an issue dear to your heart, say *lamdeini*. “Teach me. Teach me what you’re doing, and why.” That is, start by assuming that the other person has thought it through.

Second, follow the dictum of the Rabbis. Give your opponents *kaf z’chut*. “The benefit of the doubt.” Assume they are no less sincere than you are, and that they are made from the same “stuff” as you, the *tzelem elohim*, that “divine image” imbedded in every cell of our bodies.

Third, be brave enough to say *sh’ma kolenu*, “hear our voice.” Politely, civilly, lovingly, constructively, honestly, *make your voice heard*. Look the other *panim el panim*, “divine face to divine face,” and say what needs to be said.

So: *Lamdeni* – “teach me.” *Kaf z’chut* – “benefit of the doubt.” *Sh’ma kolenu* – “hear our voice.” And in every listening and telling and listening again, *lev hadrey hadarim* –keep open the many chambers of our heart.

Rosh Hashanah lunch beckons. We still have shofar blasts to sound, and to *listen* to. *To sound and to listen*. So take this last text as a parting challenge for us in our new year. This is from the 4th century Babylonian rabbi, Mar bar Rabina. His little meditation has become *the* preferred prayer to be spoken thrice daily as a closing to the Amidah. It is a prayer that we would find a way to speak from - and listen with - our heart:

*Elohai n'tzor l'shoni me-ra
God guard my tongue from evil
U's'fatai midaber mirma
And my lips from speaking falsehood
V'lim'kal'lai nafshi tidom
And let me be tranquil toward those who fling curses at me
V'nafshi ka'afar lakol tihyeh
Let me be humble as dust to all who need me
P'tach libi b'toratecha
Open the chambers of my heart to your Torah
U'v'mitzvotcha tir'dof nafshi
Let my soul run to do your holy deeds
V'chol hahoshvim alai ra'ah m'heyrah hafer atzatam v'kalkel mahashavtam
Let all who bear me animosity be brought quickly to reconsider their ill-will
Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'hegyon libi l'fanecha
May my words of prayer, the meditations in the chambers of my heart be seen favorably, my precious
one, my rock and champion.
Ado-nai tzuri v'go'ali*

Rabbi Lester Bronstein
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“SH’MA MINA: LEARN FROM THIS”

Rabbi Lester Bronstein

In my family, the old running joke was “gotta eat.” As a kid I once asked my mother why we were having a big meal with my grandparents on Christmas day. “Because,” she said, “your father and grandfather are off from work, and you kids are off from school, so it’s a chance to get together.”

“Yes,” I protested, but why such a festive meal on a day that’s not our holiday?” “Well,” she replied, “we’ve gotta eat.”

Let me ask you a trick question: What key factor determines the ritual clock for Jews? I’ll make it more to the point: The Torah tells us that we’re required to recite the Sh’ma every evening and morning, *b’shoch b’cha uv’kumecha*. How did the Rabbis figure out the proper time to say it, and why?

Now I’m asking for a reason. First, you and I have just dived into the most massive and extensive liturgical experience of the Jewish year. So I want to know what all of this means at its simple core.

Second, you and I have a hunch that there’s more to all of this than what is generally called “praying to God.” Praying to God may have little to do with it. Waking ourselves up to some basic Godly message is probably more to the point. So what’s the message? What’s the take-away from today, other than “hey, we gotta eat”? Unless “gotta eat” is in fact the message.

Let me take you to the very first page of the Talmud. The Talmud is twenty thick volumes long. It has sixty-three tractates. If you were on the editorial committee of the Talmud at the end of the fifth century CE, wouldn’t you choose as the lead-off discussion something that would set the tone for the entire enterprise?

So it begins like this: “*mey-eymatai korin et sh’ma b’arvin?* From when may we recite the Sh’ma in the evening?” And because this is Rabbinic Judaism, it will give several answers. It will even make a joke about Rabban Gamliel’s sons coming home from carousing all night and admitting they hadn’t yet said it, whereupon Dad tells them they have until the crack of dawn to get it done.

But the answer that sets the tone is this: “From when may we recite the Sh’ma in the evening? From the time that the Kohanim, the priests, enter their houses to eat their *terumah*.”

What is *terumah*? Food contributed as a tax to the Kohanim by regular Israelites, since Kohanim didn’t own land and grow their own food. Only Kohanim could eat this food. But it was plain old food. It wasn’t even sacrificial food. Just food. Just dinner. Just evening supper.

Now realize the Rabbis’ ingenious answer: How do we determine when to recite the touchstone liturgy of all Judaism? Not by when the Kohanim offer some solemn sacrifice and thereby bring purification to some otherwise impure individual or situation. Rather, we recite the Sh’ma at the time when the priest sees the sun is going down, and he can no longer offer any sacrifices for that day, so he takes off his high and holy garments, washes up, and goes home to have dinner with his wife and kids.

How else to say it? We know when to recite our most important devotional words based on the moment when high holiness takes a back seat to basic human needs; to food and family and parenting.

You would think the evening Sh’ma would be our way of taking note of nature in all its grandeur; the earth spinning from daylight to darkness, promising to return us to sunlight and another Sh’ma. The great order of the cosmos. Our tiny selves submitting to divine unity and splendor.

But no. Rather, we turn to the divine as a basic need, reminded by the even more basic need of the evening meal after a hard day’s honest labor. The Kohen sees the stars come out, say the Rabbis, and he goes home.

Kohen? What Kohen? Oh him? That's just Yonkel. Yonkel Faigenholtz. Sure he's a kohen, but we know him as the guy who goes home to eat at the end of the day. I mean, after all, he's got a family to tend to. I mean, hey, he's got priorities. Say! Have you got anything to eat? Need a meal? Can you spare a meal? Hey! Gotta eat, you know.

Then someone in this opening discussion of the Talmud remembers an alternate tradition. He says, I know a version of this question that starts the same way but gives a different answer. It goes like this: "From when may we say the evening Sh'ma? From the time that the poor man comes home to eat his bread with salt until he rises from his meal." Hey, doesn't that contradict the other answer?

The Rabbis work this problem until they solve it with one of the most telling phrases in all of Talmudic literature. They say: "The poor man and the Kohen have the same time..." In other words, both of them work until it gets dark and they can't go any longer, and then they both trudge home to eat. True, one has a nice meal waiting for him, while the other goes home to bread and salt, and a five-minute seating at best. But the need is the same. And that's the point.

The Rabbis note another possibility: we could link our Sh'ma to the time that regular people eat their Shabbat dinner. But they conclude that regular people don't have the same clock as either the Kohen or the poor. Thus, regular people – who are the ones who are going to have to recite this evening Sh'ma in the first place – should set their internal clocks by both the holiest person in Israel *when he's not doing his holy thing* and the poorest person in Israel *when he is simply trying to get by*.

And since this constitutes the lead-off discussion of the Rabbis' foundational idea of fixed communal and individual prayer times, it essentially establishes the notion that for Jews prayer is linked to an awareness of human need, and especially, of human *neediness*.

Yes, we pray *when* the stars come out. We pray *when* the new moon of autumn appears in the sky, as it will today. We pray when the sun sets on the sixth day of the week, or when the column of light, the *amud hashachar*, cracks the dawn. But we pray because the poor are in need of more bread and salt, and because working people from the highest to the lowest stations of society need to re-connect with their stomachs and their families and their loved ones.

So it may not be such a misnomer to say that we daven today's service, shofar and all, in order to go home and have our Yom Tov lunch. Gotta eat!

But you know where I'm leading you. I'm asking you to turn your thoughts simultaneously to the holy *and* to the needy; to the birth of the cosmos and to the hunger pains of the poor and the unemployed. I'm not going to read statistics to you, since you already know them and they will only make you nod off even before your big Yom Tov meal.

I would, however, urge you to think – as we go through the powerful list of 'who shall live and who shall die' in the rest of today's liturgy – to think about all of those secular and religious points of contact we have with good persons of every faith – locally and globally – to remember what it ultimately means to dare to let words of prayer cross our lips:

I invite you to contemplate the work of the Westchester Coalition for the Hungry and Homeless; Westchester's Food Patch organization; Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger; and Hazon, with its "vision" of environmental sustainability; to think about the Global Hunger Shabbat initiative

sponsored in November by the American Jewish World Service; and the UJA-Federation, and the work it has done through all of its beneficiaries to help unemployed Jews and non-Jews alike find their way back to work and dignity through its Connect-to-Care program; to the Joint Distribution Committee that still brings aid to the impoverished of our people across the globe after all these decades of service; and of course to our own BAS Cares; and our social action chevra's food drive going on between now and Sukkot; and our Bikkur Cholim chevra and our new BAS Connections initiative, all designed to help people in one way or another to "come home."

I invite you today to think of our brothers and sisters in the State of Israel, who this summer – in the face of all the whirlwind of activity surrounding the Palestinian statehood proposal at the UN – pitched symbolic tents in every little town and large city in the land, not unlike our own tent, at least in purpose; who, in a sense, turned politics if not on its head then surely on its side, in order to say to themselves and the world that a society run by the Jewish people will not tolerate the obscenity of an ever-widening gap between haves and have-nots, if it means that the have-nots don't have a place to come home to or a meal to sit down to; that a Jewish society runs as much on a vision as it does on a budget; that a Jewish society – or any society in which Jews are involved - works according to the sacred principle that the Kohen Gadol and the poorest man in town see the same stars, and feel the same pangs in the belly, and come home to essentially the same table.

Now back to our Talmudic episode: The Rabbis conclude this little discussion with the words “*sh'ma mina*,” literally “learn from it,” “hear from it,” or more idiomatically, “derive from it.” This is a Talmudic term meaning that one may derive halakhic norms or behaviors from the preceding discussion and summation. So, in the case of our discussion, “*sh'ma mina*,” know that since both the Kohanim and the poor would go home when the stars first came out, you should conclude that that's the earliest moment when you, a regular person, could begin your evening Sh'ma, or what eventually became the Ma'ariv, or evening service. *Sh'ma mina*. Learn from it.

But don't learn it from the stars! Learn it from the humanity of the situation! Learn it on the one hand from the flesh-and-blood humanity of the most powerful person in society. Learn it on the other hand from the empathy you feel for the lowliest and neediest one among you.

See the pun? *Sh'ma mina* means “learn or derive from this.” But it can also mean “literally derive the Sh'ma from this.” Your *Sh'ma*, your sum total of prayerful words, from the simple evening Sh'ma to the elaborate services of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and every big and little b'rachah in between, should come *mina* - from this awareness of what really matters in God's world. Dignity. Humanity. Justice. Communal caring.

Sh'ma mina. Learn it from this tent. Learn it from these thousands of words, all derived from the basic evening utterance. Learn it from the one who goes home to eat his bread and salt. From those who put down their tools and go home to eat a meal with loved ones. And from those who provide for everyone in need, and who will not say amen until all who are hungry can go to work like a mentsch, and then come home and eat like a mentsch.

Sh'ma mina. Let us learn from *this*.

Rabbi Lester Bronstein
White Plains, NY

A PRAYER IN TIME OF NEED

Rabbi Dov Berl Edelstein

Lord, the needs of your people are very numerous.
Their minds are confused and their endurance is fleeting.
Day after day, life is filled with worry, and days are filled with tragedies.
Some are in financial straits, others in fear of their health.
Some are caught in an inter-generational struggle,
Others are absorbed in the wheel of mysteries.
Be charitable to us God, with your generous spirit, wisdom, and kindness.
Open our eyes so that we may see the inspirational rainbow shining through the gloomy clouds,
And that amid the threatening dark of the night sky we might witness radiant stars.
Remove from us and our loved ones the nagging scourge of doubt, anxiety, and panic.
Grant us strength, vision, faith, and confidence.
With your compassionate heart, God, show mercy for our human suffering.
Help soothe our constant fears and privations,
So that we may not seek out the faults of our fellows,
But rather appreciate the goodness, nobility, and beauty of each human being.
May it be so, and let us say Amen.

By Rabbi Dov Berl Edelstein (retired), Kfar Saba, Israel.

(Translated from the Hebrew by Jack Y Edelstein, Ph.D)

This short prayer was composed by Rabbi Edelstein a few days prior to the tragedy of 9/11.

A retired rabbi, educator and lecturer, Rabbi Edelstein is a Holocaust survivor who has devoted his life to interfaith tolerance and cooperation, to freedom for Soviet Jewry, and to supporting the Nation of Israel. Information about his autobiographical memoir "Worlds Torn Asunder" can be found at www.HolocaustMemoir.com.

RECOVERING JUDAISM

Rabbi Wayne Allen

I begin with a story. It is a story located in the Polish town of Chelm; a town parodied for its “wisdom.” It’s a sunny day in Chelm, and two Jews go for a walk. Suddenly, the sky grows cloudy and it starts to pour. “Open your umbrella,” says the first man to his friend. “It’s no use,” the second man replies. “It’s full of holes.” “Then why did you bring it?” his friend asks. “To be honest with you,” the man says, “I didn’t think it would rain.”

As we move into the second half of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Judaism faces a severe challenge. Judaism is in danger of devolving into an umbrella full of holes, carried around like the Jew in Chelm because we think it important yet remains entirely useless. To put it differently, the challenge is not whether Jews will exist, but what kind of Judaism will persist.

I am supremely confident that God’s promise is unbreakable and the Jewish people are an eternal people. I fully agree with Daniel Gordis that Simon Rawidowicz’s characterization of Jews as “the ever-dying people” is better reformulated as “the never-dying people.” But I am less than confident that what Jews will carry around with them will be anything more than an umbrella riddled with holes. I worry that Judaism will become more an historical identification than a religious affiliation; more a statement about ancestry and less a way of actually living. The recently published Pew report only serves to further erode confidence in the future of Judaism. When the intermarriage rate in the United States is now calculated at 58% and 70% among the non-Orthodox, we have reason to worry. When less than half of Jewish children are getting any Jewish education at all, we have reason to worry. When a significantly high percentage of Jews believes that the defining feature of Judaism is having a good sense of humor, we have reason to worry.

And yet, there is a glimmer of hope. My hopefulness is not based on the many attempts to spin the otherwise grim statistics. My hopefulness is based on a report from the New York Times this past June on the work of small but dedicated group of engineers and physicists working out of an abandoned McDonald’s restaurant.

The story begins in 1978. NASA launched the satellite ISEE-3 into an orbit between the earth and the sun in order to allow scientists for the first time to observe the phenomenon known as solar wind. It’s orbit also allowed for the satellite to pass through the tail of the comet Giacobini-Zinner in 1985. With its mission completed, astrophysicists had little interest in the satellite that was retired in 1997. In 1999 the space agency upgraded its transmission network and all the equipment that allowed scientists to communicate with ISEE-3 were discarded.

Yet 36 years after launch and 15 years after abandonment, the “zombie spaceship,” as reporter Kenneth Chang calls it, is coming home. Lead engineer Dennis Wingo was convinced that recovering the satellite was “the right thing to do.” Raising money from 2,238 donors through a crowd funding website, Skycorp, the company headed by Wingo, successfully communicated with ISEE-3 using the Arecibo Observatory radio-telescope in Puerto Rico. With a slight adjustment to the original calculations that could have caused the satellite to crash into the moon, Wingo and his team are sure they can put ISEE-3 into a stable earth orbit. A shuttle could subsequently recover the satellite.

This story cheers me. It buoys my optimism for the future of Judaism. ISEE-3 was, in the scientific world, a relic. It persisted only because of inertia but served no useful purpose. It was important for the task it once performed but was no longer of any real value. But to those who saw the satellite differently, for those who appreciated its contribution and believed it to still be functional – ISEE-3’s designer Dr. Robert W. Farquhar, now 81, wants to send it to another comet - it was something worth preserving. The message, I believe, is clear. So long as we have

a core of Jews who appreciate the value of Judaism and foresee its applicability, Judaism will persist. The only question that remains is whether we will be counted among those who see Judaism as a relic of

the past or as a guarantor of our future. The choice is ours. Let us choose wisely; not for Judaism's sake, but for our own.

Rabbi Wayne Allen
Toronto, Canada

SCANDALS

Rabbi Eric Polokoff

You had absolutely no choice in being here – by here I don't mean at synagogue, though assuredly some here had little choice in attending tonight. Thinking a bit larger, you had zero choice in joining the world. You had no say in becoming you – that was entirely your parents' doing, together with God (or some would say "chance"). As our Jewish Sages acknowledged "Against your will you are born and against your will you die." Yet you were born, and having arrived, consider the world you've been welcomed into: a world of much pain and anguish, anxiety and illness. In my family we're more apt to find ourselves sleepless over worries – not giddily listing our many blessings. And not to be a downer but think of the corruption, bullying and violence. Even at our most whole we are incomplete.

With so much dishonesty and cruelty, with hypocrites and abusers, with so many scandals, bad boys, and a few femme fatales, and in the wake of so much damage and destruction they leave behind, is it any wonder the Talmud reports:

For two-and-a-half years Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai debated. Beit Shammai argued that humankind would have been better off had they never been created, while Beit Hillel argued that it was better for humankind that they had been created. In the end the Sanhedrin put the issue to a vote and decided in favor of Beit Shammai. Indeed humankind would have been better off had they not been created, but now that we have been created, one should "examine one's actions."

While Hillel and Shammai deliberated for two-and-a-half years, lest it soon be 5775 I'll cover the same ground in just a few minutes.

Do you have an urge to counter complaints with "Stop kvetching and being so negative. Life isn't all bad. There's love, wonder, pleasantness. I'm glad I'm here." If so, you're part of Team Hillel.

In contrast there's Beit Shammai. They give ancient expression to the Woody Allen quip "Life is full of misery, loneliness and suffering... and it's over much too soon." Or the old Borsht Belt joke: "The food is awful and such small portions." For Shammai people invariably disappoint. This is the worldview of the broken and despairing.

Two thousand years ago amidst Roman occupation, the Sanhedrin, an ancient Jewish congress meeting in Jerusalem, called the philosophical question. Surprisingly, team Shammai won that day. The apprehension was that great. But the Rabbis added a caveat, an instruction: "Now that we have been created, we should examine our actions." In other words, we must undergo the challenge of self-assessment of these High Holy Days. For no matter how we got here... and no matter how messed up things are... we are still on the hook for what we do. This caveat is Hillel through and through. He also taught: "In a place where no one is being human – you must strive to be human." Created in God's Image, we each have a conscience.

We gather today to examine our deeds and re-set our paths. In so doing we must never be "holier than thou." Our Judaism instructs that someone who repents stands higher than one who never sinned. Indeed, a colleague of mine explains why we include a service of remembrance over the High Holy Days. What are reminded that the dead can't forgive – so we must make amends now, with the living.

Let us grasp that while we didn't choose to be born and will likely have limited decision-making capacity over our deaths, we are given substantial latitude in determining how we will live over the course of the days allotted to us, along with our ultimate legacy and remembrance.

Over the course of these Holy Days, like those rabbis in the Sanhedrin, we get to vote. What teachings will guide us? Openness and determination? Or cynicism and defeat? The answer will come on how we examine our deeds and exercise our souls, on whether or not we accept injustice, on the value we give to community, prayer, study, integrity, Repentance and forgiveness, to the inner voice that can propel us forward in conviction and dignity.

For perhaps the biggest scandal of all would be to accept other scandals as inevitable, or to view ourselves as unalterable, as now beyond help or beyond hope. This is the choice that's ours and while we are alive there's no time to waste.

Cain Yehi Ratzon. Be this God's Will.

Rabbi Eric Polokoff
B'nai Israel of Southbury Connecticut

WWJD: WHAT WOULD JONAH DO?

Rabbi Bonita E. Taylor, DMin,
Rabbi David J. Zucker, PhD

Jonah is arguably our most successful prophet. After all, he told the people of Nineveh what to do, and they did it! This is unlike our other prophets who fiercely tried to sway their respective demographics with passionate rhetoric, often to no avail. Yet, for all his triumph, we know very little about Jonah. He was Amittai's son, but we know nothing of his mother or whether he had siblings or other details of his family lineage or medical history.

We do not know if Jonah was tall or short, obese or thin, or hairy or bald. Unlike the prophet Elijah, we do not know how he dressed. Was he messy or neat, or stylish or trendy? We do not know if he was rich or poor. Unlike the prophets Amos or Ezekiel, we do not know his occupation. Was there a "family" business that he was expected to join? Did he live on an inheritance? He does not appear to work for his living and he seemed to have enough money to live on and to book passage on a ship. We do not know if he was "white collar" educated or "blue collar" educated or not educated at all. He appears to have some social skills and a general sense of theology and geography. We do not know if he was the pride of his family or its shame. Finally, we do not know if the reason he attempted to run away from what should have seemed inevitable to him was rooted in his past experiences or his unconscious.

This is so unlike today when we clamor to know every private detail of the lives of our latter day "prophets": their backgrounds, including their family dynamics, medical histories and school connections, who they associate with – platonically, fraternally and intimately, what they look like, and how they spend their money. A good case can be made that our current-day focus upon the medium distracts us from the message.

