

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 2007

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Shanah Tovah...I can't exaggerate the importance this moment has in my life. For literally months it has me worried. I want to say something profound, something perhaps that you never heard before, teach something and inspire. And I know that all of you sit here wanting, perhaps needing, to find something here...meaning? Inspiration?

And so this IS our encounter. I wish you were here more often. There's so much to share in this tradition, such wisdom, such understanding...Maybe this year we'll be together more...

Let me begin with a story:

Max and Sylvia were both widowed. In fact Sylvia was widowed a few times. Max is now 93 and "*b'li ayin harah*" (*kaneh harah*), he's got his marbles. He struggles like we all struggle. Sylvia is already 90, but she denies it. She thinks her chances of finding Mr. Three are better if she says she's still in her eighties.

One day they're in the pharmacy across from Century Village. Standing next to each other at the counter Max asks the pharmacist if they have walkers... "Of course" the pharmacist answers. Max then asks: "Do you sell generic drugs?" Yes, Mr. Goldstein the pharmacist answers. Sylvia chirps in "do you deliver?" Yes" the pharmacist responds. "So, tell me your hours?" The man behind the counter says proudly... We are open 24/7!

Sylvia looks at Max, Max looks at Sylvia, and they smile and say, "THIS IS WHERE WE'LL REGISTER!"

There's a great deal of change in this world. And Max and Sylvia excluded...folks are living longer and loving longer than ever. And this is a good thing. But there are other changes and much of it feels pretty frightening.

I recently saw a movie...a very popular teenage flick which got great ratings and is considered one of the best high school transition films recently produced. And as someone who is no longer adolescent, I admit that I found a great deal to laugh about...yet I also found much of it to be pretty demeaning and vacuous. I expressed this to one of the young adults around here...

And I received the following response:

We are the kids of divorce and drug users and atheists. We are jaded by our social and political agency, about love and romance, about being born in a world with some kind of purpose, about whether police and politicians or parent do anything to really protect us... there is no safety, no assurance...

We think our world and our culture...and what we are giving our children and the world we will leave. Perhaps my greatest concern is about a generation that feels it has no agency, no hope.

Think about it...

The day I received the letter, the BIG news story reported that Leona Helmsley left her dog 12 million dollars. This came after a week of headlines about Michael Vick and his pit bulls and the fact that this was THE story...front page, lead news story...and then I went to lunch at Boca Center and saw that there's a Dog Bakery there...and I recalled the woman at a meeting with Senator Joe Lieberman, where the Senator was talking about the war and global challenges and she kept pushing him on his position towards PETA and what he's going to do about all the homeless dogs after Katrina...And I see that we have young families with more dogs than children...AND I PINCH MYSELF AND ASK "Is this the world we are to leave to our children?"

But it's not about dogs...

It's about priorities. It's about values. It's about the ability to make a difference. It's about politicians and religious leaders and their sexual scandal and hypocrisy leadership, lying Attorney Generals. And it's about corporate leadership and the greed of "big" business. It's about leaders caught in scandals. And it's about all of us who can't seem to have enough, get enough...We live in a world where the wealth continues to grow as the number of poor grow and grow and grow. And it's about the genocide in DARFUR which should be on the front of every mind and every newspaper, and it's about an environment that is heating up and wasting away as we continue our wasteful ways and can't seem to seriously control our worst addiction and that is to fossil fuels...And it's about a deceptive war with a leader that can't explain what we're doing and why we are doing it. And people in the highest places that make mistakes, but never admit failure. It's about a world where the children of the less fortunate fight and are crippled, maimed and die and the privileged watch from afar...And the most immediate threat of all, Islamic fundamentalism is not confronted in any real and meaningful way.

Tom Friedman recently wrote that today Osama Bin Laden would win a popularity contest against George W. Bush and we have to wonder how we have gone so wrong.

And so it's no wonder so many of our young feel this loss of agency, a loss of the power to make a difference...and we lament the world that we give them...

