

SOME WORDS FOR EREV ROSH HASHANAH

1 TISHRI 5767 / 22 SEPTEMBER 2006

Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

“Members of a Family”

It was in the temple by-laws. In order to elect a new Senior Rabbi, an open meeting of our congregation had to be called, where the entire membership would give a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down vote on the Search Committee’s recommendation. This is a marvelously democratic and worthwhile way to select a new rabbi... unless you are the rabbi.

It was November 7, 2002. I stood right here, where I stand now, and did as the Search Committee requested – “Tell the congregation exactly who you are and where you’ll lead us. In fifteen minutes.”

After my prepared remarks, it was time for Q & A. Microphones were situated on stands in the aisles, and the lines began to form. “What kind of services do you lead? Do you pray in Hebrew or English? What social justice work have you done with your temple? What do you say when you visit people in the hospital? Do you like to teach young kids? Do you like to teach teenagers? Do you like to teach adults? What do you like to teach adults? Do you believe in God? Why would you believe in God?”

Clearly, the members of Leo Baeck Temple loved Q & A.

The night hit its crescendo when the last question was called. Someone – I don’t recall who – stepped to the microphone and asked: “Are you an American or a Jew first?”

At last... the question whose answer was sure to offend absolutely everyone. But suddenly, I felt the arrival of someone at my side. It was none other than Sandy Ragins, the Senior Rabbi of Leo Baeck Temple. And he launched into a story.

“When I first arrived at LBT as a twenty-something-year-old rabbi,” recounted Rabbi Ragins, “and the board had to approve me as Rabbi Beerman's sabbatical replacement, I sat before the board for Q & A. At the end, someone asked: ‘Rabbi, where do you stand on Jewish politics? You know – American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, Anti-Defamation League...’ Suddenly, before I had a chance to answer, a board member with a loud booming voice called out: ‘If you answer that question, you are a fool!’”

Just then, the sanctuary erupted in laughter (which, Rabbi Ragins tells me, is exactly what happened back at that board meeting for him), he scuttled me toward the exit, and moments later – without having answered the question – I was elected Senior Rabbi of our temple.

This episode has always stayed with me. It taught me something profound. From it, I learned that Rabbi Ragins is a very, very nice man. But the fact that he saved me from having to answer that

unanswerable question does not mean that the question somehow went away. I think about it often. And so let me say clearly tonight... I am not going to answer it. I would be a fool, right?

But I am going to talk about it. For being an American means a great deal to me, even at those moments when I am not especially proud of America's culture or values or behavior in the world. I am lucky to be an American, and I never forget it. So, too, does being a Jew mean a great deal to me, even when the Jews let me down or bring out the worst in each other. I am lucky to be a Jew, and I never forget it.

The question... "Are you an American or a Jew first?" – it is only partly a query about the primary component of one's identity. That's the "glass half full" part of the question. But there's a "glass half empty" part, too. You see, at the heart of the question resides a certain discomfort about being too American or too Jewish. And while it would be a worthy investment of our time here tonight to talk about that discomfort with being too American, my real interest – and it's an interest that has grown throughout this very disturbing year for Jews which has now ended – is in exploring our discomfort with binding ourselves, without apology, to the Jewish people.

Now, you may think that particularly in this year, when Israel has faced a war on a two fronts, that we Jews have not exactly lacked a bond to the Jewish people. But the kind of bond I'm talking about is much more mature than just a political matter of supporting a war or opposing a war. There are wars in so many – too many – corners of the world. We support or oppose each one. The question for us to consider is: Is Israel different for us? And not just the land... is our own people different to us? Do the Jews evoke in us the heartfelt bond of family that transcends and enriches the normative, intellectual political lens through which we view success, failure, war and peace?

Clear evidence provides the answer. Our people were always different to us. Our biblical and rabbinic texts are loaded with calls for us to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." We love the story of Ruth, the heroic Jew-by-choice, who resolutely tells her Jewish mother-in-law, "Your people shall be my people." The prophets, who express our highest ideals for social justice, repeatedly appealed to a pride and distinction in Jewish peoplehood, for they knew that a people committed to a unique, shared destiny has the power literally to transform the world. And if you suspect that this attraction to Jewish peoplehood is only found amid traditional texts and traditional thinkers from long ago, think again. Martin Buber, the great 20th century Jewish philosopher whose teachings are revered in our Reform movement, famously declared: "Israel is a people like no other, for it is the only people in the world which, from its earliest beginning, has been both a nation and a religious community." And Buber's comments are just the tip of the iceberg. Mordecai Kaplan, the American Jewish visionary who founded Reconstructionism and played perhaps the most pivotal role in shaping the Conservative movement, gave his landmark work the title, "Judaism as a Civilization."

Yes, our people were always different to us, even throughout the 20th century, even in liberal Jewish circles... but not anymore. At the dawning of the 21st century, multiple demographic studies have documented the sudden and unprecedented erosion of Jewish peoplehood among America's Jews. It is a moment unique in all of Jewish history. A 20% decline in affiliation with major Jewish membership organizations in the 1990's alone. An 18% decline in inflation-adjusted philanthropy to Jewish charities in just twenty years time. According to the 2001 National Jewish Population Study, responses to the statement, "I have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people" elicited affirmation from 75% of American Jews over the age of 65 and just 47% for those under 35. And while in 1989, a national survey indicated that 73% of American Jews agreed that "caring about Israel

is a very important part of (their) being Jews,” only 57% agreed in 2005... and the number was even smaller among younger Jews. This wasn't a question of whether they supported Israeli policies or actions, nor was it a question of whether they opposed Israeli policies or actions. It was just a question of whether they cared about Israel at all – and nearly half don't.

There is no precedent for this. And when it comes to abandoning Jewish peoplehood, America's Jewish people are alone. In England, France, Argentina, Australia, South Africa, and even in Canada, studies show that Jews demonstrate a significantly greater bond to Jewish peoplehood than we do here.

Perhaps this is an indication that we Americans feel less like an embattled minority than the rest of the world's Jews do. This past summer, I was invited by the French government to make a ten-day official diplomatic trip to France, and I returned home from that trip with one invulnerable conclusion – I would like never to be a diplomat. Sit in the offices of a few high-ranking diplomats at the Quai D'Orsay – the French Foreign Affairs Ministry – and you'll see... they say a lot, but tell you very little. The diplomat business is not for me. But fortunately, my trip included much more than meetings with diplomats. I met as well with sociologists, interfaith community activists, heads of NGO's fighting racism, top lay leaders from the Jewish community, and leading clergy from the Christian, Muslim, Armenian and Jewish communities. Allison and I even attended the annual military parade down the Champs Elysees on Bastille Day as guests in President Chirac's personal box – which, for us, gave new meaning to Admiral Stockdale's famous words, “Who am I, and why am I here?”

So I heard from a broad variety of voices in France, and what was most striking – absolutely no one denied that there has been a marked surge in anti-Semitism in France. Nobody – not even those who would be politically motivated to deny or sugarcoat it. There is no hiding the hate crimes anymore – the arson of Jewish buildings, the physical attacks on Jewish school children, the hate speech that has become expected, and therefore accepted. I was heartened to learn about the French government's awakening, albeit a bit late, to the need to take strong, official, legal action to stop the crimes – and the measures, blessedly, are starting to work. Still, I was cautioned not to wear my *kippah* as I walked across Paris on Friday evening to attend Shabbat services at La Victoire, the magnificent old cathedral synagogue in the 9th Arrondissement. “Put the *kippah* on once you get past the iron security gates,” I was told. And when you ask the French Jewish lay leaders – all very accomplished, established French citizens... they would remind you of you – when you ask them if there is a future for Jews in France, you do not get agreement that there isn't, but neither do you get a dismissive assurance that the question is ridiculous and unworthy of consideration. The fact that you're even having the discussion is rather unsettling. Samy Ghozlan, the Chairman of France's task force fighting anti-Semitism, who spent his career as a beat cop tracking the fundamentalist networks on the streets, told me point blank that he, a Jew, sees no Jewish future in France – and while there are plenty who would disagree with him, few will write off as insignificant the words of someone of Ghozlan's experience, stature and credibility.