Perhaps, one of the lessons that is inherent in Jonah's story – one reason that it is read on Yom Kippur, our most sacred day – is directly connected to Jonah's anonymity. For, if we do not know what Jonah looked like, perhaps he looked like you. Or me. Perhaps, his personal dynamics mirrored those of your own. Or mine. In the same way that Jonah did not always behave honorably, perhaps, this is true of you. Or me. Finally perhaps, there are times and places where we incorrectly run away from what we should perceive as inevitable.

On some level, Jonah represents each of us. For all of his success, he was reluctant to engage the world the way that God directed him to. Undoubtedly, he was like many of us. Can you remember an occasion when you "heard" what you believed was God's "call" and you ignored it? This may be despite the fact that the "thought" recurred, sometimes over a period of years. From time-to-time, we pursue actions that are not in our long-term best interests. We know that we need to make a change and yet, we continue along the wrong path, ignoring the signs and warnings that attempt to redirect us. In chapter two, a great fish swallows Jonah; he feels engulfed; the waters close over and envelop him (Jon 2:1, 4, 6). As adults, we need not read this as literally as do our children. As adults, let us read this for its metaphoric value and ask ourselves whether we really need to wait until we are drowning or being otherwise consumed before we turn around?

The High Holy Days are about turning and returning. They are about new opportunities to change. This Yom Kippur, when we read the Book of Jonah, let us picture ourselves in his place and in doing so, ask ourselves a few important questions. When, like Jonah, have we perceived holy encouragement to change? Why did we run away from following this guidance? What would motivate us to turn around and by doing so, to turn towards God? Jonah may have been a reluctant prophet, but eventually he does what God demands of him. When the time comes in this new Jewish year, will you? Will I?

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Christians and Jews, (Wipf & Stock 2013). *The MATRIARCHS of GENESIS: Seven Women, Five Views* (co-authored with Moshe Reiss) will appear in 2014 (Wipf & Stock). He publishes in a variety of areas. See his website, www.DavidJZucker.org

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BUILDING A WORLD OF LOVE

Yom Kippur Morning

Rabbi Fred Guttman

I begin with a love story from Jewish tradition. In our tradition, when you wish someone a happy birthday, you say “Ad Meah ve esrim” which means “You should live to be 120 years old.” One hundred and twenty is considered to be the optimum age because it is the number of years that Moses lived. By the way, in Jewish folklore, wishing that someone would live even a day longer than one hundred and twenty is considered a curse.

So the story goes that a new rabbi moves to a new town. He decides to visit a nursing home. He meets Mrs. Goldberg and asks her, “How old are you?” She says 80. He says, “May you have another 40 good years.”

He then meets Mr. Schwartz. Asks – “How old are you?” He says 100. May you have another great twenty years!”

He then meets this incredibly old woman, Mrs. Cohen. She is hard of hearing. He yells at her. How old are you. She answers 120. His response - “Have a great day!”

On this the holiest of days and on a totally different and more serious note, last night I mentioned how in the Kabbalah, “judgment,” *gevurah* and “love” *chesed* are two oppositional forces. On the Kabbalistic tree of life, these forces are called *gevurah* and *chesed*. Balancing between them is called *Tiferet* which may be translated as “beauty.”

The idea of balance is very important. If we are too judgmental, then we will have no friends. But you certainly need to be judgmental when driving a car. If you do not think that this is important, try being a passenger in a car with someone whose judgment you question! *Gevalt!* On the other hand, if you have too much love, too much *chesed*, you will give away everything you own and become an impoverished hermit.

So last night was the “judgmental” sermon, a difficult sermon which relayed that it would be ridiculous to respond with *chesed* to those who gas innocent children, ours or anyone else’s!

In order to attempt to achieve some sort of balance this morning, I want to talk about love, *chesed*, not in terms of global events, but in terms of our relationships with others.

I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah that one of the reasons why I love being Jewish is that we are a people that, throughout the centuries, have wrestled with the most difficult questions that there are. We are not satisfied with simplistic answers to such questions.

So let me ask a very difficult question. At almost every service we have here, we say a blessing for those who are ill. Can or do these prayers really make a difference? Is it possible to change what God has decreed? Are things simply *basherte*, fated? To what extent is any change really possible? For that matter, how much of reality can we really change? How much of a difference can I or for that matter anyone else really make in this world?

I know that I have felt that way at times and you probably have as well. Some of the times, it seems incredibly *hutzpadick* that an individual, especially me, can make a difference at all, much less change the reality of the situation. For example, does my speaking last night concerning the situation in Syria really mean anything? Frankly, I am simply the rabbi of a wonderful congregation in Greensboro, North Carolina. How much of a difference can I or any here make regarding this situation?

Of course, while we may not be able to make a difference globally, we might be able to make a difference locally and on personal issues. A friend of mine recently confided in me that she had not spoken with her daughter in many years. How might she be able to achieve some sort of reconciliation after such a long time?

Certainly, we find echoes of this in the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer read earlier. The prayer begins with the words, “On Rosh Hashanah it is written in the metaphorical Book of Life and Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die.” The prayer ends with the words, “But repentance, prayer and charity temper judgment’s severe decree.”

Here Jewish tradition gives us an unambiguous and unequivocal answer. Change is possible! The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah which we observed ten days ago, is not only the beginning of the year. It can be, if we would let it be, Rosh Hashinui – the beginning of change as well!

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Rabbi Elimelech Weisblum of Lizhensk, who is known as the “Noam Elimelech,” expressed an interesting way to look at the nature of change. In his mind, “God created letters and these letters in their original state are pure potential.” The letters are for him what we would call the building blocks of reality. For the Noam Elimelech, a righteous person has the ability to reconfigure the letters so that they form whatever words are desired. In his words: “These configurations are what a *tsaddik*, a righteous person, does in prayer—making new combinations. The *tsaddik*’s prayer does not cause change in the Creator, as the letters were always there. All the *tsaddik* is doing, all the righteous person is doing is creating combinations.” In so doing, the righteous person sees the potential for good in the building blocks and actualizes them or helps to actualize them into reality.

Understand what he is saying. The building blocks are there and those cannot be changed. Some of the time, we cannot change what is. We cannot change the reality of the situation. We cannot change for example the fact that a parent and child have been estranged for many years. However, what we can do and this is what this season is really about, is to reconstruct the pieces of the building blocks of reality differently. The Noam Elimelech is teaching us that each of us has the ability to change is the whole picture that the pieces make. We cannot make other building blocks or exchange them. What we can do is to change the letters, make new words and in so doing make a new the total reality. This is the way he “reframes” the situation.

This is all pretty remarkable when one considers that the current psychological technique known as “reframing” was put forward by the Noam Elimelech more than 200 years ago.

When it comes to change, reframing is taking a particular belief about a situation or context and trying to let go of that belief in order to have new insights and interpretations. As such, we see the situation in “another frame.” From these new insights, we grow and we may change. New possibilities of relationships may open up.

When a psychotherapist helps a client see things from another perspective, he is using reframing to help that person feel better and be more capable of dealing with the situation. An example might be a senior high school student who has been looking forward to playing soccer during his senior year. During the first game, he is injured and the season is lost. How can we as parents and educators help him to reframe the situation into seeing it as an opportunity for something positive? “Oh – You might not be able to play soccer, but what else can you do? Improve your grades? Take up guitar? Volunteer work? Etc.” Another example of reframing might be helping a person who feels that his mother always interferes in his life to see that maybe the interference is coming from his mother’s desire to protect him.

Religiously, Jews have been “reframing” difficult situations for centuries. Often when something difficult would happen in our lives, we would say, “Gam Zu Letovah – This too is for the best!” From such a statement would not only come recognition and acceptance of the situation, but also a reframing which would lead to different beliefs, a new strategy and a new opportunity to respond to the difficulty with creative change.

So now let’s return to my friend who recently told me that she had not spoken with her daughter in many years. How might reframing help her see the situation differently and in so doing perhaps be successful in reaching out to her daughter for reconciliation?

Here when the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer says, “repentance prayer and charity temper judgments severe decree,” our tradition is saying to her repent or change the way you look at the situation with your

daughter. Though prayer, ask for God's help. Finally as you reach out to her, be charitable in your attitude towards her. It might not go easy at first, but with your efforts and with God's help, change brought on by reconciliation is possible!

Returning to the thought of the Noam Elimelech one finds even more amazing teachings on this. In his view, a person who is righteous has a greater ability to reframe situations because that person tends to be filled with love of both God and every person in the world. He cites a passage from the Talmud (b. Berakhot 17a) in which the great Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai who lived almost 2000 years ago at the height of the most brutal Roman oppression in Israel once said: "I greet every person in the marketplace before they have a chance to greet me." Using a bit of literary license, one could say that Rabbi Yochanan is saying that he greets everyone, even the Roman official or soldier who could turn out to be his enemy or who could threaten him or the Jewish people, before they have a chance to greet him.

For the Noam Elimelech, Rabbi Yochanan was a Tzaddik. In the Noam Elimelech's time during the eighteenth century in Poland, there were two groups of people who really caused him problems. One group was the anti-Hasidic Misnagedeem who rejected the idea of a rebbe and of joy as part of traditional Judaism. The other group which really caused the Jewish people problems were the Polish peasants and landowners. Therefore it is not at all surprising that when the Noam Elimelech looks at the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel, he maintains that the angel is either a scholar or a foreigner. In that story, Jacob is about to see his brother for the first time after twenty years. Twenty years earlier, Jacob had stolen Esau's birthright. The meeting which is about to happen could be one of reconciliation or strife.

In order to bring about reconciliation, Jacob will have to reframe the situation and according to the Noam Eliumelech, he does so through wrestling – not physical wrestling with an actual foreigner, but with that which is foreign to himself and his soul. It is as though he is saying; I need to work on getting rid of the hurt, the pain, the anger which has been a part of this relationship with my brother for more than twenty years. That is not a part of my spiritual and psychological makeup of which I am proud. It is like a wound on my soul and it is foreign to the way God wants me really to be.

So when Jacob comes to make peace with Esau, he is desperately trying to reconfigure the building blocks of their reality, the aspects of their troubled relationship. Therefore, he approaches Esau with the same level of love that Rabbi Yochanan had in greeting his potential enemy.

It was because of what we would call the power of love that the combinations could be changed. In order to change the reality with Esau, he has to be non-judgmental and not see him as the brother with whom he has been estranged for the past twenty years.

On this the holiest day of the Jewish year, this is such a wonderful teaching for all of us! Accordingly, the power to change depends on our ability as individuals to engage in that struggle within ourselves. If we can even for a moment open up to that place where we are "ohev lakol," a lover of all people, then we will have the ability to change reality. Such change cannot come from a place wherein we are critical, judgmental of others, especially of those whom we need to love the most.

In the view of the Noam Elimelech, such change through reframing is indeed miraculous! Furthermore, he is teaching us that we have the ability to make miracles by helping people reframe things differently. However in order to do this, we will first have to engage in our own struggle to get there.

We have got to get our judgementalism, or hyper-critical attitudes, our anger and our arrogance. In place of these, we have to bring the attitude of chesed, of love and loving-kindness to bear.

I realize that this is often very difficult and that often we cannot do this for very long, but if we can do this even for a few moments, a few hours, days or weeks, terrific!

To be such a person, you and I will need to become active listeners. We will need to have far less judgment and far more love for others. And if you and I can do this, we will really be on our way to establishing relationships based upon love and understanding, rather than relationships built upon

criticism and being judgmental. Reconciliation will happen. Relationships will be improved and change will occur. The severe decree spoken of in the prayer will indeed be tempered!

Sometimes, the words we say are not as important as the way in which we listen. The story is told of a rabbi who came to make a Shiva (condolence) call at the house of a bereaved family. He came into the house without saying a word, sat and listened to the family for almost an hour, all the time without saying a word. Finally, he said to them, "May God console you with all who mourn in Zion and Jerusalem" – and left.

A week later, one of the family remarked to a friend that the rabbi was the most compassionate, loving and holy person that he had ever met. All of this because he had sat and listened, not because of what he did or did not say.

This week, we commemorated the twelfth anniversary of the tragedy of September 11th, a day in which almost three thousand innocent people were murdered by callous terrorists. For families who lost loved ones, the wounds seem still fresh even after years. I know that even among the survivors, the trauma of that day is still present.

Twelve years ago on a date on or soon after September 11th, a daughter was born to Rabbi Menachem Creditor. Rabbi Creditor struggled with how as the years went by, he would explain this terrible tragedy to his daughter.

Being inspired by the verse from Psalm 89:3 which says,

כִּי־אָמַרְתִּי חֶסֶד יְבִנֶּה עוֹלָם

"For I have said, The world is built by love."

He wrote a very beautiful song called "Olam Chesed Yibaneh." The English words of the song are:

I will build this world from love.

And you must build this world from love.

And if we build this world from love,

God will build this world from love!

Yes friends, the theme of today is that change is possible! The severe decree may be averted! The building blocks of our lives may be rearranged, if we would simply become less judgmental and more loving to one another. As Rabbi Creditor writes: "And if we build this world from love, then God will build this world from love.

In so doing, may we all be signed and sealed for a blessing in the book of Life.

Amen

Rabbi Fred Guttman
Greensboro, N.C.

ED KOCH'S UNIQUE BRAND OF JUDAISM

Yom Kippur

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt

Earlier this year we lost a giant, a proud Jew, Idi Yitzhik, the former mayor of New York, Ed Koch. Koch was to say the least, a colorful figure who succeeded another Jew, Abe Beame. Elected after several terms as a progressive Democratic congressman, he liked to describe himself as a "liberal with sanity." He is credited with invigorating New York's economy and saving the city from bankruptcy while promoting New York so tourists would want to come back, along with many other accomplishments during his 12 years as mayor.

An opinionated, outspoken brash politician, always willing to speak his mind, he did not shy away from controversy or from taking a stand on issues, whether consequential or insignificant. In 1987 he refused to allow the New York Giants to have a parade permit to celebrate their Super Bowl victory because they played their home games in New Jersey. During a subway strike he shouted words of encouragement to New Yorkers who were walking across the Brooklyn Bridge, and ultimately succeeded in breaking the strike. When the price of movie tickets went up drastically and suddenly, he took it upon himself to deliver movie reviews to let New Yorkers know what films were worth seeing and which were not worth the price of admission.

He was the walking definition of chutzpah. After he was defeated by David Dinkins in his bid to serve a fourth term, New Yorkers would often stop him on the street and ask him to run again. He was known to reply, "The people threw me out. Now they have to be punished."

Michael Bloomberg eulogized him at his funeral, "Tough, loud, irreverent and full of humor and chutzpah, he was our city's quintessential mayor. More than anything else, he understood that New York was more than just a place; it was an attitude." One of the most notable things about Koch and his attitude was how proud he was of being Jewish. He wore it on his sleeve. Conscious of his high profile when he choked on food in a Chinese restaurant years ago, he told reporters it was watercress he had eaten, even though in reality it was pork.

Koch reminds us of the guy who was so Jewish he was upset he was at St. Andrews hospital. He told his family he wanted to move from St. Andrews to the local Jewish hospital. His family asked what the problem was, was it because he was not getting good medical treatment at St. Andrews? "No," he said, "they treat me well." They asked if the nursing staff wasn't good, and he said they were fine. They asked, "Is the food not good here?" "No, I can't complain about the food or anything here." Perplexed, his family asked him if everything was fine where he was, why then does he want to move to Mt. Sinai hospital. He says, "Because there I can complain!"

Koch denounced Louis Farrakhan, and called out Jesse Jackson for anti-Semitic statements at a time when most other politicians were afraid to take such a stand. If other politicians had the advantage of being born with a silver spoon in their mouths, the son of Polish immigrants was born with a bagel and schmear in his mouth. The ultimate kibbitzer, he knew how to work a crowd and could schmooze with anyone, asking his trademark question, "How'm I doin'?"

He realized that part of the power and beauty of America is not so much that it is a melting pot where we give up our cultural identity and ethnic heritage, but that America is exceptional because it is a mosaic where our diversity is to be celebrated for it contributes to the beauty of the tapestry that makes us a unique nation. Precisely because he was so Jewish he was able to relate so well to non-Jews. He had a deep respect for Catholicism and Cardinal John O'Connor was one of his closest friends, coming to console him on the day in 1989 when he lost his bid for a fourth term.

Koch epitomizes the classic Lenny Bruce routine from the late 1950's, early 1960's.

"If you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter even if you're Catholic; if you live in New York, you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish, even if you're Jewish.

Kool-Aid is goyish. Evaporated milk is goyish, even if the Jews invented it. Chocolate is Jewish and fudge is goyish. Fruit salad is Jewish, but lime Jell-O is goyish. All Drake's Cakes are goyish. Pumpernickel rye is Jewish and, as we all know, white bread is goyish. Instant potatoes, goyish. Black cherry soda and macaroons - very Jewish.

Negroes are all Jews. All Italians are Jewish. Irishmen who have rejected their religion are Jews. Baton twirling is goyish, very goyish. Trailer parks are so goyish Jews won't go near them."

Celebrate is a goyish word. Observe is a Jewish word. Mr. and Mrs. Walsh celebrated Christmas with Major Thomas Moreland, while Mr. and Mrs. Bromberg observed Hanukkah with Goldie and Arthur Schindler from Kiamesha, New York."

Usually endorsements by most politicians do not mean very much. But Koch's was sought after because of his tremendous influence. The source of his influence and credibility with voters came from trusting he would tell it like it is and because he was a staunch lover and unequivocal defender of Israel. Willing to cross party lines, a candidate's position on Israel was often the criteria for how he would determine who got his support.

Underscoring his Jewish pride, he once said in a newspaper interview with the Forward, "I'm about as Jewish as you can get in terms of traditions, obligations and pride". He was fond of quoting a passage from Deuteronomy, "Justice, justice shall you pursue." Sandee Brawarsky who interviewed him many years ago wrote in the New York Jewish Week after he died that he identified as a Conservative Jew and did not feel particularly comfortable at Reform services, where he felt "naked without a yarmulke", even though his funeral took place at the cathedral-like Temple Emanuel in Manhattan.

His perspective on public policy was formulated by his understanding of Jewish ethics and teachings. His Judaism led him to work to improve the lives of his fellow New Yorkers. He understood the imperative taught by Jewish sources that we have an obligation to the broader community to make the world a better place, and to serve society. How can you not love a guy like this? I suspect his brand of Judaism is one many of us can identify with.

He made all of us proud to be Jewish and blazed the trail that made it possible for others to openly display their Jewishness, and for an observant Jew like Joe Lieberman to run for vice president without having to compromise his practices or his principles. With Koch showing how it is possible to be so comfortable in his skin as a Jew, many celebrities did not hesitate to sprinkle their speech with Yiddish. I still remember years ago when Larry King wrapped up his interview with Neil Diamond and they wished each other on the air, "*Zei gezunt*," Yiddish for "go in health." I loved when Johnny Carson, who was most definitely not Jewish, talked about his accountants "H and R Goniff".

Contrast how Mayor Koch lived his life with Henriette Allen, wife of Redskins coach George Allen and mother of Virginia's former Senator and Governor George Allen. How sad that she felt she had to hide her Jewish past from her family. Her children grew up never knowing that her father, Felix Lumbroso was a Tunisian Jew imprisoned by the Nazis during the German occupation of Tunis. They were denied the privilege of knowing that she came from a proud Sephardic family that included an 18th century rabbi, Itzhak Lumbroso, whose commentary on the Talmud was the first Hebrew book printed in Tunisia. So afraid of the reaction if her secret which she had hidden for six decades would get out, she asked her son when he found out her true identity whether her friends would still like her? She even asked her son, "Will you still love me?"

Koch lived his life very differently. He was so proud of who he was that he wanted his epitaph on his tombstone to loudly proclaim he was Jewish. With the shema in Hebrew and a big Jewish star on his tombstone, in typical Koch fashion, he is buried in Trinity Church non-denominational cemetery because,

among other things, he wanted to be sure it was accessible on the subway line. Inscribed on his tombstone are the last words of Daniel Pearl, who as he points out, was murdered by Moslem terrorists, "My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish. I am Jewish." He even said that every Jew should proclaim this every Yom Kippur.

So I want to take up Koch's challenge and suggestion. Are we willing to be as publicly demonstrative as he was, and what does it mean to be able to make this declaration about being a Jew?

One definition of being a Jew is on display in the Bravo cable TV show "Princesses: Long Island". The stars do not hide their identity, although maybe we would be better off if they did. The reality show, which I must admit I have never seen, follows a group of single Jewish women in their late 20's who sprinkle Yiddishisms throughout and speak of Shabbat and Manischewitz wine. While it opens with Jewish proverbs and outwardly appears to embrace Koch's approach, unlike Koch's form of Judaism, being Jewish is little more than a superficial aspect to who they are. Unfortunately the show apparently plays into and perpetuates some of the worst stereotypes about Jews.

Perhaps even more grotesque and disturbing is the video of the kid from Dallas, Sam Horowitz' Beyoncé like bar mitzvah performance with professional dancers. The blatant over the top ostentatiousness is hideous and disgusting and has absolutely nothing to do with the meaning of becoming a Bar Mitzvah. Sadly, it is a natural extension of the trajectory of how bar mitzvahs are celebrated in America today.