But haven't we experienced threats to humanity before? Haven't we known previous generations that feared the world their children would inherit? The threats have not always been the same, and in a very significant way, in this nuclear age they have never been so great, the stakes have never been this high, but they have existed before.

When we come here on this day, I think we're all looking for a few things. I think we're looking for connection, we're looking for a sense of rootedness, and we want to be together. It's more than that. Rather we want to find purpose, we want to feel that life has meaning, we want hope and we want to make a difference.

So what can we say to the people who feel the loss of agency, and wonder what they can possibly do? It's a response to a generation! And...It's something for all of us. Because when we look around we will see how cruel and dangerous this world is... and how little is being done...and we will admit our own sense of helplessness. And yet there must be a response. There must be a response to be found here. This day addresses the question. This is the call of this moment.

Please let me try.

Let me begin with our history.

We have lived through very dark periods. We have experienced plagues and pogroms we have witnessed brutality and corruption.

It wasn't long ago.

Tobi and I and many of your kids were on the March of the Living this year. We stood in Birkenau on Yom HaShoah. When you stand there you are carried away. It's so vast. The remains of the barracks and places of torture and cruelty expand for miles and miles. And one feels the presence, the spirit of a million souls. Our family. You hear them in the wind. It is a place of the ultimate human cruelty and vulgarity.

Crowded with visitors that day, there were people from all over the world. And there were Polish soldiers there. And there was a unit from TZAHAL, the Israeli Defense Force...a unit in their beautiful maroon berets marching with the blue and white flag with the Star of David. And I stopped short and at attention and with the barracks in the background and the crematorium up ahead hugged my wife and my son and I could only cry, because of the realization that despair was transformed into hope.

Sixty years ago we were on the verge of extinction. Today, we are a powerful people. Before 1948 we lived for two thousand years with a sense of powerlessness and weakness. And we were transformed.

What I experienced that moment in Birkenau reflected more than just the realization that an Israeli military presence gives strength. No, there's something in the essence of our being, something at the core of our texts, something that resides in our soul that will NOT allow us to give in to despair. We're created in the image of the Divine. That will not allow us to give up our agency in the world. And if it happened in Poland, where the ghosts of six million reside, we can do something. And maybe, just maybe, that's why we're here. Because there's something here that somehow, someway continues to draw us...to each other, to our past, and to hope...And that's incredible. And this is what we are challenged to access on this day.

The world can feel overwhelming. Maybe the immediacy of the news and the easy access to information makes life more challenging, not less. We know of every act of violence committed anywhere in the world within minutes. What happens in Islamabad makes a difference in New York. It didn't feel that way generations ago. We know so much and are capable of so much and yet we see human beings act like primitive animals. And we see the destruction of villages and the starvation of children.

We can amass so much and yet we're so selfish. We can create new forms of life and yet show total disregard for humanity.

And, it maybe this very essential understanding that brings us here.

I'd like to turn to the Biblical character that is our focus on these days.

Don't lose touch with the Biblical characters! Because through them we gain some incredible sources of insight, family, self, politics and religion.

One of the most memorable moments of the past year was a dialogue at St. Gregory's Church. An Episcopal priest, an Imam and as I'm called in outside circles – the Jewish Rabbi. I used to laugh, now looking at newspapers, I understand. The title of the dialogue was "Children of Abraham." We shared a common past, shared a destiny. Interesting, the Priest spoke of Abraham as a model of faith. The Imam spoke of Abraham as a model of subservience. I spoke about Abraham as a model of conscience, resistance to authority, struggle and change.

We may derive meaning from our texts and ancestors, but these days are about us. They are about our capacity to be self reflective and to bring about change, because that's where all change begins. We all need to admit the need to change. And that takes humility and responsibility. And so we look at the world and wonder can we make a difference in it? How do we see ourselves? That's the first question. Where are you?

Abraham was just one man, in a corrupt world. But he said NO, he left his place, his home. A well-known Midrash tells us that when Abraham was traveling he came across a "birah doleket"...Birah Doleket...It can be translated in two very different ways.