The well-to-do Jews of France face a threat that we just can't “get” here in America. So when they look at the world context around that threat – a sly President in Iran who denies the Holocaust, calls for the death of Israel, and seeks to develop nuclear capabilities, and a Jewish state whose enemies don't seek political compromises in order to make peace, like most national enemies do – these enemies are on record, repeatedly, that their objective is the obliteration of Israel, period – well, you can see how France's Jews might experience the need for Jewish peoplehood a bit more urgently than we do.

This might explain, at least in part, why we American Jews display less affinity for the Jewish people. But we, who live in this country's secure embrace, certainly can't depend solely upon the threats to Jews and Judaism around the globe to rekindle our zeal for Jewish peoplehood. For better or for worse – and it's probably a little bit of both – the currency of the Holocaust is extremely limited with contemporary American Jews, as is the fear of anti-Semitism, which we have the luxury of experiencing only through news stories and email messages detailing events and places far from the pristine safety of our homes. One could reasonably argue that we *should* be more conscious of troubling markers like the recent Texas Republican platform, which declared America unequivocally to be a Christian nation and pledged to “dispel the myth of the separation of church and state.” Mel Gibson's hate tirade may have found little support in today's America, but in a Christian America, with no separation between religion and state, it's hard to say with any confidence what we should expect. Still, unless things get considerably worse for us here, America's Jews will not be bound to the world's Jews predominantly by our shared fears. For in the deepest recesses of our hearts, we just don't really share those fears.

So what else will it take to bind us to our people? What, beyond the fact that we practice a version of the same religion, should bind us to the disparate masses of Jews sprinkled throughout the world?

Perhaps we might begin our search for an answer by appreciating what non-Jews have always admired about us... that we are the guardians of something truly exceptional in all of human history – something beyond even the beauty and wisdom of our religious heritage. Many have marveled at it, but I believe that it was Mark Twain who most famously expressed it. Back in 1899, Twain wrote: “If statistics are correct, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous, dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of – but he is heard of. He is as prominent on this planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also way out of proportion to the smallness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous flight in this world, in all the ages, and has done it with his hands tied behind him... other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was... All things are mortal but the Jews,” concluded Mark Twain. “All other forces pass; yet still he remains, what is the secret to his immortality?”

Twain's soliloquy of admiration suggests that the existence of a Jewish people has been more than just “good for the Jews” – our existence as a people has been good for the world... the inventive spirit, the community-shaping instinct, the pursuit of artistic beauty, the lifting up of human life, and the multiple successes in demonstrating how to build peace with others in a non-Jewish world. All are a part of the incredible story that is Jewish peoplehood, and it is therefore hardly jingoistic for us to take seriously the responsibility of safeguarding a history that has defied all odds and has, much more often than not, been a blessing to humanity.

This past year, Rabbis Beerman, Ragins and I hosted our annual Rabbis' Book Review program, and we reviewed non-Jewish historian Yuri Slezkine's bold volume, “The Jewish Century.” Writing about the past 100 years – the period *after* Mark Twain's observations – Slezkine asserts that the 20th century was the Jewish century. It was the time when the world's groups either succeeded or failed based upon the extent to which they could emulate Jewish adaptability, mobility, literacy, and

flexibility. It's a controversial thesis, to be sure – but the very fact that it can be made so articulately and defended so intelligently demands our attention. The world has taken notice of the uncommon jewels produced by our people's improbable survival. Will we take notice? Will we embrace the familial obligation upon which the very survival of the Jewish people has always depended?

In the year 5767, that familial obligation to *Am Yisrael* – our People Israel – begins with our people in the *land* of Israel. One thing became very clear to me during my time in France – Israel is us, and we are Israel, whether we wish it to be that way or not. The most powerful symbol of Jewish peoplehood on earth is the land where the Jewish people reign. So it doesn't much matter if we're disinterested in Israel. It doesn't matter if we're disdainful of Israel. To the world, Israel is still us, and we are still Israel. We are all one, big extended family. So at this season of judgment, we must ask ourselves: are we among the nearly half of American Jews who really don't care too much about our brothers and sisters living in Israel?

It may be a harder question to answer than you think. You see, a funny thing happened when I informed our congregation that I was planning to travel to Israel on a relief mission just a few weeks ago. Email messages and phone calls came pouring in – wishing me safety, wondering if Allison approved, saying “Godspeed” on this dangerous trip, praying for me and my safe return. I was on the ground in Israel for a little less than three days – and very clearly, the risk I was taking with my life disturbed many of you. We care about each other; you were worried for me. And then I got to thinking... the Jews in Israel live every day of their lives with that risk. They send their kids to school with that risk. They go supermarket shopping with that risk. They plan weddings and Bar Mitzvahs and birthday parties with that risk. And if they didn't, there would be no Israel.

So if you are among those who are glad, for whatever reason, that Israel exists, then you are among those who owe a family debt of gratitude and heartfelt concern to the Jews of Israel, who are, quite literally, saving your place in your own thousands-of-years-old home.

There were countless unforgettable experiences on this trip – meeting the young parents in Sderot, who were pleading with their mayor to protect their schoolchildren from Qassam rockets flying in from Gaza; singing the *Mi Sheberach* with a hospitalized woman in the north, whose two brothers were killed by the same katyusha rocket that wounded her; standing amid the rubble of the bombed-out ophthalmology unit at the Western Galilee Hospital; being led in *Oseh Shalom* by the next-door-neighbor of Gilad Shalit, the 20-year-old soldier captured by Hamas... and that's a very partial list. It was all rather surreal for someone like me, who, quite frankly, would probably just leave if my kids were at daily risk of being bombed by terrorists. Wouldn't you? Would *you* risk it all for the sake of Jewish peoplehood? Probably not. Fortunately, there are some Jews who will. Can we conscience leaving them to wonder – as they do – whether we even care about their plight?

In all the times I have been to Israel, I have never witnessed a more profound, nationwide depression. There is universal fear that greater violence is on the way. There is a crippling despair that making peace with the likes of Hezbollah and Hamas may prove impossible – after all, Hezbollah and Hamas have promised never to make peace. And there is a gnawing suspicion that we Jews in America look upon Israel with dispassionate eyes – seeing just another mess to view and judge and be inconvenienced by. They worry that, to us, Israel has become just another country in our political calculus.

Well, Israel is not just another country. The Talmud states clearly: "*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*" – we people of Israel, wherever we may live, are responsible for one another. That means we're responsible for challenging each other to live up to our highest ideals. And it also means that we're responsible for providing the love that is due another member of the family. When you're family, the two go hand in hand.

I look at Israel, and I see so much to love. I see a land where the wonders that Mark Twain described are in particularly large supply. I see more than 3000 years of our people's history – our successes and our failings. I see a place where the greatest moral teachings of our tradition actually figure in the rulings issued by courts. I see the revival of our people's remarkable language. I see a place where a palpable feeling of Shabbat descends on an entire country late on every Friday afternoon. I see a place where women have ascended to real power much more consistently and speedily than in America. I see the redemption, by Jews, of the world's neediest Jews in places like Ethiopia and the Former Soviet Union. I see a place where literally everything stops once a year to remember soldiers who have fallen (We should be so compassionate about the young American lives we sacrifice in this country.). I see a place where literally everything stops once a year to remember the six million innocent Jews who were murdered in Europe in our own time (Where else are these souls counted?). And I see a country that models the Jewish value of dissent. Israel's leading newspaper, *Ha'aretz*, looks a lot to me like the Talmud... it's loaded with the kind of free diversity of opinion that we've lived without in our American press for far too long.