Contrast it with the description of Charles Angoff who was bar mitzvah in the early 1900's and wrote the following memoir:

I was Bar Mitzva on Thursday. My father woke me up at 6:30 in the morning and took me to shul. There were about thirty people at the service. I was called to the Torah for the first time - and that was my Bar Mitzva.

Some of the other congregants came over to me and wished me a mazel tov. My father bashfully put his arm around me and also congratulated me. Then he and I walked a bit, and he went off to work. I turned toward home feeling terribly lonely. I had become a full, mature Jew - and most of Boston was asleep and didn't care. The few people who passed me on the street didn't care either.

When I reached our house, as soon as I put my hand on the doorknob my mother opened the door and threw her arms around me and kissed me and hugged me and kissed me again. Her arm around me, she took me to the kitchen, and there on the table was the Shabbes tablecloth. To my mother it was yom tov.

She had the usual bobkes on a platter, but there was also a platter of the kind of cinnamon cakes I liked, and a smaller platter of ginger jam, another favorite of mine. Also a cup of coca. "Eat, Shayel, eat," said my mother. I suggested she have come cocoa too. "No. I'm not hungry" she said. I ate.

I was conscious that she was looking at me with great appreciation of what had happened to me. Her oldest son was now a full man in Israel. I was embarrassed, but I was also delighted. I finished my cocoa, and mother said, "Have another cup." The last time she had suggested I have another cup of cocoa was when I was convalescing from a cold that had almost turned into

pneumonia. I had another cup. When I was finished with my special breakfast, mother said, "Father had to go to work. He had to. You understand."

"Sure," I said. "But we'll have a small reception on Saturday night, after mincha. We've invited the relatives and some friends. So we'll have a little reception."

"Oh," I said, too moved to say anything else.

She got up, came to me, patted my head and then kissed me slowly. "Maybe you're a little sleepy, Shayel. Maybe you want to sleep a little more. I'll wake you up in time for your school."

"Yes, I think I'll have a little more sleep," I said.

I didn't want any more sleep. I lay down on the bed. I was profoundly happy. Everything was good. Everything was very good."

I know we may never be able to recapture that spirit and we have traveled a long way from Shaya of Boston to little Sammy of Dallas. But with all my heart I want us to try to preserve those basic core values of what it means to be a Jew.

What after all, do we want non-Jews to think about what it means to be a Jew? What do we want our children to associate with being Jewish? The answer will depend on how we live our lives.

If we live a Judaism devoid of any meaningful Jewish content, we wind up looking like a mere parody of the faith and beautiful heritage our ancestors bequeathed to us. I worry about what happens when Jewish rituals and observance are absent and there is little more than the occasional adornment of Jewish accoutrements on a skeleton devoid of any significant manifestation of Jewish teachings or observance. I worry about the long-term viability of Judaism that is centered exclusively on materialism masquerading as ethnic pride. Being Jewish is more than Lenny Bruce's version of being loud and having chutzpah.

Too many lose Koch's understanding that Jewish ethics should play a role in how we act and do not appreciate how powerful a moral force in the world it is.

Just last month an El Al plane set to take off from Ben Gurion Airport returned to the gate to pick up an 11 year old cancer patient. The young girl was one of 30 Israeli children with cancer who were on their way to attend a Jewish camp in New York for children with cancer. Her passport could not be found and so despite months of planning and anticipation, she wasn't going to be able to take the flight with the other children.

With the plane in line and cleared for takeoff on the runway, another girl from the group who had been sitting next to her found the missing passport in her knapsack. Excited, she quickly told the stewardesses who let the pilot know, who then notified El Al management who decided to do something almost never done. The plane turned around and went back to the gate to pick up the girl so she could join the group that was on its way to Camp Simcha. I like to think Jewish ethics of *hesed* and *rahmanus*, mercy and compassion, had something to do with the decision to do so.

That same month 17 Jews of Yemen were brought to Israel, because we believe "*kol yisrael arevin zeh be'zeh*, all of Israel is responsible for one another," a message I have seen in my travels as Chairman of the Rabbinic Cabinet of Jewish Federations of North America.

Earlier this year I traveled to Europe - once with rabbinic colleagues to Ukraine and once with members of our congregation to Poland, Prague and Berlin. When we visited Berlin, we saw an exhibit about Moses Mendelssohn, the father of the Jewish Enlightenment, a great Jewish philosopher and an important figure in Jewish history. He helped to usher in the modern age for Jews and is credited with having said, "one should be a Jew at home and a man in the street." Yet his mission to integrate Jews into modern life had disastrous response in his own family. Most of his grandchildren had left the faith of their famous grandfather and within one generation had lost all connection to their Jewish roots.

I have officiated at funerals where the only Jews were me and the deceased. I will never forget the time I presided over a funeral for a Jewish woman who had died, and the family asked if I would mind if her niece who was a minister would participate and say a few words. I was the only Jewish person at the funeral, since all of the women's children were raised as non-Jews. After the minister spoke, as we were

about to get into our cars to leave the cemetery, I asked the niece how she was related to the woman who had passed away. I assumed she was related by marriage, or something. Imagine how shocked I was when she told me the woman I had buried was her mother's sister, meaning that she was born of a Jewish mother. I said, "So then do you realize that means you are Jewish?" She nodded and knowing I only had a moment to say something to her before she left, I wanted to leave her with something to think about and so I said to her, "You are so sensitive and compassionate. I am sure you would make a wonderful rabbi."

In each of the trips to Europe I came away seeing a glorious past that had been destroyed. I stood at Babi Yar, a site of mass extermination, and saw the ravine where 100,000 Jews were gunned down. I saw crematoria at Auschwitz and the remnants of the shtetl in Krakow, as well as the Jewish quarter in Prague. I came away not just nostalgic for a past that is no more, but for an appreciation of my obligation to maintain, sustain, preserve, perpetuate, live, pass on what was destroyed and a pledge to try to inspire you to want to do the same.

On this Yom Kippur I invite all of us to embrace Ed Koch's suggestion. Let us loudly and proudly proclaim, "I am Jewish." Let us live our life as Jews by helping to write the latest chapter in the longest ongoing and unfolding story of a people who walk with God, a people proud of who we are, of our past, and of our destiny.

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Potomac, MD

PROFILES IN COURAGE

Kol Nidre

Rabbi Sid Schwarz

Two years after John F. Kennedy was elected Senator from Massachusetts, he wrote a book called *Profiles in Courage* that would win a Pulitzer Prize and also help propel this handsome young senator into the White House three years later. Kennedy, a history buff, chose to profile eight political figures whose courage while in office was, shall we say, out of the ordinary. Kennedy consciously sought to emulate those figures in his own Presidency; most historians would judge that Kennedy did that admirably, particularly in his ability to walk the world back from the ledge of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

I want to speak tonight about what it takes for each of us to live our lives as a “profile in courage.”

A couple of years ago, on the heels of a sermon I delivered called “WWMD: In Search of Character and Ethics”, I taught a course for Adat Shalom on Musar, Jewish ethical teachings. For each *midah*, the Hebrew term for a positive character trait, we had a worksheet that helped participants make that *midah* more present in their lives. Character, not unlike proficiency at an instrument or in a sport, requires practice, a lot of practice. One of the entries on that worksheet was a space asking each participant to fill in the name of someone who was a living role model for that *midah*. Definitions take you only so far. Seeing how a character trait is embodied by a real person, responding to real circumstances makes it much more possible for us to try to emulate that trait.

For this reason, before I offer a Jewish spin on the character trait of courage, let’s first talk role models.

Role Models

There is hardly a better role model in the world today for “courage” than Nelson Mandela. The outline of his story is familiar. A leader in the African National Congress which was dedicated to ending the Apartheid regime in South Africa, he was convicted of sabotage and treason in 1962 and sentenced to life imprisonment. After 27 years in jail he was released in 1990 amid escalating international pressure and civil unrest. He partnered with President F.W. DeClerk to establish free, multi-racial elections in 1994, an election that he won, allowing him to ascend to the Presidency of South Africa, serving five years, from 1994-1999.

What was so notable about Mandela’s leadership was his ability to rise above anger and to withstand the natural tendency to seek revenge and retribution. He did not forget the oppression and suffering that black South Africans experienced at the hands of the white, Apartheid regime. He paid a personal price for fighting that system every day of his imprisonment. **Yet he also understood that the future of his country depended on uniting the country, white and black together.** His decision to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Panel headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu was the vehicle for Mandela to create a historical record of the injustice of the Apartheid regime without allowing the past to doom the country to decades of violence and retribution.

Even more surprising, especially to Blacks in South Africa, was his decision to meet with senior figures of the hated Apartheid regime. Emphasizing personal forgiveness and reconciliation, he announced that “courageous people do not fear forgiving, for the sake of peace.”

When South Africa hosted the 1995 Rugby World Cup, Mandela became fan #1 of the South African national team, the Springboks, even though the team and the sport itself was the chosen pastime of the white minority. As portrayed in the movie, *Invictus*, with Matt Damon, when South Africa defeated New Zealand in the final, Mandela presented the trophy wearing a Springbok shirt. Some say that it was at that moment that Mandela succeeded in uniting a country that, under other circumstances, under a political leader without Mandela’s vision and moral courage, would have been mired in racial conflict for another century.

Other Role Models

Jews too have a Mandela like figure in the person of Natan Sharansky. In the 25 years that I spent as an activist in the Soviet Jewry movement, Sharansky was one of my personal heroes. Thousands of Soviet Jews became refuseniks when they were refused permission to emigrate by Soviet officials and they often lost their jobs as a punishment for their "civic ingratitude". Hundreds of other Jewish political activists were imprisoned on trumped up charges, sometimes for drug charges after the KGB planted drugs in their apartments. But Sharansky was the best known of all Soviet Jewish refuseniks.

He was the most public of all activists in speaking to the western media on the blatant human rights abuses of the Soviet government. He also refused the requests of Jewish organizations that asked him to avoid getting involved in championing the rights of other Soviet dissidents. They felt that such partnerships would lessen the chances for success on the Soviet Jewry issue. But one of Sharansky's closest friends and colleagues was Andrei Sakharov, the father of the Soviet atomic bomb, a non-Jew who became a political critic of the Soviet government. Sharansky was resolute in his commitment to human rights for all Soviet citizens, not just for Jews.

If you want to understand what courage looks like read Sharansky's memoir of his nine years in prison, *Fear No Evil*. The most obvious example of courage is that he refused to betray any of his colleagues to the KGB, paying the price time and again by being put into solitary confinement. But even more importantly was his refusal to capitulate to KGB intimidation that he would be put to death. He continued to live as a free man in his mind, even as his body was imprisoned. **Within a year of being released from prison, he stood on the stage of the Summit Rally for Soviet Jewry at the Capitol here in Washington D.C. in December 1987, a symbol that one man of courage could defeat the Soviet state. Within four years of that rally, close to a million Jews had re-enacted the Biblical Exodus and left the Soviet Union for Israel and the West and the Soviet Union was left on the dustbin of history.**

Sometimes courage comes in surprising packages. Malala Yousafszai, the Pakistanian school girl was a hero even before she was almost killed by a Taliban assassin last October and even before she addressed the UN this summer. At age 12 Malala started blogging for the BBC under a pseudonym in order to bring the world's attention to the need to educate young girls in the Moslem world. By the age of 13 she began to speak at public gatherings and to the press. At age 14, she received Pakistan's National Children's Peace Prize and the prime minister set up a technology college for women at her request. She began receiving death threats at age 15 but refused to stop her activism for female education. **Now 16 years old and recovering from her near assassination, it is clear that her voice will not be silenced.**

A final example: This year a documentary came out about one of the thousands of amazing stories of survival during the Holocaust. *No Place on Earth* tells the story of how Esther Stermer, a mother of six, saved her family and five other families, 38 people in all from the Nazis by taking refuge in a cave and living there for almost a year and half, 511 days. As the Nazis occupied western Ukraine, Esther led her family to one of the largest tunnel systems in the world, called the Priest Grotto. They lived there in complete darkness except when they prepared food. The head of each household sneaked out at night to forage for food. Water was found underground. Her sons, Sam and Saul, now 87 and 90 respectively, tell the story of how two Nazis on patrol found their mother on patrol early in their odyssey. With her life and that of all the others at risk, she refused to play the victim. She spoke boldly to the Nazis: "What the Furher will lose the war because an old Jewish woman is hiding in a cave with her family?" **Remarkably, they left her alone and they survived the war underground.**

Lessons

What can we gain from pondering the lives of Nelson Mandela, Natan Sharansky, Malala Yousafszai and Esther Stermer?

It is a Jewish value called *ometz lev*. This value does not have a direct translation in English. Literally it means "heart-strength" and it has nothing to do with eating low cholesterol foods. A better translation is

moral courage, fortitude, resolve. When I was growing up, the epitome of strength were photos of a 20 year old Mr. Universe named Arnold Schwarzenegger. He was my role model! I decided to order the weight training ropes he was endorsing from the back of a comic book. I used the ropes religiously, every day. Months later, when the ropes failed to have their advertised result, **I took solace in the teachings of Judaism that made clear that strength was in the heart, not in the biceps. *Mi hu gibor*, asks the Mishna; “who is brave and courageous?” *Hakovesh et yitzro*, “the one who is able to control his or her impulses.”**

Personal Application

The first three examples I shared with you all came to public attention because of their well-publicized plights that took place in political contexts. But don't think that just because you are unlikely to be featured on the cover of *Time* magazine that *ometz lev* does not apply to you. **All of us are capable of strengthening our *ometz lev*.**

The Book of Proverbs teaches: “the refining pot is for silver, the furnace purifies gold but God tests our hearts (17:3).” Life can be hard. We are tested every day. How?

- Consider the mid-career professional who is let go because of the changing priorities or reduced budget of the agency. That professional now worries about how they will provide for their family, pay for college, or have self-respect within their community of peers.
- Consider the teen who, because of awkwardness or shyness, being too smart or too dumb, being too tall or too short, or struggling with their gender identity is being bullied at school. He has no friends. She has no one to talk to. This teen considers taking his or her life to end their silent agony.
- Consider the 60 year old adult who gets a diagnosis of inoperable cancer. Just a week earlier there were things to look forward to. Life was just beginning. A vacation, children getting married, taking on a new hobby. And now the prospect is of hospitalization, dependency and saying goodbye. What of the spouse, who wants to be strong for their beloved but is undergoing their own private hell with the prospect of burying their life partner.

Each of these situations is taking place in our community right now. Each of these situations is in this very room right now. Maybe it is someone sitting right next to you. Sometimes we know about it and there is the sustenance of sacred community and its ability to reach out and support people in their times of fear, of pain and of loss. But in many cases, we don't ever know. The fear and the pain is borne in silence. Perhaps that silence is a sign of stoic courage; perhaps it is a sign that our society places too much emphasis on a person's ability to “tough it out”, to be independent and not to rely on others.

In each one of these cases, we need *ometz lev*, the courage that comes from deep inside of ourselves. **This is a courage that does not win medals for bravery but a courage that gives us the ability to confront life's toughest challenges and go on living. Perhaps we each need a healthy dose of *ometz lev* just so that we can tell others that we need help and support. Perhaps the most courageous thing we can do is to say: “I'm scared, I feel all alone, I feel helpless, I need help”.** One of the great gifts of a sacred community like Adat Shalom is the deep reservoir of *chesed*, of loving-kindness that exists here and that is shared with people in their times of deepest need. *Chesed* is to *ometz lev* as rain is to a withering plant. It sustains the life giving force within us. In the year ahead, I invite you to be part of that sacred, communal give and take. Try to grow closer to this community that needs you to sustain it and that can, in turn, sustain you in your most trying hour.

Day to Day Life, and Death

Just to be clear, you need not be facing a life-threatening situation to find the trait of *ometz lev* to be helpful. In our own community I am constantly inspired by examples of people exhibiting this “courage of the heart”.

- Parents who are raising children with physical, mental or learning disabilities, who modify their life and/or career to accommodate visits to doctors, hospitals, schools, all manner of therapists and who must support their child through the emotional turmoil of finding their place in the world.
- People battling their own inner demons, be it a chemical dependency, food addiction, fear of social settings, each of which makes each day a struggle for balance and sanity.
- Adults caring for aging parents watching the gradual loss of competence and independence of the people who were once your source of support. Are there any easy answers about when to bring help into a parents' home? When to take them into your home? When to place them in a nursing home? When to move them to hospice? When to make that fateful decision about life support in a hospital? **I think not.**

All of these circumstances call for *ometz lev*.

This past summer my mother's sister, my Aunt Zahava, was taken to the hospital for a lung infection. The families were relatively close. Aunt Zahava and her family lived in Flushing and I grew up on Long Island so we spent a lot of time in each other's' homes. My Aunt Zahava never forgot a birthday or an anniversary and though the stroke that almost killed her 20 years ago made her physically weak, she led an active life with her second husband, Eli in Baltimore. Now in her early 80's, the hospitalization took its toll. Soon other parts of her system started to break down. The most serious condition was a leaking heart valve that a cardiologist suggested be repaired a decade ago as a voluntary procedure. My aunt refused at the time and now the medical consensus was that in her weakened state, she would not survive heart surgery.

I visited Zahava a couple of times and she was awake and alert, surrounded by her husband and her children although she could not speak because of a trach in her throat. When Sandy and I visited her together, we stood on either side of the bed and she engaged us in conversation with her eyes. She held each of our hands and did not stop caressing us for the entire visit, a way for her to communicate her love. A week later, with no prospect for recovery, Zahava, fully conscious, aware and mentally sharp, asked that they turn off all the life support machinery that was keeping her alive. She did not want to live that way with all that would imply for her loved ones. Her husband and children acceded to her wishes. Within a day she died. The loss is deep and still painful for those of us who loved Zahava. **What an example of heart courage! Sometimes *ometz lev* can not only help us learn how to live, but also how to die with grace.**

The Hasidic tradition gives us a metaphor to understand the challenge of having this level of courage. It comes from R. Nahman of Bratzlav; many of you may know it as a song. R. Nahman taught: *kol haolam kulo gesher tzar meod; vechaikar lo lefached*; "the world is a narrow bridge, and the essential lesson of life is not to be afraid".

A Gift

Just a few weeks ago I heard an interview on NPR with Sebastian Rossouw, pastor of Regina Mundi church, the largest Roman Catholic in S. Africa, located in the black township of Soweto. He was being asked about the legacy of Nelson Mandela and he said: **"The legacy that Mandela brings is that despite what the past has dealt you, do not allow it to determine your future."**

What a great Jewish lesson. Leonard Fein has written that Jews are "prisoners of hope". I love the expression and have used it time and again. By "prisoners of hope" he meant that Judaism has taught us that it is within our power to change; not only change the world, but also change ourselves. **As part of our soul-searching this season, we should ask ourselves - are we going to accept that who we are and how we behave today is all that we are capable of or do we have the courage to begin again and do better.**

Each of our role models, Nelson Mandela, Natan Sharansky, Malala Yousefzai , Esther Stermer prevailed because they had *the ometz lev* to look past the hand that life dealt them and create a new reality for themselves and for the world. They were “profiles in courage.”

This is also the gift of the *yamim noraim*, the High Holydays. **To be better people, we need to strengthen our resolve. To face the challenges that will inevitably come our way this coming year, we need courage. It is good to be reminded that within each of us is a deep well of *ometz lev* that we can summon up for those moments when we most need it.** Then, and only then, will we realize that we don’t need to check *Profiles in Courage* out of the library. We just need to look in the mirror.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz
Washington, DC

SOMEONE IS WATCHING YOU: SHOULD WE WORRY ABOUT THE NSA PROGRAM?

Kol Nidre

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt

Barely a day goes by without a new revelation coming out about the National Security Agency program to collect data on American citizens. We now know that our government has been collecting records on almost every phone call made in the United States, as well as monitoring e-mail messages and Internet chats. It was revealed that Verizon phone logs, as well as the encrypted records of other companies, have been regularly reviewed by the NSA.

In fact, the program is so pervasive and successful Verizon is looking to capitalize on it. I understand their new advertising slogan is going to be "Now we can hear you." Conan O'Brien suggested their new calling plan is going to be called, "Friends and Family and Obama." I heard about one couple who became suspicious when a guy speaking to his girlfriend on his cell phone said, "You hang up first honey," and the girl said, "No, you hang up first!" And then a voice on the line said, "How about you both just hang up at the same time?"

Many see the unauthorized surveillance and gathering of intelligence as a violation of our civil liberties. Others are concerned because they see it as a violation of trust since the program was clandestine and unknown until Edward Snowden, who had been a contractor working at the NSA, leaked documents to the Washington Post and other news outlets. Some view Snowden as a criminal who served the interests of our enemies by publicizing secret information and believe he should be prosecuted, while others say he should be viewed as a hero. Snowden, by the way, is currently hiding in Russia, where he can feel safe for, as we all know, Russia would never undertake secret surveillance of its citizens.