One is a CASTLE that lit up. It radiates brilliant light. And from this light consciousness of God was experienced. Birah Doleket...others say it means...castle that was burning. It was on fire. And it was being destroyed.

These are two different readings of the word doleket. And they have very different implications for our perspective on the world. One emphasizes the world's beauty. The other highlights the potential for destruction.

Abraham Joshua Heschel whose Centennial will be celebrate this year (and you've got to read him) wrote: "One may look at the world and absorb its wonder and radiant glory; and one may also see and be shocked by its ugliness and evil."

It is both. When we think about it, we know life exists with polarities. There is tov and rah...the yin and the yang...and we must learn to live with those polarities. And it's there that we make our choices.

But it all seems so large, so overwhelming. When we think of life's problems, we think about the whole world.

Globalization through technology and economics has made the world much more immediate...and much more overwhelming. In his book "The Clash of Civilization," Samuel Huntington takes issue with those who see the economic benefits of globalization bringing safety to the world. He asserts that Jihad and McWorld, as he calls it, are linked together, driven by technology, ecology and communications. He foresaw just what we are seeing, not global harmony, but tribal factionism, the clash of civilization. The world is falling apart, the center doesn't hold.

So, what does Judaism say about this? What does it say about globalization? It's interesting to note that Judaism begins the New Year, Rosh Hashanah not with the birth of a Lord or leader, not about the flight of the prophet; rather it's about the birth of the entire world, the beginnings of humanity. We view ourselves as part of something large.

In our tradition Adam was created from Adamah, the land. The rabbis taught that the land was taken from every corner of the world. The Adamah that made up Adam was black and white and red and yellow. Rosh Hashanah is not about the birth of a particular religion. God did not create religion. God created the universe. And in that universe, every man, every woman was created with Divine potential...and the real miracle is that everyone is created unique. We're all different.

Our particular story begins with a man who says, "NO" to the prevalent morality of his time. He saves the life of the child and sacrifice of children becomes abhorrent. Abraham is the model. He argues with authority, he stands up for conscience, he's willing to break with parents. Fight with God for the innocents of Sodom & Gomorrah. Because he believes that he can change the world.

Our High Holidays begin with Abraham and end with Jonah. A Jewish prophet who cannot escape his call to save the world of Nineveh...not the world of his ancestors, not the world of the Jews of neighbors who are different and need help.

Religion & Judaism so often makes people more narrow, see one way, their way...but this tradition is born with the concept of human difference, filled with divergent opinion even recognizing other's worship...

Amazing, from our beginnings we have been a global religion. That is the "Hashakafat Olam" the view of the world created by the Bible and carried through the rabbis. So is it any wonder that Jewish world services and "We work for food," and countless Jewish organizations are leading the way in the response to Darfur. And as severe as that situation is and as far away as it is, it is seen as our responsibility. No wonder that Israel

has accepted 500 refugees from Darfur...and a major debate took place about opening our borders to proportionately the greatest number that any country in the world will accept! When we exclaimed, "Never Again" to Genocide, we never thought it meant only to Jews!

This is the life we need to live. We need to model that. We don't organize enough. We don't do enough! But we can and when we do, we begin to answer the question about agency...

Robert Fulgham who wrote "Everything I Needed to Learn About Life I learned in Kindergarten" more recently wrote "Kids Don't Listen to What You Say, They Watch What you Do." I can tell anyone to be hopeful, but I need to live hopeful and that's about engaging in the work and the processes that matter. That heals, that helps, and that creates the needed change in the world.

There's a great threat to Israel now, nothing's new there, but Israelis and Palestinian leaders who are willing to risk a lot, in spite of Hamas, in spite of Hezbollah, in spite of Iran and Syria there are people talking about peace and coexistence. And that's a message of hope.

I know that Judaism has something powerful to contribute. We understand the young person who feels so overwhelmed, because there is so much ugliness and danger. We live in a very dangerous world.

What we need to do, is not explain, rather take it and look at ourselves. Take this moment and this opportunity and transform something here...ourselves? Our community? Our world? Perhaps.