What I don't see, of course, when I look at Israel is a place that is perfect. And let there be no doubt – this was a year in which Israel's imperfections were plain for all to see. But let me assure you – my wife of a dozen years certainly has discovered that I am not perfect... but still she loves me. I'm a member of the family. The renowned American Jewish author, Nessa Rapoport, puts it this way: "When you are young, you demand perfection of yourself and of those you choose to love. More than fifty years into our history as a newly sovereign people, we know: Redemption still awaits us, and the beloved does not need to be perfect to be entirely worthy of love."

If you're as interested as I am in trying to transform skittish Israeli souls into resolved peacemakers, let me make one thing I saw in Israel perfectly clear – Israelis are not going to respond to American Jewish critics, living in blissful safety, who won't treat them like members of the family. Like a child whose parents only chastise, the critiques stop mattering. If we want our advocacy actually to make a difference... if we truly want to band with Jewish people in Israel and throughout the world in building peace, we'll have to begin by figuring out, once again, how to love the Jews.

Now, here at our beloved Leo Baeck Temple, where we have so passionately and so consistently opened our hearts to the needs of the other, this call to take care of our own may seem out of character. Is this kind of particularism a violation of our broad values of social justice? Well, let me tell you – the empirical data suggests that the opposite is true. Those who care about Jews as a people and take action to support them tend also to commit to action in support of those in need throughout the world. Those who build Jewish schools and synagogues and Israel also commit more fully to universal social justice than those who don't. The two are positively related, not mutually exclusive. And if you think about it, it really stands to reason. After all, if, as we always say, the Jewish mission is truly to be a light unto the nations, then how could building up the Jewish people do anything other than strengthen our efforts to build up our entire, broken world?

Mark Twain was right about us. We have showered the world with abundant blessings. We have defied the fates that should have consumed us time and time again. We possess something absolutely precious that the world needs. Do we still believe it?

Two of American Judaism's leading voices, Steven Cohen and Jack Wertheimer, wrote just this past June: "A people no longer proud of what and who it is, no longer dedicated to caring for its own, cannot long expect to be held in high regard by others, or to move the world by its message." Are we willing to risk that matchless message through our own self-neglect?

This isn't about land. And it's not about governments. And it's not about politics. It's about securing a next generation for the members of your family. After all, even the father of Cultural Zionism, Ahad Ha'am, did not see the state of Israel as the irreplaceable commodity. "When a land is destroyed," he wrote, "there may yet arise a Zerubabel, an Ezra, a Nehemiah who could bring forth their people with them and restore the Land. But when a people is destroyed," he wrote, "who can come to its rescue?"

The answer: no one. If your identity as a Jew includes no commitments that perpetuate the Jewish people that will follow you, you can be certain that there will *be* no Jewish people who will follow you.

"Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh" – we're responsible for one another. Responsible to love. Responsible to criticize. Responsible to fund. Responsible to teach. Responsible...

We are members of a family. May we leave a wondrous inheritance.

SOME WORDS FOR ROSH HASHANAH MORNING

1 TISHRI 5767 / 23 SEPTEMBER 2006

Rabbi Leah Lewis

In the 2002 edition of the "New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy," you can still find the old saying that we all learned as kids: "It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game." In our culture, we play a lot of games.

At an athletic school in China, just one month ago, testosterone and syringes were found in the office of the headmaster. The Chinese authorities caught teachers there injecting students with performance-boosting drugs in preparation for their games.

Last February, when the Olympics were in Turin, the biggest headlines did not go to downhill skiers or figure skaters. Instead, the news was all about the Austrian biathlon and cross-country ski teams that were found with doping equipment and disqualified from competition.

In recent times, baseball slugger Barry Bonds and cycling champion Floyd Landis have filled the news because of their alleged involvement with these same illegal performance enhancing drugs. Their stories, along with others from among our country's most successful athletes, have moved from the sports page to the front page.

I wish I could say that these are isolated incidents, limited just to these few individuals or relegated to the superstars. But when it comes to this topic, there always seems to be more.

Now that the football season is up and running, we are reminded that anabolic steroids have appeared in the NFL, as well. Three players from the Carolina Panthers were found filling mega-prescriptions for these drugs during the week before they played in the 2004 Super Bowl. Good old American football, lauded for its tough drug testing, is yet another professional sport in which the expectations for performance from the coaches and the owners and, ultimately, from the fans, are at an all-time high. Although I am hardly the biggest sports fan on this bima(!), I do know enough to see that the players are doing whatever is necessary to meet these unrealistic expectations, regardless of health or legal consequences, so that they can win on the biggest stages, make the biggest bucks -- become "super human."

Oddly enough, as the year 5766 draws to a close, the headlines of athletes being tested and arrested have made their way back to the sports pages. Nobody is talking about the fact that America's most watched sport, football, has been infected by performance enhancing drugs. By now, Barry Bonds and Floyd Landis are old news. So maybe it's time to update our cultural literacy dictionary... out with "it's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game," and in with "winning isn't everything... it's the only thing."

Have we simply come to accept the reality of our time? That to be 'the best' according to the standards of our world today means going beyond our natural capacity to perform, regardless of the price.

Of course, it's not just millionaire home run hitters or Tour de France champions who find themselves in a naturally impossible situation as we enter the new year, 5767. The 'need to succeed' is inside you and it is inside me in one form or another. I want to be the best wife and mother and daughter and sister and cousin and friend and rabbi that I can possibly be. Oh yes, and I'd like to stay in shape and always be the first one in the book club to read the book. Sound familiar?! Just like the stars, we all want to succeed in our own passions and careers but in many cases, the standards that we have bought into are so high that measuring up is quite literally impossible – at least naturally.

Thankfully, there is no shortage of information out there that exists to teach us how to make the impossible possible. All it takes is a trip to your local book store to find dozens of 'sure thing' and 'can't miss' secrets to success. In the name of "research," I went undercover and asked for some materials on the topic. The nice lady pointed me to an entire corner of my neighborhood Borders' Books where my secret to success was sure to be hiding. Here are just a few of the titles I found:

Success Built to Last

Public Speaking for Success

The Success Principles: How to Get from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be

Never Eat Alone...And Other Secrets to Success

Good to Great

The One Thing You Need to Know

The Art of the Steal

The Wal-Mart Effect

The Wal-Mart Way

Secrets of the Millionaire Mind

Trump: Think Like a Billionaire

Being Martha

Successful Decision Making

Successful Performance Reviews

Successful Strategies for Growth

The books line the shelves and every author has his or her own recipe for success. Dedication, bravery, hard work, creativity... It is no wonder that professional sports is facing a 'doping epidemic.' Athletes who want to rise to the top of their field are measured by their ability to do it all, and to do it more and better than their competition. In a sense, so are we. Our fields may not have mile markers or yard markers or bases on them, but we do measure our success, and so do others.

I can't tell you how many times I sit with a bereaved family still trying to make sense out of the recent death of a loved one, when the conversation comes down to figuring out how that person was – or was not – successful in life. It is measured by their memories. And I am always struck that moments like these have little to do with business – even for the most 'successful' business people. I am privileged to hear the most loving and powerful stories about how he loved his wife or how she welcomed everyone into her home or how they were integrally part of their community. In life's most fragile moments, we measure success not by how much we have, or even how much we have done. At moments like this, success is living our values. Thankfully, Judaism gives us this day to align ourselves with our values precisely so that the task is not ignored until those who mourn our death can do it for us.

Today is Rosh Hashanah, the day that marks the beginning of the new year. Every fall we celebrate and reflect on this marker of time. Along with the sweetness of the apples and honey of this day is the notion that today is *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgment. On Rosh Hashanah, we are told, it is written into the Book of Life whether or not we have been successful in the past year. Successful, that is, not in comparison to our neighbors, but according to our most personal markers and those set out for us by our tradition. Today is our critical annual reminder that our actions warrant judgment, or evaluation. By God? Perhaps. By society? Whether we like it or not. By our loved ones? I hope so. By us? Judaism begs us to.

In author Jim Collins' bestselling book, *From Good to Great*, an exploration of why some companies are great and others aren't, Collins and his team identified 28 companies that were truly successful. To qualify as a success, according to Collins, a company must beat the general stock market by an average of seven times over fifteen years. This study was revolutionary in the world of business because the companies that he followed performed twice as well as the companies that we all think of as being the most 'successful' around; companies like Coca-Cola, Intel, General Electric and Merck.