Concern about the actions of the US government has created strange bedfellows and has managed to do what no one has succeeded in doing or imagined possible. It has united our country. Individuals and factions on opposite ends of the political spectrum have found common cause. Libertarians on the right, who by their very nature are suspicious of the government's activities, find justification for their fears, while liberals on the left are concerned by the invasion of privacy and violation of constitutional rights.

I find it interesting that although the American public has such a limited attention span this issue has dominated the headlines for months and evoked a stronger and more prolonged response than most news stories. The last time a story kept the public's attention for this long was when Kim Kardashian announced she was breaking up with one of her former boyfriends.

Perhaps the issue has captured our attention and sustained our interest because it evokes our worst fears of George Orwell's novel, "1984," and concerns about the role of Big Brother. It may be because it goes against the grain of the principles of our understanding of constitutional freedom. The question I wish to pose tonight is: Is this something we Americans should be worried about?

I cannot help but note the irony of the reaction to the invasion of privacy and collection of intelligence in this day and age when we willingly reveal so much private and personal information about ourselves on Facebook and other social media. More than you would ever need or want to know about a person's daily activities can be ascertained just by reading their Facebook page. People let others know what they ate for lunch, what they did in the morning, are going to do in the afternoon, what they like and don't like. Grocery stores track what we buy and what products we use. Based on our shopping patterns they anticipate our needs and potential future purchases. Smartphones track and detect our every move. Those smartphones can act as recorders and cameras as well. Moments that once would have been private and gone unnoticed are now captured, posted to YouTube and shared with the world. Our clicks on a computer can be retrieved and are used by businesses and private enterprises for commercial purposes.

I recently went online to check out some options for new trash cans we were looking to purchase to facilitate recycling at the synagogue. I subsequently noticed that whenever I went to read something

online for the next week or two unsolicited ads for trashcans appeared on the side margin of whatever article I was reading. It was kind of spooky.

The truth is we lost our privacy a long time ago.

Everything is seen and known in real time. I heard about a woman who was worried about her husband because she knew he was driving on I-95 and wasn't the best driver. She called him on his cell phone and told him to be careful. She just heard a report that a car that sounds like his was going the wrong direction on I-95. Her husband frantically shouted into the phone, "One car? Are you kidding? There are hundreds of cars going the wrong way."

Our sages had a deep respect for a person's right to privacy and a complicated, but sophisticated view of government. The High Priests in the time of the Temple wore bells on the bottom of their garments. The bells would make a sound whenever they would enter the Holy of Holies, the Ark, where the Holy One dwelled. Incidentally, I think they were fashion trend-setters, because it is the first known instance of bell bottom clothes.

A fascinating midrash tells us that the reason they had bells was so that they would not startle the *Shehina*, the Divine Presence, when they entered. Even God, they said, needed and deserved His privacy. Based on this premise, commentators explained that not just God, but every single person is entitled to privacy, and no one should unexpectedly enter a person's abode or room unannounced.

Perhaps Americans are upset because it is the government that is collecting the information. Since the time of the American Revolution and the founding of our republic, we have as a nation had an instinctive aversion to government intervention in our private affairs.

Pirke Avot, the Sayings of the Sages, offers two conflicting opinions about how we should regard government. On the one hand Shemayah said, "Seek no intimacy with the ruling power." (1:10) His perspective was supported by Rabban Gamliel who added, " *Hevu zehirin bahrahshut*: Be cautious of the ruling power." He goes on to say, "for they bring no one near to them except for their own need." (2:3)

However, these contemptuous comments cannot be taken as absolute and viewed in a vacuum, for they must be understood in the context of when they were uttered. Shemayah and Gamliel were referring to the Roman authorities who were an oppressive enemy regime that regularly employed double agents to spy on Jews and others it considered to be rabble-rousers and potential troublemakers.

Elsewhere in the same masechet, Pirke Avot we read, that Rabbi Hanina, the deputy High Priest and a contemporary of Rabban Gamliel offered a contrasting view and had a much more benign attitude. He said, "Pray for the welfare of the ruling power, since but for the fear of it, men would have swallowed up each other alive." (3:2) He saw government as protecting the social order of society and protecting individual freedoms. His attitude recognizes the constructive and critical role government can play guaranteeing public safety.

In our own day, surveillance can be a mixed blessing. Anyone drive a car in the District of Columbia lately?! Just the other day they announced that even more speed cameras are about to be installed throughout the city. Yet we must also acknowledge without sophisticated cameras, the Boston bombers would not have been tracked down and apprehended so quickly. The truth is the tension between civil liberties and keeping us safe, between intruding on our privacy and protecting us is a difficult one to balance.

The government claims that their surveillance has been an effective tool against the threat of potential terrorist acts. While it seems to be true, we may never know how many potential attacks have been thwarted, as it is difficult to ascertain statistics about acts not committed.

It is like the joke about the guy who was standing in the middle of Manhattan hitting the street with a stick.

A policeman came over and asked what he was doing since he was disrupting the flow of traffic. The guy told the policeman he was hitting the street to keep elephants away. The police officer told him he was crazy. There were no elephants within thousands of miles of Manhattan. And the guy looked at the cop and said, "See, its working!"

All this information gathering is bound to have an impact on individuals and our society. In light of all the technology which observes and records all we do, one cannot help but wonder what the politicians who were rejected earlier this week by the voters of New York, Anthony Weiner and Elliot Spitzer, were thinking when they committed their indiscretions. Did they really think such high profile individuals could get away undetected with their illicit acts in this day and age?

Social scientists who study human behavior and the decisions people make ask what is it that causes people to do things they know they shouldn't do, and conversely, what leads others to do good?

Ordinary people can become heroes in an instant. Wesley Autrey risked his life and jumped onto the subway tracks in New York to save a man from an oncoming train. Earlier this summer Antoinette Tuff courageously used empathy and talked a would-be killer into putting down his rifle so students could get out alive. Charles Ramsey did not hesitate to run in and free Amanda Berry from the home of her kidnapper in Cleveland when he realized she was being held captive. Yet Ramsey and others who do heroic things do not consider themselves heroes and are not perfect people. We are all only human. None of us is flawless. But that may be the most hopeful thing and best news of all. Our inadequacies and imperfections do not hold us back from doing good and even great things. More importantly, we are all capable of doing the right thing.

Elizabeth Svoboda, author of "What makes a Hero? The Surprising Science of Selflessness," contends that heroes aren't born, they are made. She writes they are often "a natural result of lives that have primed people for selflessness."

Dan Arieli, a behavioral economist at Duke University, performed an interesting experiment to understand cheating and moral decisions. Before taking an exam, half the participants were asked to list 10 random books that they had read in high school and the other half was asked to recall the Ten Commandments to see if it would have an impact on cheating. His study revealed that the group who recalled 10 books had no difference in the rate of moderate cheating between them and people who did not perform any exercise before taking the test. But interestingly, the group that was asked to recall the Ten Commandments had no cheating whatsoever.

He concluded that the experiment has significant implications for the real world. "While ethics lectures and training seem to have little to no effect on people, reminders of morality-right at the point where people are making a decision-appear to have an outsize effect on behavior."

Svoboda notes that working at a company with a written code of ethics affects employees' decision making. Other factors that appear to motivate people positively are examples set by parental role models and personal experiences that encourage empathy and understanding, meaning altruistic behavior can be taught, learned and encouraged.

This research and its conclusions obviously are of interest to me, for they reflect the basic message that is at the heart of this holiday. Because, in case you have not figured it out yet, the reason why I am speaking about the NSA surveillance scandal on Yom Kippur is because that is not really the topic of my sermon. Rather it is a different kind of surveillance that we should pay more attention to. Long ago the Talmud taught "*hakol tzafui*: Everything is seen."

The point I wish to convey is that the message of the Aseret Ymei Teshuvah which begins on Rosh Hashanah and culminate in Yom Kippur is that our actions are recorded and remembered. Pope Francis, who, for what it's worth, gets my vote as being a terrific pope, recently responded when asked a question

about homosexuals, "Who am I to judge?" Who would have ever imagined that the person who is considered by members of the Catholic Church to be God's representative on earth would respond to a question with the words, "Who am I to judge?" If he, for whom the doctrine known as papal infallibility applies is not one to judge, then who are we to judge, and who is in a position to judge?

As the prayers we express throughout the Yom Kippur holiday remind us, and what Pope Francis may have meant was, it is God, the One who sees all who is in the position to be the ultimate judge. Listen carefully to the prayers we recite and reflect upon what we proclaim and profess. The Yom Kippur liturgy uses verses and passages from the Bible to impress upon us and stress that God remembers and records our deeds. As comedian Bill Maher said, men all over the country breathed a collective sigh of relief when they heard who was listening in on their conversations. "The government? Thank God. I thought you were going to say it was my wife."

The notion that God records and remembers all can be even more intimidating and daunting. I know there may be some among us who reject a concept of an all-knowing God. Others make the mistake of getting hung up on taking the words literally, while some reject the notion altogether because they see injustice rewarded in the world.

I think this all misses the point and is irrelevant.

Remember the Arieli experiment about how the Ten Commandments influence how people act? What I found especially fascinating is that he writes, "We even ran the experiment on a group of self-declared atheists, asking them to swear on a Bible, and got the same no-cheating results yet again." The conclusion is obvious: Act as if there is an all-knowing God who has given us a moral code to live by and who cares about the decisions we make, even if you don't believe He exists. It will help to improve our actions, ourselves and the world.

So even if you find yourself questioning the theology, I urge you to accept the underlying premise because the prayers we recite throughout these 24 hours saying that God judges us can have a profound impact on how you live your life. This is why Yom Kippur is so powerful and why the ancient ritual has such a strong hold on us even after thousands of years.

The Talmud and our prayers we constantly repeat remind us that God watches and records our deeds, and judges us accordingly, but significantly that message is coupled with the expression of the divine attribute of mercy. When I reviewed and reread the Mahzor as I was preparing for the holiday, I was struck by seeing that every time it talks about God as an all-knowing judge, it immediately adds that God is merciful. We should not approach God with fear or trepidation, nor should we be scared that God will punish us. All of this is meant to guide us to be better people, for we believe in a loving God.

We are reminded He does not wish the death of the sinner, but merely that the wrongdoer should abandon his ways. It goes so far as to tell us that a person who expresses sincere regret, does true teshuvah, even on his death bed, is forgiven by God.

The Talmud tells a story about the Roman who was the executioner of Rabbi Hanina Ben Teradion. When he saw the rabbi consumed by flames, and saw the depth of his faith and belief, he decided he could no longer live with himself and what he had done. He decided to take his own life rather than take the lives of any more innocent rabbis. About him the Talmud says that in that instant he acquired eternal life. How can eternity be gained in a moment? Because the Pope was right -- Only God can judge because only God sees all. While humans have a tendency to judge each other based on single impressions, God has the capacity to see the big picture.

Some Jews are surprised to learn that Judaism teaches we should fear God, forgetting that one of the names of this season is Yamim HaNoraim, the Days of Awe. Others are surprised to hear that Judaism posits that God loves us. They think it sounds Christian. The truth is we should both love and fear God, and approach God with a sense of awe, but resting assured that God's love is accessible to us.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman points out that by acknowledging that God remembers all our deeds we are challenged to pause so we can remember and think about what we have done. This gives us the chance to reflect on who we are. An honest assessment of one's actions and life, of our shortcomings and faults allows us to make a break with our past and not be enslaved by it. This time of year is meant to be a catalyst for teshuvah. The New Year is about allowing us to chart a different path so we can make appropriate changes and move in a different direction. Coming to terms with what we have done and become allows us to be able to approach it unencumbered by the mistakes of the previous year. In this way the New Year holds the promise of a new beginning, of embarking upon a future not yet written.

Our morning daily prayer contains a passage that comes from the 10th century midrash, "*Tanna DeVe'i Eliyahu*," *L'olam yehay adam yereh shamayim basater u'vagaluy*, A person should always revere God in private as in public. We should acknowledge the truth of this and practice it in thought and deed."

So on this Yom Kippur we should be less concerned with our government's surveillance of our private lives. Instead of worrying that what we do is watched at all times by the NSA, Google, Yahoo or Giant, we should be more concerned with a different kind of surveillance. Many synagogues have over their ark the words, "*Da lifnei mee atah omed*: Know before whom you stand." The Talmud tells us that all is seen, referring to God. It then continues, "But free will is given." Whether we believe in God or not, on this Yom Kippur let us keep this in mind and take it to heart so that we will make the proper choices and be able to be proud of the record we are making of the days of our lives.

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Potomac, MD

COMMENTS FOR THE HIGH HOLY DAYS

Collected and compiled by Rabbi Paul D. Kerbel

Reflections

“Days are scrolls” - “Days are scrolls. Write on them only what you would like to have remembered about you.”

Bachya ibn Pakuda

“Our Eyes and Our Heart” – In proper devotion, a person has her eyes downward and her heart upward.”

Talmud, Yevamot 105b

“The Purpose of Prayer” – Prayer does not change God, but it changes those who pray.”

Soren Kierkegaard

“Everything Depends on Us” - Pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on man.”

Francis Cardinal Spellman

“Teaching Torah” – We either teach Torah or something else at any moment. If we do not teach Torah enough of the time, the opposite of Torah will prevail in the world.”

Professor Arnie Eisen, Taking Hold of Torah

“The Purpose of the Commandments” - “The purpose of the laws of the Torah is to promote compassion, loving-kindness and peace in the world.”

Moses Maimonides, Mishneh Torah

“Faith” – “Faith is real only when it is not one-sided but reciprocal. Man can rely on God, if God can rely on man...Faith is an awareness of divine mutuality and companionship, a form of communion between God and man.”

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

“Meaning” – “He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

“Cannot Ignore God” – The Jew may love God, or he may fight with God, but he may not ignore God.”

Elie Wiesel

“If There is No God” – If There is No God, all is permitted.” Ivan Karamazov,

The Brothers Karamazov

“Man is dead” – In the nineteenth century, the problem was that God was dead; in the twentieth century, the problem is that man is dead.”

Erich Fromm, The Sane Society

“Questions and Answers” - In the final analysis, for the believer there are no questions and for the non-believer there are no answers.”

Hafetz Hayim

“Treasures in Our Homes” – “A story is told about a poor man from a poor village who was told in a dream to seek out a treasure buried under a certain bridge in a faraway town. The poor man made the journey and located the bridge. As he was searching, a police officer stopped him and demanded to know what he was doing. When the poor man explained,

he confided that he too had such a dream and that the treasure was to be found in a certain faraway village under the shack of a poor man. He rushed home and found a treasure under floor of his storeroom. The poor man discovered an important secret. Our treasures are not in faraway places; we can find them in our own homes.”

Rabbi Tzvi Yehudah Kook

“Defining Religion” – There is only one way to define Jewish religion. It is the awareness of God’s interest in man, the awareness of a covenant, of a responsibility that lies on God as well as on us. God is in need of man for the attainment of His ends, and religion as Jewish tradition understands it, is a way of serving those ends, of which we are in need, even though we may not be aware of them.”

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

“The Holy Neighborhood” – “God is not hiding in a Temple. The Torah came to tell inattentive man, “You are not alone, you live constantly in a holy neighborhood; remember ‘Love Thy Neighbor – “God” -As Thyself’... Let us keep the spark within aflame...let our greed not rise like a barrier to the neighborhood. God is waiting on every road that leads from intention to action, from desire to satisfaction.”

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

“Each of us must stand alone.” – Each of us must stand alone, in the fullness of our being, before God, and attempt to understand what God wants from us. What is the right path? It is God’s voice we are hearing, or Satan’s? We may be reasonably certain that if we are honest with ourselves, we will correctly interpret God’s words of love, compassion and grace.

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Yizkor – “A Loss of Glory in God’s Kingdom”

Our creator, the King of Kings, delights in life. Because of his love for us and because we are so few, each of us is important in his kingdom. Though we are flesh and Blood, we are irreplaceable. When one of the House of Israel dies, there is a loss of glory in God’s kingdom and His grandeur is diminished. Therefore, brethren of the House of Israel, all of you who mourn and all of you who remember on this day, let us fix our hearts on our Father in Heaven, our King and our Redeemer, and let us pray for ourselves, and for Him too, that He and His kingdom be hallowed and enhanced, glorified and celebrated.

Israeli Nobel Laureate S. Y. Agnon

On Sinning:

We must relay the message on Yom Kippur that a sinner is not as bad as he thinks. For if a Jew perceives that he is totally corrupt, he will mistakenly think that he is too far removed from repentance. On Yom Kippur, God ‘reaches out a hand to sinners’ and that if a Jew wishes to repent, obstacles are removed and the road to return is straightened.”

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

“Everything belongs to God”

“All of a person’s organs, talents and capabilities belong to God and are only ‘on loan’ to man. The very moment they are misused, we have violated our agreement with God. Living a life of sin is an act of theft and extortion.”

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

“Sinning through religion” - Religion has become a substitute for the couch of the Psychoanalyst. Religion is expected to give us peace of mind, to bring us happiness, to guarantee us good health and to assure us of never-ending prosperity. This religion is not God-oriented but ‘man’-centered; man is not required to serve God, but God is meant to serve man. It

is the typical religion of a comfortable middle-class. We have everything: jobs, professions, homes, cars, insurance policies; and, we also have a God. It is useful to have a God, one can never tell when we may need Him. No one is concerned with 'the word of God'; no one listens and no one obeys. The function of our awakened piety is to confirm us in our habits and our customary way of thought. We believe in God but we want to limit God's authority. God can ask of us no more than we can ask of ourselves. In no way, should God and religion inconvenience us or interfere with our comforts and pleasures.

Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits

"There Isn't Enough Time" – "My hope is that you don't sin, not because it is forbidden, but because there isn't enough time."

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk

On Repentance:

"Rebalancing Our Lives" – Repentance is the mechanism for rebalancing lives that have been distorted by mistakes, or by sin."

Rabbi David Wolpe

"Opening the Door" – "If one who has sinned opens the door of repentance even slightly, even the width of the eye of a needle, God will open that door so wide that wagons and chariots could pass through."

Shir haShirim Rabah 5:3

"Hiding" – Hiding is something we do well. Too well at times. We hide from each other, we hide from our families, our friends. And we hide from our people. We hide from God. Teshuvah, repentance, is a return from our hiding places, a return from where we have hidden from each other, from our tradition and from our God.

Rabbi Philip S. Scheim

"If you make a mistake" - If you make a mistake, be big enough to admit it, smart enough to profit from it, and strong enough to correct it."

Anonymous

"Ultimate Source of Sin" – "Idolatry is the root source of our sin and wrongdoing. Ultimately, all idolatry is worship of the self, projected and objectified... in the last analysis, the choice is only between love of God and love of self, between God-centered and self-centered existence."

Will Herberg, Judaism and Modern Man

"There are two types of sins" – "There are two types of sins. One type is the sins we have committed by *actually doing something*, as in the violation of the Sabbath, theft, Robbery, and so forth. The second type of sin is when a person is called to account in heaven *because he did not prevent others from sinning (when he was able to do so.)* Therefore, we pray first for the forgiveness of our sins that we committed by actually doing something wrong. Then we beseech the Almighty to eradicate the IOU's on which we signed, meaning those sins of others that we might have prevented and didn't."

Hafetz Hayyim (Rabbi Israel Mayer Kagan)

"Let Your Heart Strike You" - It is customary to strike our heart with our fist for each of the verses of 'Al Chait' –'For the sin we have committed' yet we cannot be certain that God forgives us. If however, a person's heart **strikes him over every sin**, a person will attain forgiveness from God.

Hafetz Hayyim (Rabbi Israel Mayer Kagan)

On Tzedakah and Gemilut Hasadim:

"By nature, people are selfish and self-centered. God wants us to be more

selfless and world centered. Tzedakah is a lifelong process of self-actualization. As I sustain the life of others and give to causes worthy of my support, a new breath of life comes into me. Tzedakah is an ongoing personal expansion. Tzedakah is not merely giving. It is sharing, bonding, relating and connecting. Tzedakah weaves a new fabric of human relationships.”

Rabbi Avraham Chaim Feuer
The Tzedakah Treasury

“Why is Tzedakah So Difficult” – A Rabbi was once asked why it is so hard for people to give an appropriate amount of tzedakah. He answered that the Chazon Ish offered the following interpretation. In the time between the First and Second Temples, the people of Israel were enamored of idol worship. Once the Second Temple was rebuilt, the yetzer harah for idol worship diminished – but - because the role of ‘yetzer harah’ is to test us and challenge us – we cannot be without something that is difficult. The Hazon Ish believes that the worship of money and wealth and the inability to part with money for charitable purposes replaced idol worship as the “yetzer harah” of the Jewish people.

The Tzedakah Treasury

A Spiritual Final Word:

“Most people worry about their own financial needs and their neighbor’s soul.” Better that they should worry about their neighbor’s financial needs and their own souls.

Rabbi Israel Salanter

And, A Final Word That Leads to Action:

“If all of the fourteen million Jews lived by Judaism’s values and means, the effect upon a world searching for meaning would be incalculable. If every Jew lived ‘the Jewish mission’, fighting for ethical monotheism and against both religious fanaticism and secular radicalism, the impact upon all of society would be staggering. A moral revolution of unprecedented proportion would be in the making.