You know why Herschel became the great Jewish religious role model of our generation. Because he left the Rabbis in the Catskills and drove down to Selma and walked with King.

By the way, it was Herschel who first said "We need the audacity to hope." So what do we do for this world? Darfur must be on our agenda. We must lobby and write and protest the evils of Islamic fanaticism. We want to give our kids some hope...we've got to model hope.

There's a great story in the Talmud about a man named Shimon Bar Yochai. He was sick and tired of seeing examples of Roman power wherever he looked. And he was terribly distraught about the life they had built. And so he takes his son into a cave and for twelve years they neglect any worldly desire or responsibility, bury themselves in the cave and only learn Torah.

But he learns it's not good enough. He must participate in the world. The cave is not a place for Judaism. It's a world religion!

We may not be a generation emerged in the study of Torah, but we have found ways to isolate ourselves from the world.

I recently read about a man in Connecticut who just completed his 51,000 square foot home with a home theatre that seats 100 and I wonder when does it all stop. When do we say with our own lives we have built big enough, we've traveled luxuriously enough, we have driven fast enough...and it's enough and the time has come to give to others...

Do you want to impress your child...help take care of some isolated lonely elderly person, give your time to help the destitute migrant workers at La Caridad in Boynton, the Haitian kids in the Milagro Center in Delray...the Jewish kids at JAFCO...They'll remember that more than your next car.

We're not going to fix it all. And we're not going to change everyone. But we can change our activities, our spending, and our response to the environment. And when we do that, we create meaning. This is where it can start. And you can make that happen. What our young people are looking for, models that use their lives to make a difference.

I want to tell you about a heroine....

Florence Melton Mini School – She saw something and didn't like it. But I saw something about Florence...treatment of every nurse, every person who cleaned her room. Last night of life...New aid on duty, Florence asked her all about herself. I once believed she changed the world because of her vision, But, I learned it was because of her passion and love.

Today we say...This is the birthday of the world. We don't say it's the birthday of our people, we don't say it's the birthday of our founder...No today is the birthday of this world. And this is our world. It's our world to improve.

Like Abraham we must begin with ourselves, we create our families and help them commit themselves to Eloheinu Melech HaOlam...and we strengthen our people in its quest. That is our job. And this tradition comes to inspire it.

But it's more than political and social response. It's also personal and spiritual. It is about saying enough to our material desires and turning to our souls, creating sacred time and sharing with community, responding to the needs of those around us and performing mitzvot...it's about developing a consciousness for prayer and bring home Shabbat...We need a spiritual renaissance and the gift for that is here also. And when that becomes a part of our lives, we model something else. And we say the world is not all about me.

And finally I know we move from powerlessness, helplessness and hopelessness when we feel worthy...when our work is recognized, when our very being is loved. We need proper organization, but it must be rooted in a sense of love. We entered into a covenant with God...based on love. The love is measured in what we do and the blessing we feel. More than anything, the love is measured in our love for each other.

Our children need our direction, they need for us to create a community that models behaviors of human concern and responsibility, they need our love, and that's measured in deeds, in words and in time. The Chasidic Master Schneer Zalman taught that the best therapy for one who is grieving, one who feels alone, one who feels abandoned, one who feels hopeless is to go another, nurture him and lift him up. Giving love heals.

In Hebrew an agent is a Shaliach. There are different ways of doing – “Shlichut.” One, many of you know, is to give tzedakkah before a trip. It makes you a Shaliach Mitzvah, and agent of goodness. And the legend says that such an agent who brings good is protected by angels. This is my wish for all of us. May we be Shlichei Mitzvot. Agents for good, who know we have to bring change to this world. One person at a time...with our power, our wisdom, our money, our time and our love. And this will make it a Shanah Tovah – A year where God's angels will protect us for health and happiness.

May you and your loved ones have a year of good health and happiness and bring goodness to others. May we turn hopelessness to hope by realizing that in this world we do matter. We make a difference to each other, to families and to our communities.

Shanah Tovah