When you look at the list of companies that he classifies as 'great,' it won't take you long to realize that the measuring device used in that study is not the same one that Judaism employs on this Day of Judgment. After all, Philip Morris, the 'big daddy' of the tobacco industry, is deemed to be one of the truly great companies by this team of researchers. With smoking responsible for more deaths than alcohol, AIDS, illegal drugs, murders, and suicides combined, it seems likely that Philip Morris' place in the Book of Life has been rescinded.

Our tradition, through the Midrash, teaches that the world was actually created on the 25th day of the month of Elul and that on the sixth day after that, this day of Rosh Hashanah, the very day when humanity was created, the first human beings were judged. "In the first hour [of that original Rosh Hashanah day]," the Midrash says, "the idea of creating human beings entered God's mind. In the second hour, God took counsel with the ministering angels, in the third God assembled Adam's dust, in the fourth God kneaded it over and over again. In the fifth God shaped him, in the sixth God turned Adam into a lifeless body, in the seventh God breathed a soul into him, in the eighth God brought him into the Garden of Eden, in the ninth he was commanded not to eat the fruit from the tree, in the tenth he transgressed, in the eleventh hour he was judged and in the twelfth he was forgiven." It was the first of Tishrei, Rosh HaShanah, a very busy first-ever day of judgment. Whether it actually happened that way or not is really rather unimportant. What is significant is what the story teaches – that from the very beginning of creation, there has been a mechanism in place for judging success.

'B'Hatzlacha, 'Good luck.' We say it all the time. But *hatzlacha*, in Hebrew, is not really about luck. It is, quite literally, a wish for someone to succeed. *'B'hatzlacha* on that test that you've been preparing for.' *'B'hatzlacha* with the promotion.' *'B'hatzlacha* in helping your daughter through her first break-up.' *'B'hatzlacha* with this round of chemotherapy.' *'B'Hatzlacha*, 'Good luck.' It is a Jewish wish for success, and although it is really not about luck, the fact that we use the term as a good luck wish seems to be an acknowledgment that regardless of how hard we work – or of how dedicated or creative or brave we are – we are only human. We are limited in our ability and deep down, we know that we cannot control everything. Quite often, success – or lack of it – is out of our hands.

That is a frightening prospect in a world in which we strive to control the outcome of things. And so we worry. For good reason, we worry about our health and our financial well-being, about our work and about our play. And we worry about all of those things for our loved ones, as well. I am, thank God, now a Jewish mother two times over and, believe me, I know all about worrying! But as the old adage goes, to be a Jewish mother, you need to be neither Jewish nor a mother! We all want the best for our children, our spouses, our partners, our families and friends. Worrying may be a natural response to the pressures of the world, but it is our sacred task to make sure that we channel the energy and attention toward the truly important.

The early 19th century Hassidic master, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, the Kotzker Rebbe as he was better known, had something to say about worrying. He lived in Poland after the Enlightenment and had a reputation for having little patience for those who were overly self-absorbed. He was plagued by the fact that there were so many people around him who were suffering. "Too many people are worried about their own stomachs and other people's souls," He wrote, "When they should be worried about their own souls and other people's stomachs."

The Kotzker Rebbe's judgment can be a valuable reminder, in our world today, about how to measure success. He would suggest on this day, the day of our own personal judgment, that we take a good, honest look at our souls, and ask ourselves how concerned we truly are about the well-being of others. I'd like to believe that it's human nature, but even if it's not, it is most certainly "Jewish nature" – the nature prescribed by our Jewish values – to understand success not only as an individual, but as a partner in the ongoing creation of the world. Being a Jew means that as long as there is brokenness, there will be healing to do.

Can we call ourselves successful when 91,000 people sleep on the streets of Los Angeles County on any given night? 91,000 human beings, in our own neighborhood, left with no place to call home. That is certainly something to worry about.

Among the souls on the streets are families – 40% of those souls, in fact – most of which have at least one member who works and legally earns a living that cannot meet even the most frugal definitions of success. A full one third – 30,000 in Los Angeles County alone – are women, many of whom are concerned not only for their own well-being, but also for their children who are on the streets with them. And many of these women are homeless because they are running away from the domestic violence that filled their lives back when they were domestic. And there are the mentally ill and those who suffer from addictions – and many who are diagnosed with both. And there are

veterans and gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered teens who have been kicked out of their own homes.

According to PATH, People Assisting the Homeless, there are over 8,000 homeless families in L.A. County. That is well over 10 times the number of families that belong to Leo Baeck Temple. How might we react if we learned that 10 of our congregations would be sleeping on the streets of LA tonight? I would venture to guess that we would be plenty worried.

Ever since our congregation was founded, we have worked together here to deepen our worry about our world and to respond with action. And I would say that we are well on the road to success. We have members who, through the temple, are fighting the genocide in the Sudan, challenging Leo Baeck Temple to do what we can to protect the environment, feeding hungry AIDS patients, defining and building peace in innovative new ways, dropping a coin or a coat into the Mitzvah of the Month basket in the lobby, and bringing bags filled with groceries to donate to SOVA. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

But like my Jewish grandmother said, "There is always more to worry about." There are still those 91,000 human beings. They are still out there on the streets... right now. And then there are still more... countless individuals who bounce from friend's couch to friend's couch, or who sell their bodies and their souls for money and for survival. Our tradition instructs that action – that doing something to mend not only the brokenness within, but also that which fills our world – is critical. On this Day of Judgment, Judaism begs us to redefine success so that in order to achieve it, we must go beyond the 'me' to the 'we.'

Rampant homelessness – like so many other social problems – is a relatively new phenomenon in our country. Each of the 20th century's World Wars was preceded by a period of widespread poverty in which people were left without homes, sleeping in shelters and on the streets all across America. And each of those periods ended when the economy turned around. Now, a much more troubling situation has developed. Over the past two decades, our country's economy has been stronger than ever before, but still homelessness is all around us. Social scientists, Rick Fantasia and Maurice Isserman, wrote about why it is that the problem is so widespread today. "Cutbacks in social programs," they wrote, "often made the difference in determining whether a poor family, or a mentally ill or otherwise disabled person, could continue to afford to pay rent in urban neighborhoods where rent costs were rising steeply and rapidly. From 1981 through 1988 all funds for federally subsidized housing programs were cut over 69 percent. The number of low income housing starts...dropped from 183,000 units in 1980 to 28,000 by 1985." Precisely at a time when Silicon Valley was priming for extraordinary prosperity, the Valley of shadow was increasing exponentially all around it – and all around us.

Today, just two and a half decades later, there are unprecedented numbers of souls who are without a shelter to call their own. They live without the tangible assets of a roof over their heads, yes, but that also means that they live without the emotional security and sense of belonging that accompany that physical structure. Despite the research and statistics that exist to help us understand this problem intellectually, on a deeper, human level, the experience is veritably incomprehensible to most of us.

Imagine for a moment the heartbreak of tucking your children into "bed," such as it is, without so much as a wall of your own to keep them safe and feeling secure. Imagine the demoralization of

needing to have a personal conversation with someone you love, and having not a single place to go that is private and that is your own. Imagine the degradation of working diligently and responsibly all day at your job, maybe two, and then discovering that your earnings are not even enough to give you a home to 'go home to' at the end of the day.

It wasn't always this way. It doesn't have to be this way. We might be intimidated by the sheer enormity of the challenge to rid our land of homelessness, but if we take seriously the teaching of our ancient rabbis who reminded us that while it is not upon us to complete the task alone, neither are we free to desist from it, we can see that in order for us to be genuinely successful, it is upon each one of us to worry and to translate that worry into action.