In accordance with Judaism’s 3,200 year-old directive (Exodus 19:6), the Jews must form an army of tender, caring, strong, moral people to combat the hordes of bored, aimless people and the religious and secular totalitarian and nihilistic ideologies to which they are prey....It is time-if there is a time – to proceed with the world-transforming event which began 3,200 years ago at a mountain in Sinai – the Jewish revolution.”

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin and Dennis Prager

Rabbi Paul Kerbel is a Rabbi of Congregation Etz Chaim in Marietta, Georgia and devotes a great deal of time to building community in Atlanta and religious pluralism in Israel through his involvement in the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta and the Masorti Foundation for Conservative Judaism in Israel.

THE EPIDEMIC OF AND THE SOLUTION TO LONELINESS

Rabbi Paul Kerbel

What do we do when we see someone crying in a public space? A girl was crying into her phone in a public park early in the morning and she said, "I know, I know, I know," over and over. What did she know? Had she done something wrong? Was she being comforted? And then she said, "mama, I know" and her tears came even harder.

Here is the question for us: do we get involved? Do we run over to ask what is wrong? Or, do we mind our own business? Does she need attention or should we keep scrolling through our list of contacts on our iPhone or watch a movie with our ear phones on.

What was her mother telling her? Never to stay out all night again? That everyone fails? Was it a real phone call or was she rehearsing a conversation yet to take place? Was she alone in the world? Did she need support? What do we do?

I did not hear this conversation. The writer, Jonathan Safran Foer did. In a beautiful essay in the New York Times in June, entitled "How Not To Be Alone," Foer tells the story above and uses the story to test our ability to be attentive to our family, friends and strangers, to recognize how even faster technology has actually made us less sensitive, less attentive, less able to respond. Letters have been replaced by tweets. Phone calls and RSVPs with one word or one sentence responses. And Foer laments: "a funny thing happened. We have begun to prefer the diminished substitutes. It's easier to make a phone call than to schlep to see someone in person. Leaving a message on someone's machine is easier than having a phone conversation - you can say what you need to say without a response; it's easier to check in without becoming entangled. (I bet all of us call people when we know they are not available to pick up on the other end.) Shooting an e-mail is easier, still, because we can hide behind the absence of vocal inflection, and of course there's no chance of accidentally catching someone. Each step "forward" has made it easier, just a little, to avoid the emotional work of being present, to convey information rather than humanity."

I am not sure if you agree with me, but our world is changing, and for the most part, I am not sure it is for the better. When I was a child, I was very close with many of my grandparents cousins and family. What descendants there are of those relatives, I have almost no relationship with. Members of my family live all over the country and time, distance and a lack of connection have taken their toll. I have served in four congregations over the last 28 years totaling approximately 1800 – 2000 families. There were people who I was close to that I have lost touch with and people whom I am disappointed stopped being in touch me. And in many cases, it is no one's fault. Can any of us have a list of 2,000 people that we speak to, catch up with, keep in touch with? It is the nature of our world. We all feel a little disconnected.

I believe that one of the greatest problems we face as individuals, and, as a society is the plague of loneliness. All of us have felt loneliness in our lives. The first days and months after we move to a new city; starting a new school; losing friends and loved ones to moves and time and distance, to family dynamics, to death. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote: "we are ships that pass in the night; and speak to each other in passing. Only a signal shown, and a distant voice in the darkness; so, on the ocean of life, we pass and speak to one another, only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence." Eric Hoffer wrote that: "Loneliness makes the loudest noise. This is true of men as of dogs." Our individual loneliness is having an effect on our communities and societies at large."

Starting with Harvard professor David Reisman's path-breaking 1950 study, The Lonely Crowd – to Harvard professor Robert Putnam's ground-breaking sociological study in 2000 – Bowling Alone, to JTS Chancellor Arnie Eisen and Hebrew University scholar Steven Cohen's significant and important study in 1998 – The Jew Within, we have lived through and continue to witness a startling pattern: with each year, and each generation, with all of our megabyte power and instantaneous connectedness, we are more disconnected than ever. We belong to fewer organizations, we are involved in fewer communal and civic activities, and, *we feel more alone in our lives than ever before.*

Many of us have heard of the French social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville. He wrote a widely quoted and known book entitled, Democracy in America. In his penetrating and comprehensive analysis of American society, de Tocqueville wrote that Americans have “habits of the heart” and those habits helped to form ‘the American character.’ He singles out the many virtues of life in America that he observed in 1830: family life, our religious traditions, our participation in local politics as helping to create the kind of person who could sustain connections to the larger community and the central institutions of American society. But deTocqueville noted one area of concern in his observations of American society in its early years. He was one of the first to diagnose the “individualism” within American society which he warned could undermine the institutions of freedom in America.

So it is not surprising that the year I became a rabbi, Robert Bellah of Harvard University, utilizing deTocqueville’s phrase “habits of the heart” as the title for his brilliant analysis of American society, suggested that ‘the individualism may have grown cancerous’ and therefore threaten the freedoms of American society. Bellah and his co-authors study the ways in which we do and do not participate in the public sphere of life; the extent to which the American education system and our society prepare us to take part in our larger world and society. In the end their study concludes that many Americans, largely confined to a vocabulary of individualism, find it hard to make commitments to others- and, that in the end, many of us allow ourselves to be alone and therefore only answer to ourselves and our individual needs. They urge us to use the words of one of the twentieth century’s leading psychoanalysts, Viktor Frankl, that the essence of life is “to find meaning and purpose in our lives and use our talents to help others.”

Chancellor Arnold Eisen and Professor Steven Cohen came to similar conclusions right before the end of the 20th century in their work, The Jew Within. Eisen and Cohen write that: “The single most important finding of our study is that the patterns explained fifteen years ago by Robert Bellah in *Habits of the Heart* reflect that the language American Jews speak is one of profound individualism. ‘Community’ is a second language, subordinate to the first. Our subjects, like Americans more generally today, do not speak it as often, or as well.”

They continue: “The decline of communal obligations, the rise of sovereign individuals...nowhere have these processes been more evident than among Jews...our concern was to find out what affiliated Jews make of their own Jewishness and how they calculate their responsibility to other Jews.”

And Robert Putnam in his classic work, “Bowling Alone” laments that Americans feel vaguely and uncomfortably disconnected – we have changed our environment more quickly than we know how to change ourselves – we want to live in a more civil, trustworthy, more collectively caring community – but we are lost at how to get there. Putnam’s last chapter is an agenda for creating a more caring community. In one of his bullet points he suggests: Let us find ways to ensure that by 2010 Americans will spend less leisure time sitting passively alone in front of glowing screens and more time in connection with fellow citizens.

Jonathan Safran Foer, deTocqueville, Bellah, Eisen and Cohen and Putnam have all focused in on one of these dual weaknesses and areas of concern: loneliness and an individualism that disconnects each of us from the other. In the 1980’s we called it “the me generation”. But it seems that the term ‘the me generation’ could apply to much of American history. The ‘individualism’ of DeTocqueville has become the loneliness in American society today.

In a new study published in England, one in ten Britons reports being lonely. And this study is quick to point out that it is not just the elderly who feel lonely but a growing number of young people as well. Loneliness can be triggered by poor health, illness, money, children moving away, feeling cut off from family and friends, friends dying, a lack of transportation to participate in the larger community, career problems or divorce. The unemployment crisis facing many countries in Europe, especially among the young will only exacerbate this problem. The startling statistics of youth unemployment throughout Europe presents grave dangers to Western society. This study also points to something I think we all

know: loneliness is related to the fact that many people lack a sense of purpose or any connection to community.

Dr. Andrew McCullough notes: “we have data that suggests that people’s social networks have gotten smaller and families are not providing the same level of social context they may have done fifty years ago. It is not because they are bad or uncaring families, but it has to do with geographical distance, marriage break-down, multiple caring responsibilities and longer working hours.” Dr. McCullough echoes Jonathan Foer’s comments on technology: Social networking websites have come under fire for reducing face to face contact and making people more isolated. Society is too materialistic and individualistic.”

In the “Journal of Advanced Nursing”, the author Colin Killeen, wrote, “Loneliness is a little discussed concept in today’s self-obsessed climate where being lonely is seen as a negative, embarrassing condition. Everyone is lonely to some degree, no matter how much they pretend they are not: it is part of being human.” She offers a suggested definition of loneliness, knowing that loneliness is ‘a very subjective concept.’ She offers this definition: loneliness is a condition that describes the depressing, dehumanizing, detached feelings that a person endures when there is a gaping emptiness in their life due to an unfulfilled social or emotional life.”

Loneliness is a state of mind. It causes people to feel empty, alone and unwanted. While loneliness often leads us to crave human contact, the state of mind often makes it more difficult to form connections with other people.

Henry David Thoreau wrote that ‘city life is millions of people being lonesome together. One author, in a book of her struggles with mental health wrote: “by today’s standards, I was successful, but I was miserable. I have never known more people – nor been lonelier. A recent cartoon read:

Loneliness
The State of Feeling Sad or Deserted Due to Isolation
Loneliness is:
No emails in the inbox
No friends on Facebook
No retweets by anyone
No comments on the blog

The disease of loneliness is not necessarily relieved by being with more people. Sometimes being with more people accentuates our feelings that as much as we are around people we do not feel connected to them.

So what can we do? The poet, John Donne wrote the poem, No Man Is An Island, Donne teaches: “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, part of the main...any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.” And the writer Kurt Vonnegut suggested: What should young people do with their lives today? Many things obviously. But the most daring (listen carefully) is *to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.*” Political scientists and philosophers, social scientists and psychologists have many responses to my question. But today I want to share with you what our Jewish tradition has to say about loneliness. Is there a solution? Judaism says: “yes, there is.”

I would like to suggest three strategies. The first two are contradictory to each other. One way of overcoming our loneliness is not to be alone less but to be alone more. We have to be able cultivate the art of being by ourselves more and with other people less. The Rabbi of Sassov urged: A human being who does not have an hour for himself each day is not a human being. Rabbi Sassov wants each Jew not to be ‘alone’ but, in solitude. We need to learn how to get to know our true selves and be comfortable with and enjoy time with ourselves. When we are alone, we discover our inner strength. We can deepen our spirit. We can reflect, evaluate, meditate and be renewed.

It is no accident that some of the greatest stories of the Torah occur in solitude. Abraham alone in Mesopotamia leaves everything behind to take possession of the Land of Israel and create a new people with a new religion. Moses, alone in the Sinai Desert, discovers God; Moses, alone on Mt. Sinai brings down the Ten Commandments. Jacob prays alone on his journey to his family's homeland. Jacob and Joseph mature in their solitude. Kol Dimama Dakah – A still, small voice. A still, small voice –alone- strengthens and fortifies our ancestors. The artist, the writer, the philosopher and the scientist each pursues time in solitude. We need to be able to teach ourselves to be alone, but not be lonely.

Our **second** strategy is found in two simple sentences in the rabbinic tradition: The Ethics of the Fathers teaches a message simply in five words: Kol Yisrael Arayvim Zeh La Zeh – all Jews are responsible for one another. Another proverb from Pirke Avot: “Al Tifrosh Min HaTzibor” - Do Not Separate Yourself from Your Community.” Judaism requires us to care about other people. Dostoyevski notes: “hell is the suffering of being unable to love.” When we are selfish – when we are self-centered – when we are stingy with our resources – we build tall walls to insulate ourselves from other people's problems. We need to break out of the aloneness we have created. Mother Teresa taught, “I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.” And remember Vonnegut: ‘creating stable communities.’

Our tradition teaches us the idea of *ahavat habriyot* – to love our fellow human beings – *v'ahavta lereyecha comacha* – to love our neighbors as ourselves...I believe that it is part of the DNA of our people to care about others – through mitzvot -deeds – through tzedakah, through observances at home and in the synagogue – we are connected to each other and encouraged to create circles of friendship and caring.

When our people have crises around the world – or, here in America, we need to be there for them...when the State of Israel faces enemies that seek to destroy her – we need to be there for Israel - when there are so many unmet needs in our community – in education, funding for trips to Israel, taking care of our elderly in their homes and in larger facilities – we need to help and do our part.

So to be clear – to shake the disease of loneliness from our lives, we both need to be comfortable with ourselves, take time for ourselves, enjoy the simple pleasures of life by sometimes doing them alone and at the same time relish, enjoy, seek out opportunities to live life as part of a sacred community.

And the **third** strategy I think you already know. It is suggested by the title of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's seminal work entitled: *Man is Not Alone. Man is not alone- because we have God.* We have all experienced loss. The Book of Psalms seeks to comfort us: “Though my father and my mother leave me, God gathers me in.” In the chilly loneliness of fear we tap reservoirs of courage that well up out of the ancient words: “The Lord is for me. I will not fear.” One of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's most beautiful melodies is to the words of Psalm 121 - Esa Einai –el heharim. “I turn my eyes to the mountains; from where does my help come from? My help comes from God, creator of the heavens and the earth.” We are not alone. God is with us. God gives us strength, courage and vision. God and our Jewish faith can enrich our spiritual life only if we are willing to work hard and invest in our relationship with God. Our relationship with God can touch us, enrich us, help us transcend to a new level of spirituality.

A final thought from my colleague and our former scholar in residence Rabbi Brad Artson. Rabbi Artson reminds us of the story of Joseph and his brothers. Twice Joseph dreams about his family bowing down before him. Twice he tells his family about his visions of superiority. The brothers, hurt and enraged by their brother's arrogance, sell Joseph into slavery. Joseph experiences the depths of loneliness and despair as an Egyptian slave and as a prisoner in an Egyptian jail. But, it is in prison that Joseph learns to sympathize. He learns that the other prisoners – even at the bottom – are still human beings. In prison, Joseph accepts a basic principle of our Jewish tradition – all of us are responsible for one another.

In caring about the imprisoned butler and baker, he in fact plants the seeds for his own restoration and future glory. Joseph learns that his own talent can thrive best when he cares about other people. Far from being a threat, the happiness of acquaintances, friends and relatives form a supportive environment

in which each of us can blossom. Arrogance isolates, not the sharing of skills and talents. Ruthlessness, not drive, leads to loneliness. By living as part of a vibrant community – here at Etz Chaim, in East Cobb, in Cobb County, the Metro Atlanta area, our State, our Country and our Jewish people wherever they are...we can support each other to be the best that we can be. Rabbi Jack Riemer wrote a prayer: We cannot merely pray to you.” The responsive reading lists many things we can do to help our society and our world. It ends with these words: “Therefore, we pray to You instead, O God for strength, determination and will power - **to do, instead of just to pray, to become instead of merely to wish.**”
Dear friends: The destiny of the world is in our hands. With God’s blessing and our hard work, we can create caring communities that would virtually eliminate loneliness. Action – giving - tzedakah – involvement, volunteerism – and faith in God these are the best cures for loneliness.

And by living, and caring, and participating we will please our God, and, in the words of Aleynu which we will recite in a few minutes – *bayom hahoo, yehiyeh adonai echad u’schemo echad* -we all serve to hasten to bring the spirit of God to our world.

Amen.

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CHOSENNESS
A Kol Nidrei Sermon
Rabbi Richard Plavin

At this season, with just about six weeks until November 6th, it is important for me to speak about the election. It is also important that the synagogue retain its tax exempt status, so, the election I want to speak about is the Election of Israel. I didn't say the elections in Israel. I have no intention of interfering in the politics of another country, even Israel. When I say the Election of Israel I am using a term used by theologians and Biblical historians to refer to the notion of Israel as the Chosen people. Few concepts in Judaism are more controversial.

For some Jews, the idea that we are the chosen of God makes all the sense in the world. How else to explain our remarkable achievements in the face of persecution, our outstanding gifts to the world despite our small numbers? How else to understand the miraculous survival of the Jewish people for thousands of years in the face of innumerable attempts at our annihilation? No doubt you have received the same e-mail forwards as I have touting the percentage of Jewish university presidents or Nobel Prize winners, or PH.Ds per square mile in Israel.

I particularly like the story about the Russian military college where a renowned general gave a lecture to the graduating senior class. Then he accepted questions from the audience. One young man asked which country would be Russia's next great enemy and the general answered that it would be China. The young man replied that in case they were doomed since China had so many billion people and Russian had only 200 million. How could they ever defend themselves? It would be a lost cause. "Nonsense," said the general. "Consider the wars between Israel and the Arab nations. A few million Jews against nearly 100 million Arabs." The student responded, "Yes, I know that history. But we don't have that many Jews." We love that. We talk about Yiddisher kupf and Jewish devotion to philanthropy, and we think we are just great.

Other Jews find the idea of Chosenness absolutely abhorrent. They see it as an outdated, offensive and divisive notion. Some say it is a major cause of anti-Semitism. The Reform and Reconstructionist movements have eliminated the concept from their theology and edited their prayer books to reflect that change. That is why you may hear some people recite the Torah blessing minus "Asher bachar banu", "Who has chosen us," and instead they say "Asher karvanu" "Who has brought us close to His service."

From my perspective, both of these reactions reflect a profound misunderstanding of what it means to be God's chosen people. In fact, we have misunderstood the idea of Chosenness since the very days of the prophets. Tonight I want to talk about the election of Israel, God's choosing us to be His holy people, because this concept must be understood if we are to understand our Jewish identity. Last week I said that we Jews, who call ourselves Conservative, are very passionate about being Jewish. I think that's clearly so. Just look at how many of us are gathered here on this holy night. But what does our being Jewish mean to us? And does it mean anything that our tradition speaks of our being a Chosen People? Chosen for what?

On Rosh Hashanah the hero of our Torah readings was Abraham, and that is where the story of the Chosenness of Israel truly begins. And it doesn't matter what you think of Abraham, whether you believe that he actually existed, or you feel that he is a figure of Jewish mythology. The essential point is that Judaism has understood his story as the beginning of our story. My Christian colleagues talk about 'being called,' to their vocation and in reality, that is what happened to Abraham. He got 'the call.' God gave him a mission, and that is where it all began. It is important to note that as we read the Abraham stories, we see that he is a flawed character, in many ways far from perfect. I think his flaws were intentionally not edited out of the text. It tells us something vitally important: that a person does not have to be perfect to serve God. Abraham was not a perfect human; but he was a human willing to try his best to do God's will.

There is one verse in the Torah text, just before Abraham has his famous negotiating session with God about saving the people of Sodom, that makes it very clear to me what it means to be a Jew. The Torah

says, "I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right." I love that verse and I am going to repeat it. "I have singled him out," that is the choosing. "That he may instruct his children and his posterity," that means us, whether you are a Jew by birth or a Jew-by-Choice, you are the posterity of Avraham Avinu, our father Abraham. "To keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right." "By doing what is just and right." If that is our mission, what more needs to be said? That makes it crystal clear. To be chosen is no emblem of superiority; it is in fact a heavy responsibility.

We Jews have always had a hard time with that idea. It is so much more pleasant to see God choosing us as a star on our report card; as some sort of magical shield from injury. That would be nice, but it is not what our tradition tells us. Just look back at the prophets. One of the most coveted Torah portions for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah is Kedoshim, in the book of Leviticus. What excites the young boy or girl who has to get up on the bima is that the prophetic reading for that Shabbat, the Haftarah they will have to prepare, is just 9 verses long. Only 9 verses, but they are exceptionally powerful. The message of the prophet Amos contains the most basic and significant statement about the Chosenness of Israel that exists. He makes it very clear that Chosenness does not mean that God loves Israel more than the other nations. In that chapter Amos compares Israel to the Ethiopians. The verse says, "To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians. True, I brought you up from the Land of Egypt, but I also brought the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir." In other words, God reaches out to all oppressed people. The prophet is telling us, "Don't think you are so special because God redeemed you from Egyptian bondage." That is not how it is to be understood. God redeemed you because you have a job to do, and people cannot be in the service of God as long as they are enslaved to flesh and blood taskmasters.

Another important message in this passage is that there is nothing exclusive about being the Chosen People. We do not claim that we are the proprietors of the only truth. Have you ever had a missionary come to your door, hand you six or seven different tracts, and tell you that you can study them all and decide which path to God you think is best for you? No, that will never happen. What we find so insulting about proselytizing, about missionaries who tell us that their gateway to heaven is the only door, is that it is saying "your way is defective." What we find intolerable about radical Islamists who feel their way is the only correct path is that they too often use violence and kill people to make their point.

Some people familiar with Jewish liturgy point to the *Aleynu* prayer as proof that we too have that arrogance. You know how it begins "*Aleynu l'shbayach la-adon hakol, latet gdulah l'yotzer bereshit* – It is our duty to praise the Master of all, to acclaim the Creator." We continue to chant that prayer in the Hebrew "*Sh'lo ah-sanu k'goyeh ha-aratzot*" I wonder how many Jews know the translation of that passage. It says, "God did not make us like the other nations and did not assign us a destiny like theirs; God did not make our lot like theirs nor our portion like that of all other people." Many find that a very troublesome passage; it seems to smack of elitism. I understand that what the text is saying is that we Jews have a special role to play in the world. But appearances matter. The problem is that the words do sound arrogant and exclusivist.

Very often when I daven on weekday mornings I use the prayer book recently published by the Israeli Marsorti/Conservative movement. I like what they do with the *Aleynu*. Where the traditional text says "*Sh'lo ah-sanu k'goyeh ha-aratzot* – Who has not made us like the nations of the earth" the siddur provides an alternative passage. It is a verse from Micah. The prophet says, "For all people will walk everyone in the name of his God, and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever." I find that text so much more palatable. It says very clearly, "Our way is not the only way. It is the way for us."

Amos, in an earlier chapter, says very clearly that the election of Israel was not a matter of privilege but rather a call to special responsibility. "You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth – that is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities." In other words, our Chosenness is more connected to our suffering than our reward. Tevye the Milkman in "Fiddler on the Roof" understood the nature of Chosenness well. He cried to the heavens, "I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't You choose someone else?" And then, he demonstrated that he truly understood what it

meant to be chosen by setting out to invite a stranger to his home for Shabbat dinner. Make no mistake: being chosen is no small matter. Jews were chosen to bring to the world God's message: love your fellow as yourself, care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger, give to the poor, all people were created in the Divine image, and most importantly, always value life. In this way, Jews are chosen to be a "light unto the nations." There is no doubt that living a life of holiness in a society that is not only secular but in many ways profane, is a significant challenge. We live in a society that does not know the meaning of modesty, that sexualizes the marketing of just about anything, that puts materialism way above spirituality, and puts pleasure above responsibility – all values that are so contrary to the teachings of Judaism. It takes considerable backbone, and appreciation of a Jewish way of life, to swim against that very strong current. And that is what is being asked of us when God says that we are to be a 'light unto the nations.' But it is the role for which we were nominated and if we say, "If nominated I will not run and if elected I will not serve," if we try to say that, we are being derelict in our duty as Jews. The magnitude of this challenge has to give us tremendous admiration for Jews-by-Choice and for Baalei Teshuva, those who have chosen to adopt a life in which they take their covenantal responsibilities seriously.

Rabbi Sholomo Riskin tells a fascinating story. A young man from a secular background came to him to study and learn more about his heritage. Over time, the man became thoroughly observant and of course, Rabbi Riskin was very pleased. Then quite suddenly, the man stopped appearing at services, no longer attended study sessions, and just fell off the radar screen. Rabbi Riskin had no way to contact him and was quite worried. Then, some months later, the rabbi spotted the man in the market and approached him for an explanation. The man said this. "Rabbi, it was just too much. When I had to make decisions based on my own ideas and what my friends might think, I could manage. When I had to tailor my life to what I believed God would want of me, it was just more than I could take." In essence, this young man was choosing not be chosen. Now let me tell you a very different story.

Louis Brandeis was a student at Harvard Law School at a time when there were explicit limits on what Jews could hope to achieve. Quotas were in effect and many law offices were completely closed to Jewish attorneys. When Brandeis was in school, his colleagues would say, "Brandeis, you're brilliant. If you weren't a Jew, you could end up on the Supreme Court. Why don't you convert? Then all of your problems would be solved." Brandeis did not respond to such comments, but on the occasion of his official introduction to an exclusive honor society at the law School, Brandeis took the podium and announced, "I am sorry I was born a Jew." His words were greeted with enthusiastic applause, shouts, and cheers. But when the noise died down he continued. "I'm sorry I was born a Jew, but only because I wish I had the privilege of choosing Judaism on my own."

The initial response of stunned silence slowly gave way to awed applause. Ultimately, his anti-Semitic peers rose and gave him a standing ovation. In 1916, Louis Brandeis became the first Jew appointed to the United States Supreme Court.

So my friends, we all have to make a choice; the choice to be chosen. Some people say that in this very open society, we Jews are all Jews-by-Choice. To some extent that is true. But I find over and over again, we cannot escape our identity. Whatever you do in life, you are representing the Jewish people. Your actions reflect not only on you, but on all of us.

As you say your prayers in the next 24 hours, I want you to consider that choice. How do you understand being a Jew? What does it mean to you that the Jews are God's chosen people? Accepting chosenness, in this age, in this world, means being a rebel. A wonderful young scholar who taught here two years ago, Rabbi David Hoffman, wrote these words.

From Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Isaiah to Rabbi Akivah and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in the 20th century, Judaism has never been about acceptance. The greatest teaching that Judaism offers the world is that the way things are is not the way things have to be. The course of our lives and the condition of the world are not inevitable realities. God, through the Torah's commandments and the protest of the prophets, created a vision of the world as it was meant to be, but is not yet.

Each and every one of us stands in that chain of tradition. He continues: "This, perhaps, is the core religious commitment of a Jew: to live with an awareness of this sacred tension between the reality of our world and the dream of what it should be."

Friends, that awareness is what it means to accept Chosenness.

On this Yom Kippur, I challenge you to make that choice.

Rabbi Richard Plavin
Beth Sholom B'nai Israel
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AVINU MALKEINU: WHO DOES THE INSCRIBING?

Rabbi Amy Scheinerman

Avinu Malkeinu, perhaps more than any other prayer, is emblematic of the High Holy Days? Avinu Malkeinu captures and expresses the essence of our prayers, hopes and aspirations. It joins forces powerfully with that seminal Jewish image, *Sefer ha-Chayim*, the Book of Life. *Avinu Malkeinu, kat-vei-nu b'sefer chayyim tovim*

Avinu Malkeinu, inscribe us for blessing in the Book of Life.

On Rosh Hashanah, tradition holds, *Sefer ha-Chayim*, the Book of Life, lies open in heaven. In it are *two kinds* of inscriptions, though we rarely distinguish them. The first kind of inscription is what is written **about** us in *Sefer ha-Chayim*, the Book of Life. These are the inscriptions of our lives that tradition holds God reads today. Where do these inscriptions come from? We write them with all the good we have done, the kindness we have shown, the mitzvot we have fulfilled... as well as with our sins and failings. Everything is there, metaphorically in black-and-white ink. Were I to update the image, I might say everything is in pixels on the backup hard drive of life or, given the ubiquitous nature of video-cams, it's all there in the video of our lives.

The image of these inscriptions in the Book of Life is compelling because it reminds us of something we know, but often wish to forget: that everything we do and say - not to mention everything we neglect doing and fail to say - *does make a difference*. We know the difference a complimentary word or kind gesture from someone else has made in our lives. So, too, a disapproving look, being snubbed or ignored, a critical or caustic comment flung our way. Nothing simply hovers in the air; all those looks, gestures, words, comments - all find a landing spot in our heads and hearts. Nothing escapes God's notice, and tradition holds that everything we do will be taken into account when God judges us.

This brings us to the second kind of inscription in the Book of Life. These are God's inscriptions (more like prescriptions) for us in the coming year. We implore God to write us down for all the blessings we most furtively seek all of our days:

*Avinu malkeinu, inscribe us in the Book of happiness.
Avinu malkeinu, inscribe us in the Book of prosperity.
Avinu malkeinu, inscribe us in the Book of forgiveness.*

We pray with deep sincerity, but the way the prayer is couched, we hold God responsible for inscribing us on the right side of the ledger and we expect God to deliver on the goods. It's in God's hands, not in ours. And perhaps that's why so often we forget what we've prayed for as soon as the shofar is blown at the close of Yom Kippur and life goes on as before until next Rosh Hashanah rolls round again because if God is responsible, we are not.

So here is the question I wish to pose: Do you believe the theology behind the prayer? Do you believe that God judges us and hands out substantive rewards or punishments in the year to come based on our performance over the past year? If this is not your understanding of God and how the world works, what can we make of this moving and heartrending prayer?

The poet, Ruth F. Brin z"l, writing from the perspective of a woman, responds to the male language - "our **father**, our **king**" - but her point goes far beyond the concern of gendered God-language:

When men were children, they thought of God as a father;
When men were slaves, they thought of God as a master;
When men were subjects, they thought of God as a king.

But I am a woman, not a slave, not a subject,
not a child who longs for God as father or mother.

I might imagine God as teacher or friend, but those images,
like king, master, father or mother, are too small for me now.

God is the force of motion and light in the universe;
God is the strength of life on our planet;
God is the power moving us to do good:
God is the source of love springing up in us.
God is far beyond what we can comprehend.

Personally, I live in a world mediated by the laws of nature and physics (the concrete reality), and filled with the holiness of God (the potential for growth and change, for compassion and righteousness). Yet I'm still tempted to ask: Why *do* bad things happen to me and to others? I would suggest that this is a futile question leading only to frustration and despair. Rather than asking, "Why do horrible things happen?" let us ask, "What can I do about it?"

I invite you to consider the image of *Sefer ha-chayim* (the Book of Life) and the petitions of Avinu Malkeinu this way: We are responsible for BOTH kinds of inscriptions: those that reflect how we've lived during the past year (the first kind of inscription), but also (and this is the second kind of inscription) the potential blessings and curses we can be to those we know and love. You see, the flip side of saying that everything we do and say - not to mention everything we neglect doing and fail to say - *makes a difference*, is that we are writing not only onto the page of the ledger that has our name at the top, but also onto pages of others. On our own pages we write with deeds and words; on the pages of others we also write with deeds and words, with kindnesses or cruelty.

Divinity resides within each of us. We are God's manifestation in the world: God's eyes, ears, hands, feet, mouth. Words fly from our mouths and always find a resting place; gestures hit their mark. The inscriptions we make in the Book of Life are real, significant, and enduring - both for good and for ill. What we do matters so much because of its effect on others.

What if this year we begin anew by acknowledging the divine within us and therefore our capacity and responsibility to bless the lives of others? What if this year, instead of sitting back passively and begging God to bless our lives, we understand *Avinu Malkeinu* not as a laundry list for God, but as a "memo to self"? What if this year we pick up the pen of our lives and start writing the inscriptions we want God to read next Rosh Hashanah?

How can we do that? The answer is not genius, but mindfulness. With your tongue as your pen, here are things you can say directly to others, thereby writing them in *their* Book of Life...and then watch what happens!

- I feel good when I'm around you.
- I love your sense of humor.
- It's fun to do things with you.
- You are easy to talk to.
- I always know I can count on you to listen.
- You give good advice.
- You always have something interesting to say.
- I appreciate your caring.
- You're important to me.

Surely, one of these applies to everyone you consider a friend and many who are only acquaintances. Don't hold back kind and encouraging words. What you give freely will be returned to you freely.

Avinu Malkeinu is not the only prayer we view through this lens. Another that I love, but which suffers from the same sense that we are passive recipients of God's mercies and punishments, is *Ha-yom*. Here is the version found in *Gates of Repentance* (p. 357) with my suggestion of another way to hear the prayer interpolated.

Ha-yom t'am'tzeinu. Amen

This day, strengthen us. Amen.

This day and every day we have the capacity to encourage and strengthen the people in our lives.

Ha-yom t'var'khei-nu. Amen

This day, bless us. Amen.

This day and every day we can be a meaningful blessing to others.

Ha-yom t'gad-lei-nu. Amen

This day exalt us. Amen.

This day and every day let us be good to ourselves and to one another.

Ha-yom tid'r'shei-nu l'tova. Amen

This day, look with favor upon us. Amen.

This day and every day we can promote the welfare and good of others.

Ha-yom tikh-t'vei-nu l'cha-yim tovim. Amen

This day inscribe us for a blessed life. Amen.

This day and every day let us bless others through our kindness and generosity.

Ha-yom tish-ma sha-v'a-tei-nu. Amen

This day, hear our plea. Amen.

This day and every day let us hear the pleas of others... and respond.

Ha-yom tit-m'khei-nu bi'min tzi-d'ke-kha. Amen

This day, uplift us with Your righteousness. Amen.

This day and every day let our righteousness uplift others.

May the coming year be filled with blessings and may we be privileged to be the purveyors of blessings to others. May you have a sweet new year, and may you sweeten the lives of others in the coming year.

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LEAVING IS NOT AN OPTION

Rabbi Neal Borovitz

As the rocket attacks accompanied by the verbal assaults against Israel grew louder this past summer I found myself reflecting back upon the many Rabbinic solidarity missions that I have participated in. I found on my computer some notes from a talk I gave in the fall of 2007 that I share with you, my colleagues with the hope that they can be both challenging and comforting as we approach these Yamim Noraim these days of Awe, determined to find hope in a time of despair.

“Leaving is not an option!”

On the last day of four day visit to Israel in October 2007 these were the words of a social worker specializing in Trauma in Children who lives and works in Sderot, the Israeli town that sits on the border of the Gaza Strip. His words summarize the determination and dedication of all the citizens of Israel with whom I met as my fellow United Jewish Community Rabbinic Cabinet members and I toured the towns that were the targets of Hezbollah’s Ketushas and Hamas’s Kasams the previous summer.

This year as the Hamas arsenal of weapons were able to reach far beyond the communities such as Sderot and Ashkelon that have endured these attacks for the past eight years, **“leaving is not an option”** is more than a mantra for a few hundred Israelis in towns and kibbutzim that border Gaza, but rather, a statement of the existential reality for all Israelis.

So what can we do? What can we as rabbis say to our communities on these Awesome as well as Awe-filled Holy Days? One suggestion I make is that we seek to understand and apply the words of an early 20th century Reform Rabbi named Ferdinand Isserman, who in a quote that is included in both **Gates of Prayer** and **Mishkan T’Filah** once wrote:

“Pray as if everything depends upon God and act as if everything depends upon us.”

On these days of awe we must pray for Divine help in seeking peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians. However, we can and must also recognize that we American Jews must also act as if everything depends upon us.

One of the Mitzvot I learn from the story of Abraham, the leading man of our Rosh Hashana is Bikur Holim, visiting the sick. I believe that every one of us who visits Israel this year has a unique opportunity to fulfill this Mitzvah. The physical damage caused by the rocket attacks is quickly being repaired. The holes in the hearts and souls of average citizens caused by these very same rockets are not so easily repaired.

I remember that on our 2007 Rabbinic Cabinet mission one Israeli Reform Rabbi said to me, “Neal, the presence of you and your 22 colleagues from all four religious streams is a true gift to our community.” We all know that rocket assaults such as Israel endured this past year will impact tourism negatively. The impact of a drop off in tourism is not only economic but psychological. Therefore step one that I believe we all need to take on these forthcoming Holy Days is to encourage American Jews in the pews to join each of us on a trip to Israel in 5775.

A second lesson I learn from the Abraham story is that our patriarch was a man who maintained positive relationships with his neighbors. In the encounter with Avimelech and in his willingness to find followers to free Lot from captivity an underlying message of Abraham’s willingness to not only speak truth to power but to be a good neighbor.

The Iron Dome anti-missile defense system and other high tech weaponry made a significant difference in the war of 2014 over the war of 2007. Our role as American Jews is to express gratitude to our Congressional representatives and Senators as well as to President Obama for American military and

diplomatic support of Israel. As Americans we have a right to petition our government leaders and as Jews we have a responsibility to lobby on behalf of strengthening the American-Israel alliance. Israel today is the front line in the battle for not just Jewish survival but for the defense of Western civilization against Islamic Fundamentalist terror.

“Leaving is not an option!” Staying the course, defending our right as it says at the end of Hatikvah, “to be a free people in our own land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem” demands of American Jewry that we remain the financial political and emotional supply line for our Israeli brethren.

Leaving is not an option for Israelis; and standing idly by cannot be an option for us. May each of us inscribe ourselves this year in the Book of Life with a commitment to the promise of UN Resolution 242 passed on the eve of Rosh Hashanah in September of 1967 in which the world affirmed the right of Israel to live in peace with her neighbors within secure and recognized borders. Let us recognize that in order for that inscription to be sealed we must all in the words of Rabbi Isserman:

“Pray as if everything depends upon God but also act as if everything depends upon us”

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SUPERSTITION AND SPIRITUALITY

Kol Nidre

Rabbi Morley T. Feinstein

Tonight I want to wish a very special birthday to my daughters Renata and Eliana, who turn ten years old this very day! Neither Imma nor I planned to celebrate this particular way with you, your brothers Aaron and Ari, and our family, on Kol Nidre, Friday the Thirteenth of all dates! But I do want to say with all my heart, *Yom Huledet Sameach*, Happy, Happy Birthday, may you live to be 120, bis a hundert und tzvanzig, Kenahora! Pooh pooh pooh!

No, I'm not going to spit three times or throw salt over my shoulder; I'm careful about black cats since I'm allergic, and I don't: whistle at night, pay attention to crows hovering in the sky, point my fork at someone, open up an umbrella inside the house or walk under a ladder. These are a variety of superstitions, bubbe-meises; as we observe Yom Kippur we must ask: Is our way of being Jewish filled with superstition, or can we instead elevate our spirituality to bring meaning to our lives?

Our Reform forebears were greatly concerned about how superstitions focused our behavior, our thinking and feeling about Judaism. The Aleinu prayer in our Union Prayer Book included the paraphrase, "May superstition no longer enslave the mind nor idolatry blind the eye." Our immigrant ancestors were heavily engaged in the rote superstitions of Judaism and not the uplifting spirituality of our heritage. We wanted to change this, and revised our prayers and deeds to reflect our learning and our logic, our reason and our being rational. We refused to pray or sing anything we couldn't actually believe or defend as real. Today we must be careful not to let our rational side trample our spiritual feelings.

Even the Kol Nidre was once denigrated as irrational, though its melody was beloved. Yet that haunting melody, the sound we return to each year, heightens a spiritual tranquility which we crave, what we seek in a world that sometimes leaves us behind. We worry about making a living, doing our errands, rushing around, getting angry and stressing out as we are stuck in traffic. With the technology of cell phones, iPads, laptops, clocks on our coffee makers and toasters – life is no simpler. Science and technology have distanced us from that sense of spiritual peace and comfort.

When there was a limited amount of information to acquire, any educated human being could be knowledgeable about various subjects. Today, where an infinite number of messages are transferred from one computer to the next, with everything from business data to scientific theorems to pornography to gossip to Torah study channeled through the internet, the world has rapidly changed. Then, we knew more about less. Now, we know less about more. In this high-tech age, we need a high-touch response. So people have returned to the life of the spirit, to the ineffable qualities which nurture our souls.

Spirituality is a word that only entered the Jewish community in the 90's. We had gained our civil rights, the Vietnam War concluded, our concern for the environment became normative, Israel had won its wars, Jews were freed from Russia and Ethiopia. With these global concerns seemingly resolved, people began to open up their faith and inner spiritual life. We Rabbis became more liberated to speak and write about God. Many Jews embarked on their own spiritual journeys; Baby Boomers focused more and more on the meaning of life and their own spiritual sparks. Spirituality, which sees as its primary task cultivating and nourishing our human souls and spirits, is integral to the Jewish religious experience. [Rabbi Arthur Green]

Our Jewish spiritual renewal can sweep us heavenward. Many of us have felt religious joy. We know the incredible *nachasat* a wedding, the amazing pride at a Bar or Bat Mitzvah; even the ache of sadness at a funeral touches our spirits. It is possible for us to feel alive Jewishly, to grow in relationship with God. Those special Jewish family moments are part of our spiritual journey. And so many of you honored us with your comments about the great heimish quality of our Rosh Hashanah services, a combination of music, of feeling at home, of warmth, of uniting our heads and our hearts, of your bringing your conscious intention to the moment.

Spirituality combines our routine prayer with spontaneous emotion. It brings the full vitality of body, heart, mind and soul together. [Rabbi Arthur Green] And that is very challenging. Seeking our spirituality through prayer is hard, it's tricky, for we may be unclear about God. It can be daunting to reconcile our beliefs with our worship. And honestly, it doesn't always work for me. I too can be tired, and there are times that it may feel difficult or mechanical. It's especially hard after an intensive counseling session, or coping with the loss of life. But then, there are those moments that strike forth like lightning, and the music of prayer is like a smile from God. It emanates from the soul. It invigorates us, the music may remind us of our life experiences, the words may move our souls. Spirituality may be the propane, but religion is the lantern of its expression that bursts the flame into light.

A rabbi was once asked by his students, "What do you do before praying?" The teacher responded, "I prepare for prayer." The students pressed their mentor and asked, "How do you prepare?" To this question, the rabbi replied, "I pray that I may be able to pray properly." Prayer is our spiritual conversation, our encounter, our striking up a dialogue with God. And when we pray, the rhythm and cadence of the words can be comforting, like those terrifying moments when we have to say Kaddish for our loved ones. Prayer helps us frame our lives, giving us an opportunity to think and reflect, to provide moments of introspection in a world filled with beeps, buzzers, bells and sirens.

Because prayer can be challenging, we needed to revolutionize our worship, to do something new and dynamic in our Synagogue. We've prayed Shabbat at the Beach and Havdalah at the Marina, had a morning of meditation and hiked with Torah off the Beaten Path, all outgrowths of your responses through the Joshua Project. Our new Saturday services provide an entrée to Judaism, coping with our needs for Healing at our Healing Shabbat, learning about prayer in our Learner's Minyan, singing and praying with our children at Tiny T'filah, getting a hands on experience leading or reading or chanting in our participatory Minyan, and a quarterly time for meditation, for quiet and tranquility. We need community, gathering together in song and prayer. And our 'Taste of Judaism' class can open the door to spirituality, ethics and community.