This year at Leo Baeck Temple, we're going to set those 91,000 human souls directly in our sights. I hope that you will mark your calendars to be with us on Sunday morning, December 3, for a conference on homelessness that will educate us about the real-life challenges in Los Angeles, and will inspire us to action. Our keynote speaker will be none other than our Mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa. This day will be a critical start to a congregation-wide movement to end homelessness. We may not be able to eliminate the problem all by ourselves, but, blessedly, that is not the standard for success given to us by our Jewish heritage. Rather, we are commanded to do our part in the world's repair—chipping away at social ills, like homelessness, one human being at a time. When we come face to face with the problem and soul to soul with those who suffer from it, we move outside of the 'me' to the 'we'. It is the way that we Jews measure success.

You know, when I thought about that bookstore, and its full library of 'secrets of success' books, I realized that there was one thing missing. Risking my cover, I made a return trip to Borders, walked directly to the Judaica section and pulled the Torah off of the shelf. And then I placed it on the shelf in that little 'success' corner, somewhere between *Secrets of a Millionaire Mind* and *Being Martha*. It probably just confused the hell out of most shoppers, but somehow, I felt like I was doing my part to ensure that the values that we are so lucky to inherit were at least afforded their rightful place among the litany of recipes for success.

There is an image that has stuck with me ever since the collapse of the great energy giant, Enron, unfolded in the news. It was Sunday, December 2, 2001, just hours after the company filed the largest bankruptcy case in United States' history. On that day five years ago, six Enron representatives boarded their 45 million dollar corporate jet to travel from Houston to New York for the proceedings. Once in New York, they stayed in suites at the Four Seasons and dined at many of Manhattan's finest restaurants. Only one of these Enron representatives, Associate Counsel, Richard Sanders, saw any problem with the money that was still being spent so freely, despite the fact that the company had just gone broke. "We should have flown up on Southwest Airlines," he said, "and stayed at the Ramada Inn."

In Enron's 1998 Annual Report – back when the company was famous, not infamous – success was defined by the following measurements:

RESPECT: We treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves. We do not tolerate abusive or disrespectful treatment. Ruthlessness, callousness, and arrogance don't belong here.

INTEGRITY: We work with customers and prospects openly, honestly, and sincerely. When we say we will do something, we will do it; when we say we cannot or will not do something, then we won't do it.

COMMUNICATION: We have an obligation to communicate. Here, we take the time to talk with one another...and to listen. We believe that information is meant to move and that information moves people.

EXCELLENCE: We are satisfied with nothing less than the very best in everything we do. We will continue to raise the bar for everyone. The great fun here will be for all of us to discover just how good we can really be.

A pretty worthwhile set of standards by which to measure success. Too bad Enron's leaders were so driven to win the game that they abandoned all those values and pumped their corporation full of steroids instead.

For the good folks at Enron, it is too late to measure success honestly. For the rest of us, it is not. We may live in a driven world that bombards us with unhealthy images of what it means to be successful, but on this Day of Judgment, we are reminded that Judaism provides a compelling, compassionate and grounded perspective on what success at its best can be – translating our concern for our own well-being and the well-being of others into productive action.

Let each one of us reflect thoughtfully on what it means to be successful in this new year and together, let us pursue it by taking care of both the 'me' and the 'we'.

B'hatzlacha!

KOL NIDRE

10 TISHRI 5767 / 1 OCTOBER 2006

Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

“Lessons in Love”

You know, it’s kind of hard for me to believe sometimes, but this is my fourth Yom Kippur here in this community. Four new years at Leo Baeck Temple . It has been enough for us to make a home together here. But that doesn’t mean that I’ve forgotten how it felt back at the very beginning. Just a few days after I completed my first High Holy Days here at LBT, I remember being at the grocery store, and I was spotted by a temple member who clearly thought I had a familiar face, but in my sweat pants and t-shirt, he had absolutely no chance of placing me. So I gently let him off the hook: “It seems that you and your rabbi shop at the same supermarket.” “Ah, Rabbi,” he said, “I’m sorry, I just didn’t recognize you without your white robe on.”

Now, tempted as I was to say something like: “The robe! Yeah, it’s out in the car, I just forgot to put it on...” or “You know, I only wear the robe to Gelson’s. At Trader Joe’s, I go with the holy sweats and t-shirt...” – tempted though I was, I just smiled graciously and kept my mouth shut. But it did get me thinking about how this white robe has become a part of my body, my identity for so many of you.

Now, most of you probably see this white robe as the proper uniform of an American clergyperson. Pastors, priests, rabbis – we all wear some variation on the theme. But what you may not know is that this robe actually has much deeper Jewish roots than that. It is a sort of secularized version of the kittel, the Yiddish term for the more form-fitting white garment – it looks like a bathrobe – that we Jewish men are to wear, according to our tradition, on Yom Kippur, and our wedding day, and on the day that we are buried.

Now, in Reform Jewish circles, you don’t see too many genuine kittels. In fact, the only time I’ve seen a Reform Jew wearing one was when I attended the wedding of my best buddy in rabbinical school. And I’ll never forget his father turning to his mother, while the service was underway, and using his most discrete stage whisper, which was audible only to those of us seated in the first six rows, he says, “Honey, why is our son wearing a butcher’s apron?”

But my colleague loves his kittel. And if he was going to follow the dictates of our tradition and wear it on his wedding day, so, too, would he follow the dictates of our tradition and wear it on the High Holy Days. And if you think I was nervous at my first Holy Days here, how do you think he felt on his first High Holy Days at his congregation, as he walked out onto the *bima*... looking like he just stepped out of the shower at the Regent Beverly Wilshire?

I’m going to stick to this white robe. I may look like a member of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, but at least I don’t look like I got lost on my way back to the locker room at Burke Williams.

Yes, this is the right robe for me. But I'm not going to forget where it comes from. Strange custom, this. A white robe, to be worn on a man's wedding day, on Yom Kippur, and on the day he is buried.

Interesting connections. One's wedding day, Yom Kippur, burial. Sounds like the opening line of a borscht belt joke: "What do marriage, Yom Kippur, and death have in common?" But the truth is that this question is a lot more than the opening of a bad joke. It's an opening into a deeper understanding of this day and of ourselves, and it could help us, perhaps, live richer, more hopeful, more meaningful lives.

And if ever there was a time when we needed help living more hopeful, more meaningful lives, it's right now. These days, the world seems like an especially hopeless, meaningless, hate-filled place. War in Iraq. War in Israel. Genocide in Darfur. Incendiary cartoons followed by violent riots. A head of state calling for the destruction of Israel. A state-sponsored cartoon contest lampooning the Holocaust. Catholic churches fire-bombed by radical Muslims angry at the Pope's labeling them "violent." By the way, and with all due respect, there really must be a better strategy than fire-bombing churches to convince people that you are not violent.

In a world filled to overflowing with hatred, a world of fear and endless anxiety, we search for a balm, some kind of elixir, an antidote to the venom, the poison which reaches into us, no matter how much we may attempt to avoid it.

And it's out there, the antidote – a weapon powerful enough to vanquish hatred, to combat despair. The antidote is love.

"Love?" you may wonder. How can love vanquish hate? Well, first of all, contrary to what you might have heard about the "Old Testament" God being a God of fire, brimstone, and vengeance, our Jewish tradition actually has more to say about love. Our texts are loaded with descriptions of a God who loves the world in general and the Jewish people in particular. And as for the importance of love between people – regardless of what they look like or what they may believe – the Jewish message is made completely clear by Rabbi Akiva, the great sage of the 2nd century, who famously taught that Judaism can be boiled down to just one *mitzvah*: "*V'ahavta l'reicha kamocho*" – love your fellow human being as yourself.

But lots of traditions emphasize love. Lots of religions and cultures value it. What's unique about Jewish perspectives on love, and how can they offer a protective balm in these troubled times?

Well, perhaps we can find the answer by following this white robe – this kittel – to the three moments in Jewish time where it appears, and where we learn what's expressly Jewish about Jewish views on love.

The kittel is first to be worn on one's wedding day, when bride and groom unite under the terms of the *ketubah*, the 2000 year old marriage document still used today, whether in its traditional form or in contemporary renderings. It includes this promise from bride and groom: "I will serve, honor, support, and sustain you..."