But Rabbi, I'm spiritual, not religious! A noted mystic once described those who want spirituality without religion as wanting the cream without the milk. We need to balance the richness of the cream with the sustenance of our milk. It's not a fad or the latest thing. We have to remember that Ritual is at the core of Spirituality. Spirituality is intensely personal and potentially profound, while ritual connects it and each of us to others. Community gives us the language and lifecycles, rites and rituals of our heritage.

In 1943 in the Skarzysko concentration camp the Rabbi smuggled in a ram's horn, and asked Moshe to sculpt it into a Shofar. Moshe had never made a shofar, and he approached a devout Polish Catholic carpenter to help him. Moshe was able to work on it and the Catholic carpenter assisted with tools and advice. Moshe finished the Shofar one hour before Rosh Hashanah. At dawn the next day, despite the blows they knew would follow, they sounded that shofar, which is now in Yad VaShem. This simple mechanical act had great profound spiritual meaning for them, performing a ritual in the face of the oppressor, and the story of their courage moves us. (Story from Yaffa Eliach's Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust.)

Our ritual is the holy vessel into which we pour our spirituality. And our tradition speaks not only to the glory of the sunrise but also how we drive, or use money, or have sex, or work, how we speak to neighbors and children. To learn that framework, our spiritual touchstone is Torah, where we turn for inspiration and insight, to refract our experiences with the world. The sacred text of Torah provides us with a lens to stare into our souls, as it has done for over 250 generations! Moreover, Torah captures the Divine light so we see ourselves more clearly, and find a personal way to respond to the Godliness in life. When we place a mirror in front of the text, we see our reflection in the lives of our ancestors.

I had a congregant who yearned to know more, felt he was ignorant of Judaism, never had a proper education, and wanted to start on his path to spirituality and knowledge. He learned that to relate to the Torah is to enter the spiritual path of our ancestors, crossing the rivers with them, journeying and trekking through the desert, feeling their pangs of thirst, empathizing with their sufferings or their exaltations of

victory. When he paused in those rare moments to reflect on his own journey, he began to be enriched by the text and his life became interwoven with those who have come before.

“As the text has left its imprint on me, I have also left my footprints along the path of my ancestors in the text and beyond. Our journey through the Sinai and the desert we call life become fused. The sacred text is a spiritual legacy, documenting the relationship of individuals with God through history. Through study, I am able to join my struggle with theirs.” (Rabbi Kerry Olitzky)

But study is not sufficient alone to engage our souls, our quest. It can be a solitary exercise. Study and prayer by themselves are not enough. We need to interact with the world around us. It is part of who and what we are as human beings, as Jews. The Rabbis instructed us to build our synagogues with windows of glass. They compelled us to maintain a perspective on the reality of the material world beyond the walls of the house of prayer – even while we are trying to gaze heavenward. This is especially important for those of us who attempt to balance our liberal religious lives with our feet firmly planted in contemporary society, with all its vice and virtues. Remembering to work to make the world a better place must guide our interaction with the world and shape our daily lives.

When I travelled to Mississippi with the Board of Rabbis to repair the damaged homes and roofs following Hurricane Katrina-ok, you're wondering, our Rabbi on a roof with electric tools and pneumatic hammers? - the priests, ministers, and rabbis of the organized interfaith religious community matched their words to deeds, sending missions of volunteers who acted on their spirituality to find God and help troubled souls, a true lesson of *tikun olam*.

This is why we roll up our sleeves on Big Sunday, work for immigration reform or against gun violence, march against genocide, require every Bar or Bat Mitzvah to do a *tzedakah* project, and bring our Confirmants to Washington, DC to the L'Taken Seminar for social justice. Our Mechinah class will be doing the Israel LA AIDS Walk to live their Jewish life and connect it to this world. And you can help someone tomorrow by taking 5 minutes from 12-5, at our Bone Marrow Registry, and potentially save someone's life.

There are two inherent dangers in the pursuit of spirituality. First, we need to be concerned about New Age spirituality that emphasizes red threads, crystals or the Kabbalah Center's mishugas, rather than a life devoted to prayer, study, and ethical behavior. Secondly, we can't abdicate our responsibility to others as we seek our personal growth. Behind some who want to tap their inner power or find their true self is old-fashioned self-glorification. “It is, like so much in our society, self-centered and narcissistic.” (Rabbi Irwin Zeplovitz)

Let me share a story about Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady who was studying in his son's house. The floor below, his grandchildren slept while his son studied nearby. The baby started crying, but the son was so involved with his study he did not hear his child crying. Distressed, Shneur Zalman descended the stairs, calmed the baby, and then sternly addressed his son. He said, “You cannot reach the Holy One if you cannot hear the cry of a baby!” We can't be so focused on our holiness that we ignore a cry for help. We need to respond to such calls always! Shneur Zalman's lesson speaks directly to us, jars us and draws us to redress society's wrongs.

Though our ultimate goal may be the spiritual development of others, showing them dignity and respect, it must also be the improvement of their lives, listening to their cries, making sure they are secure, fed, clothed, housed and healthy. Jews constantly listen for that human cry – whether it emanates from the mouth of a baby or from someone in distress. As one Hasidic master taught, “Better you should be concerned with your soul and other people's bodies.”

Friends, we need to speak of spirituality in our lives, in our offices, our schools, and our homes. We can find ways to make God part of all that we do. If we truly want to believe that Judaism is a way of life we live and breathe, in our homes and on our way, when we lie down and when we rise up, then we have to take these words meaningfully to heart today and act on them when we leave this House of God. Let us

fill up our grocery bags and return them to Temple. Let us turn our tables into altars of faith by saying *hamotzi* and *borei pri hagafen*. Come into the Temple or I'll join you in your home or office for a spiritual check-up, and a guide to how 10 minutes can change your life. We are not a religion built on practicing our faith only within this building. The arena for spirituality is wherever we decide to let God in.

There was a woman who loved opals. Over the years, she collected a treasured set of opal earrings, a magnificent opal ring, and a gorgeous opal necklace. The woman placed her opal jewelry in a safe deposit box. She decided to wear opals only on special occasions. Many years passed. No occasion was deemed just right, just special enough to wear the opals. Finally, the wedding of her own daughter drew near, and the woman decided that the time had arrived. With unbearable excitement, the woman went to the vault and removed the necklace, earrings and ring from the box, the opals crumbled in her hands. The woman had been so busy collecting the jewelry that she had failed to learn that opals need to be worn; they need the oils of the skin in order to retain their luster and their strength. It is the warmth of the body, the touching, which gives them life and beauty.

We can't keep our God, our personal spirituality, hidden away in a safe deposit box, expecting the Holy One to work at moments of crisis or tragedy, for our belief may crumble. We can't manipulate God to be a cosmic bellhop, ready at our beck and call. When God and spirituality are integral to our daily lives, filled with prayer and study and meaning and deeds of justice, then our faith will also have life and beauty.

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ROSH HASHANA SERMON FOR THE FIRST DAY OF ROSH HASHANA

Rabbi Robyn Fyer Bodzin

None of the characters in today's Torah reading were faultless or exemplary. Not Abraham, not Ishmael or Isaac, and certainly not Hagar or Sarah. Everyone's behavior needed improvement.

A little back story is needed to fully understand the dynamic between Sarah and Hagar. When we first encounter Sarah in Genesis 11, she is introduced with the following words: וְתָהִי שָׂרִי עֲקָרָה אֵין לָהּ וָלֵד: *And Sarai was barren; she had no child.* That is the extent of the verse. No mention of her exquisite beauty or royal lineage. Six words. The reader learns of Sarah's inability to have children even before God tells Abraham that he will be the father of a new nation.

Five chapters later, at the beginning of Genesis 16, we are reminded of Sarah's inability to bear children once again. וְשָׂרִי אֵשֶׁת אַבְרָם, לֹא יָלְדָה לוֹ. *Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.* There is no change in family status. Sarah has participated in months and years of Mesopotamian adventures and escapades with her husband, all the while constantly reminded that she has no children.

But this time, the verse continues: וְלָהּ שִׁפְחָה מִצְרִית, וְשָׁמָּה הָגָר. *She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar.* Hagar's introduction to the story is directly connected to Sarah's fertility woes.

Let's continue to the next verse:-- וְתֹאמַר שָׂרִי אֶל-אַבְרָם, הֲנֵה-נָא עֲצָרְנִי ה' מִלָּדָת. *And Sarai said to Abram, "Look, the Lord has kept me from bearing"* Go בִּ'-אֶנָּה אֶל-שִׁפְחָתִי, *now, be with her*, in the biblical way. (How much pain and contemplation did Sarah go through to get to that point?) And then Sarah says -- אֲוִלִי אֲבִנָּה מִמֶּנָּה *"perhaps I will be built up from her"*, which is commonly understood as "maybe I will have a son through her".

Right from the get go, Sarah uses and abuses Hagar to get what she wants. Hagar's feelings are not considered. Hagar's body is not considered. Hagar's humanity is not considered. Hagar is a means to an end.

Abraham spends intimate time with Hagar which leads to pregnancy. Then we read: וַתֵּרָא כִּי הָרְתָהּ, וַתִּקַּל גְּבִרְתָּהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ *and when she (Hagar) saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem.*

The words have been explained and examined for thousands for years. What did Hagar mean when she said that? According to Rashi, Hagar said to herself: *"This Sarai, her conduct in secret is not like her conduct in public. She shows herself as if she is a righteous woman, but she is not a righteous woman, for she did not merit to conceive all these years. Whereas, I conceived from the first union."* Hagar is not silent about the poor treatment she receives. In fact, she taunts Sarah with hurtful language.

In response, Sarah immediately accuses Abraham for Hagar's comments and says: *for you hear my degradation and you remain silent*¹. She is angry at her husband and demands to know why he did not stand up for his beloved wife. Abraham's response is basically: Hagar is your problem. Do what you need to do.

When we arrive at today's Torah reading, Isaac is born, he matures slightly, and his father throws him a party. Sarah observes Ishmael and Isaac playing and directs her husband to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham, while distressed by Sarah's directive, complies. He supplies them with only bread and water, and off go mother and child into the wilderness.

Sarah and Hagar were not best friends. Their treatment of each other is atrocious. Particularly, Sarah's treatment of Hagar is shocking. Casting a pregnant woman out into the dark unknown, and then later sending both Hagar and her son alone into the wilderness is appalling. And yet, Sarah is our matriarch. We refer to her all the time. Little baby girls have been named after her in every generation.

¹ Breishit Rabbah 45:5

Sarah's behavior was not exemplary. Hagar's behavior was not exemplary. Abraham's behavior was not exemplary. Yet, this is the story we have inherited. As readers and students of the text, we are left with the task of examining the lives of these characters, their motivations and their feelings. Their biographies are complete.

Rosh Hashanah and indeed these entire High Holy Days would be so different if we concluded today's Torah reading with: *"And Sarah let go of her ego, acknowledged the severity of her pain, mustered up the courage and apologized to Hagar. And Hagar, realizing that she was no innocent bystander, told her mistress that she too was sorry for the hurtful words she shared, and they hugged it out."*

If that was how our Torah reading concluded, we would be left with an ancient biblical formula for doing teshuvah. But instead, our narrative concludes with Abraham sending Hagar to cry it out in the wilderness. Yes, eventually Hagar builds herself up, but Sarah and Hagar are estranged forever. In the Torah reading for this first day of Rosh Hashanah, our ancestors do not make responsible choices after which we can model our own.

As we are reminded year after year, our ancestors were far from perfect. And we know, all of us that neither are we. The huge difference between them and us is that our full, complete stories are still unfolding. Unlike the people we read about in the Torah, every single moment of every day, we continuously write the chapters of our lives.

But even more than that, it is a mitzvah for us; we are commanded to engage in teshuvah. We have the opportunities to right our wrongs. We have the opportunities that were not afforded to Sarah and Hagar.

As far as we know, Sarah and Hagar did not reflect on their actions. They were never given the chance to say "I am sorry." But we can. We can do teshuvah, the Jewish buzzword for this time of year. Typically teshuvah is translated as "repentance" but it means much more. It is a reorientation. It is now that we should be reorienting ourselves². We need to take time to reassess, to chart a better course and ensure that we are writing better stories.

In Hilchot Teshuvah, (Laws of Repentance) Maimonides outlines 5 steps that one must take in order to do full teshuva. Just as a twelve-step program for people with addictions can be a path towards recovery, Maimonides' five-step program can lead us along the way towards teshuvah.

The first four steps include recognition of the sin, renunciation, confession and some form of reconciliation. These four steps are not passive. They are our ways of owning up to our errors.

Recognition is the inner work. For some this is easy and for others it is much harder. This is when we acknowledge what we have done was wrong. The words "everyone is doing it," or "it is not a big deal" are signs that we do not even recognize our misbehaviors.

Once we recognize what we are doing wrong, we move to renunciation. This step requires an actual change in our behavior. We need to literally renounce what we did. The next step is admitting that our transgressions are real by saying them out loud- to someone you trust. Sometimes saying the words begin to open up doors and alleyways to becoming better people. It might even lessen the guilt. This step begins the outward process of teshuvah. We need to say *I was wrong. I behaved badly. I should have walked away from that person, that slot machine, that cigarette, that person, that situation. I should have kept quiet.*

Reconciliation is often the hardest step. Unlike Sarah and Hagar, we are afforded the opportunity and encouraged to do it. Maimonides teaches that our teshuvah is not complete until we confront the one whom we have hurt, and ask for forgiveness. Not many people like these conversation, but Maimonides wants us to do it. Directly asking for forgiveness is the crucial step that must be taken to bring about

² Rabbi Michael Werbow

wholeness and resolution. By verbally apologizing, we give another person the opportunity to forgive us. Now is the time for those sorts of conversations. In the words of Maimonides: *Even though repentance and crying are always good, they are even better in the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when they are accepted immediately, as it is written, "Seek out the Lord while He may be found" (Isaiah 55: 6).*

Regarding the fifth and final step, Maimonides writes that repentance is complete only when we find ourselves in the same situation and choose to do the right and the good. Steps one through four are meant to atone for past mistakes. In step five, we eliminate the potential for future mistakes.

As we travel from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, we usually can complete steps one through four. Step five is not always possible, especially if we are part of many large networks.

I believe that we can fully participate in the teshuvah process, even without the opportunity to complete step #5, if we have faith that faced with a similar scenario, it will not happen again.

During these Days of Awe, we have a gift that Sarah and Hagar did not. We can place our faith in our future selves. Perhaps we read about their imperfections and missteps to remind us that we start this New Year by looking back at the past one. Now is the time to figure out how to change, moving forward.

To do that, we need to believe in the deepest places in our hearts that change is possible. When we read these complicated and messy sections from the Torah our own emotions are mirrored in these characters. We see loneliness, protectiveness, the feeling of being torn between conflicting values. But unlike Sarah and Hagar and Abraham, we are commanded to engage in sincere teshuvah. And, we are obligated to change and better ourselves.

While we don't read about Sarah and Hagar embracing, we also don't read about them getting any outside help or suggestions. There are no friends or confidants involved. There is no communal love. But we have that.

We can hold ourselves accountable to each other and allow ourselves to be supported by a larger group. Here at ICCJ, your neighbors, the gym, your job. As part of a community we can depend on each other, to trust that others are looking out for us, to genuinely believe that we can work together.

We read the story about Hagar and Sarah today, in groups of hundreds and thousands across the globe, to show us the consequences that result when we travel through life without a support network. Yes, the ten days are a personal time, but so much of it is spent in community, eating together and praying together with words that constantly refer to communal responsibility.

We are not a perfect people. Ecclesiastes teaches that "there is not one righteous person on earth who does only good and never sins³." The Torah provides scores of examples of people who have erred.

Judah arranged to sell Joseph into slavery.
Aaron helped the people build the Golden Calf.
King David slept with another man's wife.
The list goes on and on.

But, according to the midrash, God created repentance even before He created the world⁴.

What matters most to God is that we stop behaving badly and start to do good. God wants us to do a cheshbon hanefesh, an accounting of our souls, and right our wrongs. To quote Socrates, *the unexamined life is not worth living*. And, as we read in the Unetane Tokef prayer, it is teshuvah first, and then prayer and tzedakah that avert the evil decree.

³ 7:20

⁴ Breishit Rabbah 1:4

Our sages teach that the gates of repentance are always open⁵, and more recently, Viktor Frankl wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning* *every human being has the freedom to change at any instant*. Sarah and Hagar never had the chance to look in each other's eyes and say I am sorry. But we can. That is the gift of this time of year.

May it be Your will that You place in our hearts the desire to repent before You so that we shall not be shamed in front of our fathers in the World to Come⁶.

Amen.
Shana Tova

Rabbi Robyn Fyer Bodzin
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⁵ Davarim Rabbah 2:7

⁶ Jerusalem Talmud Brachot 4:2

CHANGE WITH SACRIFICE

Rabba Sara Hurwitz

When the first plane crashed into the North tower of the World Trade Center, Marissa Panigrosso was on the 98th floor of the south tower, talking to two of her co-workers. She felt the explosion, and a wave of anxiety swept through the office. Marissa didn't pause to turn off her computer, or even pick up her purse. She walked to the nearest exit and left the building.

The two women she was talking to did not leave.

In fact, many people in Marissa Panigrosso's office ignored the five alarm fire alarm, and even what they saw happening 131 feet away in the north tower. They did not panic or rush to leave. Some of them went into a meeting, or picked up the phone to call loved ones. A friend of Marissa's, a woman named Tamitha Freeman, turned back after walking down several flights of stairs. Tamitha told Marissa that she had to go back for her baby pictures; ... she never made it out. The people who stayed behind on the phone, and those who went into meetings, all lost their lives.

Psychoanalyst Dr. Paul Grosz, in his book, "The Examined Life," explains that research has shown that when a fire alarm rings, people do not act immediately. They talk to each other, stand around, and try figure out what is going on.

We wait. And we feel stuck.

Why? For the simple reason that it is human nature to resist change. We are vehemently faithful to our own view of the world, our own story. It is the world that we know. We hesitate, in the face of change, because change usually means loss. If we want to truly change something about the world or about ourselves, we must be willing to make sacrifices.

Change, intertwined with willingness to give something up is a key ingredient of teshuva. In his second chapter of Hilchot Teshuva (2:4) Rambam defines authentic teshuva, by a willingness to change your name

וּמְשַׁנָּה שְׁמוֹ כְּלוּמַר שֶׁאֲנִי אֲחֵר וְאֵינִי אוֹתוֹ הָאִישׁ שֶׁעָשָׂה אוֹתוֹ הַמַּעֲשִׂים

"One changes his or her name, as if to say "I am a different person and not the same one who sinned"

Rambam teaches that teshuva, the change that we want to manifest, can only occur if we are willing to give something up. We must alter our very identity, our essence, in order to be our best selves.

And yet, most of us, even with the best intentions in mind, get stuck. It is not easy to shake a bad habit, and change. How many times have we vowed to be better people, more attentive listeners, more patient, more present? And yet, somehow, time and time again, we revert back to our old ways.

The Torah narratives that we read on Rosh Hashana, the stories of Akedat Yitzchak and Chana, challenge us to reflect on what we are willing to give up, what we must sacrifice for the greater good, so that we can make both changes within ourselves as well as global changes, making our world a more just place.

On Rosh Hashana we encounter Chana, the hero of the Haftarah who models for us a complete willingness to change her destiny by giving something up, in this case, her child.

Every year, Chana and her husband Elkana come to worship in Shiloh.

The Torah highlights the monotony, the rote in which time and again,

מִיָּמִים יְמִימָה

And shana b'shana, Year after year, they plod up to Shiloh. "To bow and bring offerings to God."

לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת וּלְזָבֵחַ לַיהוָה

The Orchard Fall 2014 – Tishrei 5775

The rote of time and time again, following the same course of worship is finally shattered when Chana, refusing to accept her fate, and when she couldn't stand it anymore, she rose up (vatakam chana) and took initiative. She rose above the usual routine of worshipping God, and fought for change. She turned her back on the time-honored custom of regular prayer, and created a prayer of supplication and sacrifice.

When Chana "sacrifices" her son to the Temple, it is not just a korban, a sacrifice that is merely a gift. Rather, her sacrifice, while it did entail giving, was giving for, being willing to sacrifice for a cause.

The sacrifice of Isaac, however, is sacrifice without purpose. Avraham's willingness to sacrifice Yitzchak, went too far, and therefore, could not be a sacrifice with the intent to bring about change.

The common interpretation of the Akedat Yitzchak story is that the binding of Isaac is a test of Avraham's complete faith in God in which the test is passed by killing his son, thereby obeying God's command.