What it doesn't say is: "I will love you." The word "love" isn't mentioned. Not a very romantic text at all. But does that mean that a Jewish marriage, as described in the *ketubah*, is

loveless? Hardly. The wisdom of the *ketubah* is how it defines love – it's the promise to serve, honor, support, and sustain. That's what Judaism calls love. Under the *chuppah*, we don't promise to feel a certain way about each other. Instead, we promise to serve each other in a particular way. We promise devotion... action... concrete signs of our commitment.

Stephen Covey, the celebrated author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, tells a story about a man who approaches him after one of his seminars. The man says, "Stephen, I'm really worried about my marriage. My wife and I don't have the same feelings for each other we used to have. I guess I just don't love her anymore, and she doesn't love me. What can I do?"

"The feeling isn't there anymore?" Covey asks.

"That's right," the man replies. "And we have three children we're really concerned about. What do you suggest I do?"

"Love her," says Covey.

"But I told you," the man responds, "the feeling just isn't there anymore."

"Love her."

"You don't understand. The feeling of love just isn't there."

"Then love her. If the feeling isn't there, that's a good reason to love her."

"But how do you love when you *don't* love?" replies the man.

"My friend, love is a verb," says Covey. "Love – the feeling – is a fruit of love the verb. So love her, serve her. Sacrifice. Listen to her. Empathize. Appreciate. Affirm her. Are you willing to do that?"

Our Jewish tradition understands love as a verb. And long before Stephen Covey ever said it, the great Chasidic master, the Baal Shem Tov, had a few words to say about it. It seems the Baal Shem Tov was approached by a man who had suffered a painful falling out with his son, whom he felt had abandoned God and turned to evil. "What shall I do?" asked the man. "Love him more than ever," replied the Baal Shem Tov.

So our tradition understands "love as a verb" beyond just marital relations. Even for those of us not currently married or partnered, or who never marry, this notion of love as a verb runs throughout our tradition. And it's a global obligation. The Torah commands us to love our neighbor, just as it commands us to love the stranger.

Our sages wondered how we could be commanded to feel something – namely, love – for another person. Most of the *mitzvot* are about actions – dos and don'ts which are not connected necessarily to particular feelings. For example, the laws of *kashrut* require us to refrain from eating certain animals, not to feel a particular way about eating or not eating them. That is, I can feel anyway I want about bacon. I can crave it, obsess over it, lust after it. I just can't eat it.

Same goes for *matzah* during *Pesach*. I don't have to like it, I just have to eat it. And *tzedakah*. It doesn't really matter if I enjoy giving it, as long as I give.

So with regard to the commandments to love our neighbor and to love the stranger, our sages understand these obligations to require very specific actions. What does it mean to love others? Explains Maimonides, the *mitzvah* requires us to "visit the sick, comfort the bereaved, bury the dead, and rejoice with bride and groom."

Whether it's the love sanctified under the *chuppah* or the love we share with our children or parents, with our friends or even with strangers – the requirement of our tradition ultimately is to act in a loving way toward others. It's not about what we feel. Our job is to serve them. To care for them. To provide for them. To support them.

In the face of hopelessness, despair, hatred, and fear, this, our tradition asserts, is the way out. It's the only way out. This is the balm to soothe our troubled souls. It's not about feeling loving thoughts for those around the world. It's about embracing the enduring discipline of loving other people – both those inside our personal circles, and those well outside. It's a kind of love one can extend both to family members living under the same roof in L.A. and to endangered populations living under a thatched roof in a refugee camp in Chad. Afraid that this world has turned to evil? Do as the Baal Shem Tov says: "Love."

This is the Jewish wisdom about love that we Jews discover while wearing the kittel on wedding day.

On Yom Kippur, the kittel shows up again, and a new layer of meaning is added to our lesson about love, Jewish-style. We learn how forgiveness is a part of "love as a verb," and we see how forgiveness is modeled for us by the God sculpted by our Jewish sages.

I mentioned earlier the common misconception of the God of our Bible and our prayer books as a seeker of vengeance. Indeed, there is a dose of fire and brimstone in our Torah and elsewhere in our sacred literature, but even the most frightening images of Judaism's God are dwarfed by a divine optimism about human nature that, quite frankly, we human beings struggle to produce ourselves.

The God of our Yom Kippur prayer books is endlessly patient, true, and *loving*... and that means forever ready to forgive our failures, always eager to meet our earnest confessions with an unconditional pardon. "If only my spouse was like this," we tell ourselves... "or my parents or my children or my friends." Or maybe if we're being really self-reflective: "If only I was like that." If we all were this willing to love each other through our genuine efforts to turn, I'm certain that we would all apologize more often.

Now, of course, we can't know whether God actually operates in this way or not. What's important is that our tradition *describes* God operating like this. It's one of Judaism's many precious gifts to us – a standard for forgiveness that truly encourages us and all of humankind to reach for our loving best.

There's a reason why our prayer books are packed with references to God as *Avinu*, our Father or Parent. After all, there is no bond of love more emotionally rich and raw than that between parent and child. Each of us is someone's child, and most of us are or will be parents. We know what we yearn for in those relationships. And we know what we wish to give to our own children when they fall short of their best – not fire and brimstone and vengeance. We wish to teach them, through the loving openness of our hearts, that we are confident that they can be more. We want our children to know that we believe in them, and that they will never run out of time to make things right with us. That's love. That's what they crave. And it's what we wish to be.

On Yom Kippur, we come face to face, via our prayer books, with such a parent, such a loving exemplar. And that exemplar is described in the most generous of ways, over and over again by our Sages. The rabbis of the Midrash affirmed that in *their* God's world, "he who is twisted can be made straight." (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:15)

That's an affirmation that we could really use right about now in *our* world. Our fears are fueled by a planet overrun by twisted souls. Once upon a time, we read the news to learn about others who were in danger because of the world's darkness. Now, we know that in this global community of ours, the danger is ours, and every story is seen through that fearful lens. Just days ago, President Bush declassified that report, confirming that we are actually less safe, more in peril than ever before. It's the kind of news that could terrify us into becoming extraordinarily closed beings. But because it's Yom Kippur, and we are here, we are blessed to have a different prism through which to view our predicament. It's the prism of hope, harvested from the belief that only love can produce in us – the belief that human beings and humankind can change.

Back at the beginning of August, one of our temple members emailed me a question. Noting the fast approach of the High Holy Days, he acknowledged that he had "a real problem this year." He wondered: "How do I/we as Jews forgive" those who are such clear perpetrators of evil in the world – terrorists, anti-Semites, killers and torturers and extremists bent on violating every virtue we would hold dear. "How do we forgive?"

I explained in my reply that we are not called by our tradition to forgive those who do not seek our pardon, but neither are we ever to surrender our hope that a time of forgiveness and reconciliation might someday arrive. Retaining our trust in that possibility may be more important for us than it is for them. It's how we keep from extinguishing the love for humanity whose absence would render life dark and meaningless. Now, that doesn't mean that we are somehow commanded to feel love for those who feel only hatred for us. But "love as a verb" means that we're in it for the long haul, and somehow, we must always summon the belief that "he who is twisted can be made straight," and that time never runs out on the possibility. Our texts teach that God entreats us to repent, believes we can repent, even down to the last day before we die. Until we cease breathing, hope abides. So our job is to create a climate of forgiveness – by seeking to set things right with those we have wronged, and opening our hearts to forgiveness for those who have wronged us. This is how we fashion a world more and more like the one imagined by Judaism's greatest teachers, while we wait – as *Avinu*, our loving Parent on Yom Kippur waits – for a better tomorrow.

Are we Jews "Pollyannas" to believe in holding onto hope until that dying day? Well, if someone had told you on this very day of Yom Kippur... back in 1973... to hold onto hope... that Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin would shake hands and swear off war and death between Egypt and Israel before the 1970's would end, and that the peace would still be in force a generation later,

wouldn't it have seemed far-fetched? You'd have thought this hopeful person to be out of his mind. But he'd have been right. Until we cease breathing, hope must always abide.