However, The Sefat Emet (1:67), amongst others, posits that Avraham misunderstood God's true intention. God never wanted the sacrificial act to occur. Rather, God's command to sacrifice was testing Avraham's will to sacrifice his son, not actually murdering him. The Sefat Emeth echoes the midrash in Bereishit Rabba that describes God's utter shock at Avraham's actions. The Midrash imagines God saying: "When I asked you: 'Pray take your son' I did not tell you to slaughter him! Rather I said 'Offer him. Take him up to the mountain (ve-ha'aleihu)" You've taken him up. Now take him down!" (Bereishit Rabba 56:8)

כשאמרתי לך קח נא את בנך לא אמרתי שחטוהו אלא והעלהו לשם חיבה אמרתי לך אסיקתיה וקיימת

Avraham, perhaps God was saying, you have proven your willingness to give something up. You are my faithful servant, and have passed all the trials I placed before you. Put the knife down. Take your son down. It is only then that the Angel of God blesses him:

כִּי-בָרַךְ אֲבְרָהָם, וְהִרְבֵּה אֲרֻכָּה אֶת-זֶרְעוֹ כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְכַחֵל, אֲשֶׁר עַל-שְׁפֵת הַיָּם;

"And I will make your seed many like the stars of the heavens and the sand on the seashores."

The Avraham of the Akeda, has changed so completely that he is now submissive, unconditionally surrendering to God, unaware of the moral implications of sacrificing his child. Avraham hasn't just changed his name, as Rambam may have suggested he should do.

Rather, he has become utterly unrecognizable, losing his essence, his moral intuition.

Avraham was willing to sacrifice. But he transcended the normative expectations for giving something up. He went too far.

David Hartman, alav hashalom, a central Jewish philosopher, in his book Defender to Critic, embraces the ethic of change through sacrifice, in which we choose to give something up, "but we [must] choose with our moral consciousness and self-awareness intact...In Judaism, there is a concept called mesirat nefesh, literally "giving breath" or "giving soul": this is a kind of giving, of sacrificing, that doesn't betray you to yourself, that doesn't ask you to abandon your God-given intellect and intuition."

We must make the sacrifice of Chana, a sacrifice that resulted in the birth of another soul. Not Avraham's that could have led to death. We must make a sacrifice that brought us "tefilat chana" the prayer of chana whose formulation evolved into the amida, the shomenei esrai that we recite today. Not the sacrifice of Avraham that resulted in God's silence, in a God that did not speak directly to Avraham again.

A sacrifice that is purposeful, propelling us forward to change ourselves and our world for the better.

Sacrifice, a willingness to give something up, is a cornerstone of bringing about change. The change we want to see in our world, and the change that we want to see within ourselves. But through sacrificing,

we must not lose our selves entirely. We cannot disregard our rational selves, our joyful spirit for the greater good.

When we hear the alarm of the shofar, this year, ask ourselves, are we really willing to change.

Are we willing to change our very essence, “our names”, as the Rambam asks us to do in his description of teshuvah? Are we willing to lose something, sacrifice just a little bit, without losing our whole selves, in order to be better people?

If I were in that tower on September 11, 2001, and heard that fire alarm, I would like to think that I would have gotten up and walked out. That I would have been willing to accept a change, willing to lose my belongings, in order to get to safety.

What will you change this year? And what will you sacrifice to do it?

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KOL NIDREI SERMON 5775

Rabbi Debra S. Cantor

When he was a kid, my brother was a genius at putting together jigsaw puzzles. I don't know exactly how old he was when he graduated from 27 piece puzzles to 35, 100, 300 and then puzzles with 750 or even 1,000 pieces, but he was pretty young. I can't tell you the last time my brother put together a jigsaw puzzle – probably it's been a very long time – but he still has a great knack for problem solving and for making disparate pieces of a problem somehow fit together.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner uses the puzzle metaphor to teach us a lesson about our lives. He writes: "Each lifetime is [like] the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. For some there are more pieces.

For others the puzzle is more difficult to assemble.
Some seem to be born with a nearly completed puzzle.
And so it goes.
Souls going this way and that.
Trying to assemble the myriad parts.
But know this.
No one has within themselves all the pieces to their puzzle.
Like before the days when they used to seal jigsaw puzzles in cellophane.
Ensuring that all the pieces were there.
Everyone carries with them at least one and probably many pieces to someone else's puzzle.
Sometimes they know it.
Sometimes they don't.
And when you present your piece,
(Which is worthless to you) to another,
Whether you know it or not,
Whether they know it or not,
You are a messenger from the Most High.

[Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, *Honey from the Rock*, 1977, pp. 69-70]

"Each lifetime is [like] the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle." Every one of you received a puzzle piece on the way in here this morning. Now, I'd like you to place the puzzle piece in your hand and take a good look at it. Although your piece may look a bit different from your neighbor's piece, they do share some characteristics. All the puzzle pieces in this room are made of cardboard, printed on one side and all have rounded tabs protruding out, with corresponding blanks cut into the other sides to receive the tabs of adjacent pieces. Consider your puzzle piece. Does it fit into a piece held by someone sitting near you? Imagine trying to find someone whose piece fits into yours. It would be difficult; after all, there are hundreds of people here. It might be nearly impossible.

That's because putting together the pieces of our lives, figuring out which pieces of one another's puzzles each of us holds, trying to make sense of the picture as it unfolds – that's the work of a lifetime, not an evening. Remember Rabbi what Rabbi Kushner taught? "Everyone carries with them... pieces to someone else's puzzle." Look at your puzzle piece again. Maybe it's part of your puzzle, or maybe it belongs to someone else. How can you tell? The only way is to keep your eyes open. The only way is to listen. The only way is to be willing to give it away if necessary.

Like most puzzle pieces, the one you are holding is "fully interlocking." This means that adjacent pieces connect very tightly so that "if you move one piece horizontally you move all, preserving the connection. Sometimes the connection is tight enough to pick up a solved part holding [onto] just one piece." [Wikipedia, s.v. "Jigsaw Puzzles"] In other words, when you connect your piece with another, and then another, the puzzle becomes stronger and each connection remains attached.

Earlier tonight, we began this Day of Atonement with the recitation of *Kol Nidrei*. I am always moved by the haunting strains of that familiar melody, as well as the presence of the congregation, that great crowd

of people gathered together, many wrapped in white *talleisim*, all of us hoping to connect with God, praying to make a fresh start. I don't know if you have ever paid much attention to the preamble which introduces *Kol Nidrei*. It consists of a short statement appropriate for a legal setting:

"Bi'shiva shel ma'alah...By the authority of the court on high and by the authority of this court below, with divine consent and with the consent of this congregation,

Anu matirin l'hitpallel im ha-avaryanim

We grant permission to pray with those who have transgressed."

Who are these people, these sinners who have transgressed? Who invited them? Why are they here with the rest of us? The answer, of course, is that they *are* the rest of us. We all come here as *avaryanim*, as sinners who have fallen short. Our tradition bids us to confess together, in the plural. Not because each one of us has committed every sin on the long list of the *Al Heyt*, but because **we are each responsible to the rest of the members of our community**. In joining together at the start of Yom Kippur, we admit not only that we have sinned; we also acknowledge that we may be able to help each other along in the process of regret, return and renewal which we call *teshuvah*.

"Everyone carries with them... pieces to someone else's puzzle."

The puzzle that is your life is intricate and complicated. There are many gaps and as-yet-unfinished portions. But there are more complete sections, too, which our loved ones helped us put together. The pieces they have given us are still there; they still form a beautiful pattern. How will we continue and add to that pattern? Can we be as generous, as loving and giving to others, as they were to us?

That is what God demands of us. To connect, with those closest to us. To connect with people we don't know so well: with our neighbors and members of our community. But also with those beyond our small circles. The Sages teach: *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh* – "All of Israel is responsible for one another."
[Babylonian Talmud, Shevuot 39a]

That teaching resonated with us this past summer as we were riveted to the news coming from Israel and Gaza. Our hearts were with children huddling in fear, with young soldiers facing a cruel enemy, with Jews from France and Ukraine dealing with anti-Semitism and uncertain futures. Though far away, we knew we were part of the larger puzzle that is the Jewish people.

So we sent our children on summer trips to Israel, went on solidarity trips, gave generously to the "Stop the Sirens" campaign. Despite the fact that we have little control over global politics, diplomacy and military decisions, we knew we could make a difference. We knew we had to do our part. And because of our support, Jewish Federations of North America was able to fund our partners, the Jewish Agency of Israel and the JDC, to do their amazing work: giving youngsters in Southern Israel respite from war by sending them to summer camps in the north; providing safe refuge for elderly and disabled people unable to make it to shelters, helping threatened Jews emigrate to Israel. And so much more.

Because we're all part of the larger puzzle. Because, we're all connected. What should you do with your puzzle piece? Keep it as a reminder. Or give it to someone who needs it. And when you present your piece,

"Whether you know it or not,
Whether they know it or not,
[Remember that]
You are a messenger from the Most High."

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The Orchard Fall 2014 – Tishrei 5775

ROSH HASHANA

Rabbi Michael Melchior

I am sharing with you this message from Jerusalem, just hours before the cessation of yet another cease-fire. We are all living in the twilight zone of uncertainty, not knowing whether we might have some intermission in which people will be able to attempt to put their lives together again and the school classes can open their doors for all the traumatized boys and girls on both sides of the border, or we will see a collapse of the cease-fire. In such a case, this might result in new rounds of violence with possible escalation of suffering and bloodshed, which by now, most people have lost the track of understanding the purpose of.

How can I share with you a message for the High-Holidays after a summer in which my heart and soul has been torn, and so many tears have been shed? How can I, as a Rabbi, a Jewish leader, tell a story of joy and inspiration when there is so much sadness, anxiety and even despair amongst my people?

But then, how can I not?

Isn't this exactly the purpose of the high-holidays, the Days of Awe, days of soul-searching? These are meant to be days when we can pour out our hearts and souls before G-d and our fellow human beings; where we can in truth, even in pain-stricken truth, deal with the past not in order to bury ourselves in it, but in order to begin to rebuild the future.

At the dramatic peak of the Mussaf prayer, on these days, we depict all of human kind standing in judgment before G-d, with the great shofar being sounded and all the forces of nature trembling. Judgment is being passed; everyone is inscribed to his destiny. And then, at the pinnacle of the peak we declare that there is always hope, that we are not doomed because we can avert the decree by three measures: teshuva- repentance, tefila – prayer and tzedaka-charity.

Teshuvah – Repentance

This is one of the most beautiful concepts of Judaism. We always have the possibility to turn things around, repent, and repair our sins. But this demands looking honestly at our own fears and hatreds, and not only beating on the chests of our neighbors. This is true on a personal level, on a community level and also on a national level.

We are always eager to point out the poisonous hatred of our enemies, (and so we should because it is indeed poisonous), but the red line against racism must always be universal and our first obligation is to clean out our own society, our own political leaders, our own study houses, rabbis and educators.

Can we truly say that we, inside the State of Israel, live up to the values of a multicultural sustainable democracy in our relationship with the Arab-Palestinian minority? This minority is not the only "stranger" in the land towards whom we, as a majority, have human rights obligations, but is a partner with us in building this country. Do we recognize the attempts to push this minority outside of the Israeli democracy?

The essence of our future is not for the world to define us as a Jewish state, but for us to define for ourselves what we mean by 'Jewish state', and which Judaism we want to prevail. I am convinced that the vast majority of Jews despise the many racist interpretations of Judaism we have heard this summer by public figures, politicians and rabbis. If they are allowed to be considered legitimate in our midst, then we will have to repent for our silence, because this silence is heard loud and clear.

Tefila – Prayer

We have learned so much about prayer this summer. We started off praying for the safe return of our three missing boys. Every day and night we prayed for them. We all saw ourselves in the place of their parents, and we could not stop crying for them and with them.

Rachel Frankel, the mother of Naftaly z"l, gave us all, the most profound lesson about prayer when she at one stage approached the kotel. A group of young religious girls surrounded her, telling her that they had just finished saying Psalms for the three boys, and they were sure that G-d had heard their prayers. She just wanted to hug and thank them, but suddenly she was caught by a fear that if their prayers, her prayers, and all of our prayers would not be answered, that these girls might lose their faith in G-d. So she, in the midst of her distress, took time to explain to them that prayers are not like an ATM where you insert a card and get your money. G-d does not work for us. We believe in praying, but can never know the effect of our prayers. That is the essence of faith. The dignity, the modesty, the restraint of the mothers of these three first victims this summer, spread a unique humane message of Judaism, which became so crucial during these difficult months, and created a very special solidarity amongst all segments of the Israeli society.

This message made it possible for us to conduct a joint prayer for the boys with the participation of rabbis and imams at the place where they had been kidnapped. Later we arranged for many of the leading rabbis here to pay a condolence call and send a letter of condolence to the Abu Khadir family, after the brutal murder of their son. And many could participate in joint Jewish – Moslem events which took place at the end of the fast of the 17th of Tammuz, which was also one of the days of the fasting of the Ramadan. On this occasion, leading Ulama figures (Ulama - the supreme religious Palestinian authority) wrote to us that we each have our narrative of the conflict, as we each have our own religious beliefs, but that it is important now to write a joint narrative of peace for the future.

All these symbolic gestures are not insignificant when they take place during a period when our children, including my own children, are fighting and risking their lives together with their friends for the safety of the hundreds of thousands of our citizens in the south, who for 14 years have been living in a nightmare of rockets and sirens, together with our Muslim friends who on their television screens have been watching a totally different war, seeing their people being bombed, and calling out in despair from the ruins of Gaza. The prayer has the power also to transform us, to make us understand that we are praying to one and the same G-d, to show humility, to acknowledge that we do not possess all the answers, but have willingness to take the responsibility towards all of G-d's creation.

Tzedaka – Charity, Compassion

Charity, compassion, stems from Tzedek – Justice.

One of our leading politicians wrote on her Facebook that we should consider all of the people in Gaza as our enemies. She wrote that the mothers of the Shahids who send them to hell are just as guilty as their sons, the terrorists, and therefore their blood is on their heads. How far is this from the Judaism I believe in! When we, on Rosh Hashana blow the shofar 100 blasts, it is according to our tradition, to identify with the 100 sobs and tears which were shed by the mother of one of the most bitter of our enemies in our history, Sisra, who for 20 years had oppressed the Israelites, and who we fought on the battlefield. The weeping of a mother whose son will never return home from battle is universal. It teaches us to show compassion even towards the mother of the most bitter of our enemies. And we show this when we blow the shofar in every synagogue around the world, to this day.

Charity begins at home. But in our home there are two peoples living side by side. I am a staunch Zionist. I believe that the Jewish people's return to our homeland is part of the fulfillment of the visions of our prophets and the will of G-d. But then I cannot say that it is an accident that there is another people living here. Just as it is G-d's will that we are back in our homeland, fulfillment of Jewish destiny, then it is also part of the Divine plan that there is another people - the Palestinian people - living here together with us.

Just as we rightly demand from the other side, the Palestinian people, to accept our right for self-determination, so must we accept the same for them. This is the basic fundament of Judaism, as Hillel taught us "Do not do unto others what you would not want others to do unto you." True. We have a history of 100 years of conflict and bloodshed, and many people are giving up on the hope of reaching peace. However, the surprising truth is that both sides really want peace. They just don't believe that there is a

partner on the other side. I think that I have met with more radical Palestinian and Arab religious Islamic and political leaders, including during these past weeks, than any other Israeli. I met with leading figures from Arab countries with who we have no relations, and who all want to put the conflict behind them. I have met with religious leaders who have written the textbooks who have justified the suicide bombers, many of whom today have joined the coalition for religious and political peace. The time of Jihad has passed. It can be left in the bloody hands of the anarchists of the IS. We are ready for Salaam. Isn't that also the urge of the vast majority of the Jewish side?

Those who start wars and spread hatred never ask for permission. For them there is always a passion and an urgency. For the peace makers, however, the timing never seems to be quite right. Throughout these past months of deep conflict and war, civil society organizations, which I have some role in, have made a very conscious decision that the work to build a joint society of Jews and Arabs inside Israel, and the work for religious conflict transformation in the entire area – not only should not cease, but the timing has never been more crucial.

What is needed today is to restore belief and trust that we can transform our future. True. We had peace attempts that didn't succeed. But isn't that true of all human conflicts in history? They didn't disappear overnight.

It is not Jewish to despair. Do not give up on us. Do not give up on charity. Do not give up on showing compassion. Do not give up on justice. Do not give up on peace.

It is possible to avert the decree.

Rabbi Michael Melchior
Former MK and Cabinet Minister in Israel's Government
Rabbi, Educator and leading social activist in Jerusalem



IN TIMES OF CRISIS, JDC IS THERE.

Throughout the volatile summer of 2014, the **American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)** stood shoulder to shoulder with the people of Israel—as it has been doing since its inception a century ago. At the same time, JDC continued to provide critical assistance to vulnerable Jews caught in the crosshairs of the roiling conflict in Ukraine.

Both areas of the world were a primary focus of JDC's attention when it was founded in 1914 by an American Jewish community determined to come to the aid of at-risk Jews caught in the maelstrom of a world suddenly at war. One hundred years later, JDC continues to fulfill the principle of *areivut* that has ever guided the Jewish people.



RESPONDING TO CRISIS IN ISRAEL

JDC's urgent operations in Israel this summer underscore the value of the investments it's made over time in programs that are strengthening Israel's future by empowering the most vulnerable Israelis – children and youth at risk, people with disabilities, the elderly, and others. These initiatives have consistently been rallying points in times of war and emergency.

With support from the Jewish Federations of

North America's emergency campaign, JDC mobilized its networks and partnerships with government agencies and local NGOs to monitor the homebound and vulnerable; deliver vital services and emergency equipment to seniors and people with disabilities; organize respite outings for young and old in the hardest-hit areas; and provide trauma reduction activities for children forced to trade summer camp for hours spent in bomb shelters.

Top: Hamas fires rockets into Israel.

Left (top): JDC's Yossi Tamir meets with Beer Sheva's mayor in that city's crisis situation room .Left (bottom): JDC's Center for Young Adults in Sderot makes its safe space available to families and children during the crisis.



AIDING JEWS IN TURBULENT UKRAINE

At the same time, escalating battles in Ukraine’s eastern region reminded us yet again why it is so important for JDC to be there for Jews in danger or need worldwide. With 37 *Hesed* welfare centers already serving the poorest among Ukraine’s several hundred thousand Jews, JDC-supported professionals and community volunteers—including many of the young leaders it trained—have selflessly ensured the uninterrupted delivery of critical assistance even where tensions were highest.

Over the past months, support from JFNA, the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, and others has helped JDC cover spiking prices for food and medicine, and enabled it to provide emergency assistance to Jews who, along with thousands of their neighbors, have been fleeing to safer locations. These include entire families who were

not previously at risk, but now – having left homes and livelihoods behind – they must look to JDC for assistance with the basic necessities of life. And, as always, JDC is there and will be there.

Top: A home care worker provides a warm meal and comfort in Ukraine. Middle: Woman in Kharkiv receives a food delivery from JDC. Bottom: Food and other necessities were distributed to families in Donetsk.



JDC.ORG



**Building A Nation and A People Since 1929:
New Year's Greetings from The Jewish Agency Family**

After a difficult summer here in Israel and for Jews around the world – the autumn breeze brings with it the promise of peace. And as the High Holidays approach, Jews gather in synagogues and around family dinner tables to usher in the New Year and to celebrate their Jewish heritage.

There's the young engineer in Dnepropetrovsk planning to make Aliyah with his new bride. The Ethiopian immigrant in an absorption center in Beersheva, surrounded by his grandchildren. The seventh-grader in Cleveland, Ohio learning Hebrew with a young Jewish Agency emissary. The business student in Buenos Aires seeking an internship in Tel Aviv through TLVConnect. The young mother in Sderot, who relies on a bomb shelter repaired by The Jewish Agency.

Each one with his own dreams. Each with her own prayers and hopes for the years to come.

Here at The Jewish Agency, as we bring in the Jewish New Year as one united global Jewish family, we're working hard to ensure that those dreams become a reality for Jews everywhere. Because for us, "If you will it, it is no dream", isn't just a catchphrase. It's our mission statement.

Since 1929, we've been building a nation and a people – committed to securing the Jewish future with its heart in Israel, and dedicated to making the Diaspora-Israel relationship ever stronger.

Before we enter the new lunar year, we reflect on the myriad acts of kindness that ensured the wellbeing of the Jewish people, even in trying times. In an effort to facilitate Achdut or brotherhood, The Jewish Agency provided

respite for over 70,000 children and teens from Israel's southern region. It also distributed close to 100 emergency grants throughout the war, within 24 hours of the incident or injury, so that families have a bit of immediate relief. This year the Jewish people were successful in taking responsibility for each other; from setting up nursery's and kindergartens for younger Olim in times of crises, to providing loan funds which saved and fortified nearly 300 small businesses in southern Israel.

This Rosh Hashana, as we come together to reflect on the past year, we are also looking ahead at the year to come and the work that lies ahead. Here's to a year of peace, health, and good news.

Blessings and warm wishes for the New Year to our entire global Jewish family – from your Jewish Agency family.