In the Midrash, Rabbi Yose taught that God says to us: "My children, open to Me in penitence an opening as small as the eye of a needle, and I shall make an opening in Me for you so wide that through it camps full of soldiers and siege engines could enter." (Song of Songs Rabbah 5:2) Can we mimic that loving dream for humankind? Can we cling to the notion that all we humans need is a sliver of hope, for deep inside, we possess a purity that can always make us worthy of forgiveness, worthy of the white garments of the angels?

This is the Jewish wisdom about love that we discover while wearing the kittel on Yom Kippur.

Which brings us to the kittel's final appearance... as a burial shroud. There will come a time, I know, when I will trade in this more formal white robe that I wear for a more standard kittel. And I hope it's many years from now, but a kittel is the garment in which I'll be buried. And in death, the kittel *returns* to witness the final lesson we learn about the Jewish understanding of love.

Probably the most famous text in our tradition about love and death comes from the Song of Songs, where we learn: *aza ch'mavet ahava* – "Love is as strong as death."

How is love as strong as death? And how does this teaching serve as a balm of comfort in fearful times?

Amos Hakham, a contemporary scholar, explains this verse as follows: "Just as every person will inevitably be subdued by death, so, too, every person will inevitably be subdued by love – it's impossible to avoid it." So death conquers all, *and* love conquers all, and this is the way in which death and love are equally strong.

From this perspective, we are hard-wired to love. We can't escape it. Hatred is not the default. Hatred is not part of the design. Hatred is not inevitable, even though it seems that way sometimes.

Love is the default. Love is part of the design. Love, inevitable.

Another interpretation of "love is as strong as death": a person who loves completely is willing to sacrifice his own life for his beloved. And here we get at a meaning that can help us vanquish fear: love is so powerful that it can conquer our fear of death. And on some deep personal level, I'll bet every one of us in this room understands this.

You see, I love life. I hope *this* kittel won't be replaced by the kittel that will be my burial shroud for a long, long time. But as much as I love being alive, there are things I love more. I love my children more. I love my spouse more. If my kids needed both my kidneys, my heart, my lungs, my breath – I wouldn't think twice. And I love my community more. My love for the Jewish people is so deep that if I had to, I'd sacrifice my life on its behalf, as many have done before me.

And I don't know about you, but there's nothing I hate so much for which I'd be willing to make the same trade.

The realization of our finitude – the cold, hard fact that none of us is getting out of here alive – can inspire us to ask the biggest questions: What’s it all for? What’s it all mean? When I go, what really do I leave behind? What’s of lasting value? What, if anything, is permanent?

The verse from Song of Songs suggests the same simple answer to each of these profound questions: love. Love is what gives life meaning. Love is what enables us to face our fear of death. Love is what we leave behind. Love is what is of lasting value.

It is a frightening world. And these days, these *Yamim Noraim*, are, as their Hebrew name suggests, days of awe, days of fear. And some of the scary things in the world... there’s not so much you or I can do about them. Some of these things are so big, so far away, so global, that we as individuals feel powerless to change them.

We can respond in a variety of ways. We can turn our backs, try to shut out the world around us. We can try to escape, busy ourselves with other things so we don’t have to think about it.

But there is another way to respond. A way deeply rooted in our tradition. A way, on this Yom Kippur, this Day of Atonement, symbolized by this glorious white garment.

We can turn in love to those around us and serve them and support them.

We can commit to clinging to a parental love for humanity... an eternal readiness to forgive and be forgiven... a relentless hope that redemption is possible, that people can change, that the world can change.

And we can face our own mortality a little more bravely with the faith that love and the meaning it brings to our lives is as strong as death, a force equal to our ultimate demise.

Look, there will always be fear, hopelessness, despair. But it need not turn our souls to black. There remains a pristine white... of love. May it be our cloak.

(This sermon was written collaboratively with Rabbi Josh Zweiback of Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, California .)

YOM KIPPUR MORNING 10 TISHRI 5767 / 2 OCTOBER 2006

Rabbi Leonard I. Beerman

A Sermon for Yom Kippur Morning, October 2, 2006 5767

These are the words of Nobel Laureate Pablo Neruda:

And now we will count to twelve

and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth

let's not speak in any language,

let's stop for one second

and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment

without rush, without engines,

we would all be together

in a sudden strangeness.

...If we were not so single-minded

about keeping our lives moving,

and for once could do nothing,

perhaps a huge silence

might interrupt this sadness

of never understanding ourselves.

Perhaps the earth can teach us

as when everything seems dead

and then proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve

and you keep quiet and I will go.

One – two – three – Maybe, that’s all this sermon requires, that and a deep breath. Maybe. But – you know how it is with rabbis, and especially on Yom Kippur.

When this day is over. When the gates of Yom Kippur are closed for another year. When the prayers and the music and the words spoken, have fallen silent, we will all be, once again, alone, alone to face ourselves, to return again to what our lives are, and perhaps, to wonder what they mean. When I try to think of what my life is and was, when I wonder what it meant, the sad days passing, the dog sick and still waiting to be fed, the closeness of my wife sleeping, presences of our grown children and grandchildren, blessing them one by one on the Shabbat, listening as they sing with the guitar, or the youngest of them screaming as they chase one another through the house, “the sun, the smell of the air just now, each physical moment passing, passing,” as the poet Robert Creeley once said, “it’s what it always is or ever was, just then, just there.”

Have you felt that? Or is it just old people like me? Each physical moment passing, passing, just then, just there.

Here we are again, you and I, come to greet another year, another Yom Kippur, nestled here in Bel Air, just below the Getty, privileged by our geography and by the distinction of our membership. Fences, security guards, several security guards, just for us, we could well live out our lives as a guarded gated community of Jews, absorbed in our own spiritual needs and dedicated solely to the advancement of Jewish learning and religious observance for ourselves and our children and acknowledging our responsibility for the security and well-being of our fellow Jews in Israel, everywhere. Is that what it’s all about? Is that what it means to be a Jew, to be a Jew in the twenty-first century? To be absorbed primarily in our needs as Jews? No, (it hardly needs be said) that’s surely not enough for the Leo Baeck Temple whose spiritual leader is Ken Chasen, and Sandy Ragins before him. Just take a look at this month’s Temple Bulletin to see again that the Jewish hearts in this synagogue clearly have a place of significant value for something beyond our Jewish selves.

It’s a hard thing talking to you this year. Such a tumult is the world, brimming with anger and adversaries and terror and hatred and fear, great fear everywhere. Why, unlike you and me, does everybody else and everything in this world have to be so complicated? It is confusing. To live in this world, in this irrational time, when the values that we Jews have always affirmed are daily being coarsened, mutilated even, by our own country, even by Jews, is to be confused and angry and

frightened. Confusion, anger and fear seem to me to be thoroughly rational responses to an irrational situation.

Exactly twenty-four years ago, 1982, – that was the year that Israel invaded Lebanon – I gave a sermon for Rosh Hashanah evening in the course of which I said that I would be speaking about the war in Lebanon on Yom Kippur. As I stood at the door to greet our members as they left, a good friend of mine, the late Norman Tyre, approached me. Norman frequently had had serious problems with some of the views expressed in my sermons (would you believe that?) never failed to communicate his distress with me, but that in no way impinged on our affection for one another. This time he said: “I’m so glad to hear that you will be talking about the war in Lebanon on Yom Kippur, because I’m gong to be in India. (I have a feeling that some of you might wish to be somewhere else by the time this sermon is done.)

Now in those days I used to keep in my desk drawer a statement by Robert Alter, distinguished professor at Berkeley, which I would take out whenever I felt like being critical of Israel . “Morality on the subject of Israel comes cheap to an American Jew, because he is not directly confronted with the responsibilities of power, the naked needs of survival.”

Back then – this will hardly surprise you – I was one of that minority of Jews here who believed, from the very first day, that the war in Lebanon, the war of Menachem Begin and General Ariel Sharon, was doomed to be a moral and political failure. About rabbis like me there was a letter written to the American Jewish periodical, *SHMA*. “God bless our Jewish intellectual liberals (the rabbis among them). God bless them with their Jewish consciences and their Jewish sympathy for the hurt and suffering of all people. God bless them – and keep them far from positions of responsibility. We need their prophetic reminders of who we are and how we should act, but we would have disappeared from the face of the earth if we had let them make the practical decisions of daily existence.”

The purpose of that war, Prime Minister Begin solemnly declared, was “to secure peace in the Galilee and when we reach the forty kilometer limit, the fighting will cease.” It soon became clear as the Israeli army marched closer to Beirut, that this was a lie. It was well known that Israel had been looking for a pretext for a full scale war in Lebanon in order to create a new order in Lebanon and to liquidate once and for all the PLO, thus securing Israel’s northern border and bringing to submission the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza having deprived them of their leadership. “To

crush, to eradicate, to liquidate to fumigate to wipe out” – this was the lexicon of Menachem Begin, and as he said in a letter to President Reagan, “we are marching to Berlin to liquidate Hitler.” The war did succeed in driving Hitler (Arafat) and the PLO from Lebanon, but it was not the PLO that was destroyed, it was the moral stature of the state of Israel . The massive use of military force, the massacres at the refugee camps at Sabra and Shatila as the Israeli troops stood idly by, not only brought untold suffering to the civilian population, it also supplied credibility to the hostile propaganda that presented Israel as an aggressive state bent on expansion and annexation while trampling on the rights of the Palestinian people. But the war was fought, and the dead died. And the defeated Palestinians strengthened their national will by creating a new martyrology, and 300,000 Israelis would rally in protest in the streets of Tel Aviv expressing their shock and shame. Abba Eban, once Israel’s Ambassador to the United States would say, “This war has been a dark age in the moral history of the Jewish people.” The government of Menachem Begin would fall; Begin would disappear from public life. Ariel Sharon was disciplined and prohibited from ever becoming defense minister again. (Obviously that didn’t apply to becoming Prime Minister) Eleven years later in this month of September 1993, the defeated Arafat would be standing on the White House lawn with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and President Clinton.

And, as you remember, out of that 1982 war in Lebanon there arose a small extremist organization called The Party of God, Hizbollah, dedicated to the destruction of Israel .

What does our prayer book say? “The Torah has taught us to put our trust not in force and violence, not in aggression and domination, but in justice and truth, in kindness and compassion.” How naïve. How naïve.

This new ugly thirty-four day war in Lebanon has now been fought. Hizbollah, crossed the Israeli border, captured (or, if you prefer the locution, kidnapped) two Israeli soldiers, killed three others. Israel responded not many days later with a massive attack against the whole of Lebanon . The chief of staff of Israel’s army, Dan Halutz declared that “for every rocket fired by Hizbollah a ten story building will be destroyed. We’ll set the country back 50 years. Everything is a target.” Most Israelis gave their full support for this war. There were some protesters. Even those who had previously been identified with the peace movement in Israel, intellectual leaders among them, fully supported the war, at least in its initial stage.

Hizbollah, according to Israel and confirmed by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, committed war crimes in deliberately targeting civilians with its rockets. But these ruthless acts which brought death and suffering to Israelis in the north, did not go unmatched by the Israeli army. Although there were indeed occasions when Hizbollah was embedded among civilians, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty insisted that Israel committed war crimes in being indifferent to the lives of civilians in towns and villages where there were no Hizbollah fighters nearby, and in dropping hundreds of thousands of cluster bombs in the closing days of the war, many of which lie still unexploded.

This war, as brutal as it was, trumpeted and believed in by so many Israelis and American Jews as being full of high cause, as an existential threat to Israel, was, in my view, but a new chapter for Barbara Tuchman's *March of Folly*, one that could comfortably and logically follow our country's folly, its ill-fated war in Iraq, not so strange since Israel and the United States are linked to each other's sometimes poorly considered militant purposes. Or the war could be seen simply as another bloody chapter in the many tragedies in the Middle East, many of which might have been avoided with creative diplomacy and political vision instead of the insistent assertion of military power. Jacques Derrida, one of the outstanding philosophers of our era, wrote of the "autoimmunity crisis" he found rampant in the United States and other countries of the West, after 9/11, whereby the defensive system devised to keep out infection (the enemy that is) actually invites it and works against itself.

But the real struggle for Israel's survival, as Zeev Maoz has pointed out, is not the one against Israel's many enemies such as those heard spewing forth in the ranting of Hamas, Hassan Nasrallah of Lebanon, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran. The real struggle is one taking place within Israel and within us as American Jews. It is a struggle for the heart and soul, one that has been taking place in Israel from its very beginning, and certainly since 1967 when it conquered all of the territory between the Jordan and sea. So it has become a struggle about the future of Israel as a moral state. But it is also a struggle about our purpose as American Jews, whether we are just to be Jews, to be supporters of Israel, and our fellow Jews, since all Jews are responsible for one another, to be Jews and to continue to be what we have been, a monument to endurance; or whether we are in any way, more importantly, to be Jews, and to become bearers of a great moral aspiration. Yes, to be responsible for our fellow Jews and especially Israel, reveling in its remarkable accomplishments, to be responsible, but not always in the way these members of our Jewish family choose to define themselves, not in ways that bring destruction to others or to themselves.

I shall never forget the words I heard spoken almost thirty years ago by the great Jewish leader Nahum Goldman, when he said at a meeting I attended in Tel Aviv: "This is a critical hour in the history of Israel and the Jewish people. The great problem for Israel is the problem of being powerful. For two thousand years we were powerless as a people, and without power we learned how to be the best visionaries, the best dreamers, the best idealists. Now the powerless have become powerful. We have an army and flags and a state and victories. (He could have gone on to say, and an air force and nuclear weapons and sophisticated technology, the envy of many nations in the world) "And in America, Jews are well organized and wealthy and highly placed in all of the realms of political, cultural and economic life. But we have not yet learned how to use our power in the service of our visions. To place our reliance on power is our greatest weakness. The survival of the Jewish people is more in danger today than ever before."

I think we must be on guard against those in the Jewish community whose definition of policy is the assertion of military power. That leads to a shrill militancy in reckoning with anyone with whom we differ, viewing them as enemies of the good, enemies of Israel, anti-Semites. We had a pathetic example of that here in Los Angeles recently, when a group of our respected Jewish organizations, led by the American Jewish Committee and the JFC engaged in a public campaign of vilification and humiliation of one of the most respected leaders of the Muslim community, Dr. Maher Hathout, my friend of almost twenty years, who had been named to receive an honor from the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission. Why? Because he had been critical of Israel, because he had said some outrageous things about Israel and therefore they insisted, he had been masquerading as a moderate. He had dared to call Israel an apartheid state. Dr. Hathout should have simply read aloud the words of Michael Ben-Yair, Israel's Attorney General from 1993-1996, who wrote: "After the 1967 war we enthusiastically chose to become a colonial society, ignoring international treaties, expropriating lands, transferring settlers from Israel to the Occupied Territories... Passionately desiring to keep these territories, we developed two judicial systems: one – progressive, liberal – in Israel; and the other – cruel, injurious – in the Occupied Territories. In effect, we established an apartheid regime in those territories."

This being a day for acknowledging our sins it is a day to be reminded that there is one sin (as my friend, the late William Sloane Coffin once said) that locks people up in all other sins, and fastens them more tightly than ever in their predicaments. It's the sin of self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is trouble enough in a single human being, but when it afflicts a nation, it spells

enormous danger. Hope for a different kind of world is not to be found in an America or an Israel that will stand tall. No, it is to be found in the capacity to yield a little of our self-righteousness, repenting, just a little, for the cruelties brought to the innocent. Bill Coffin said it so well: "if only we wouldn't go on using the conspicuous wrong-doing of our adversaries as a means of nourishing our own self-righteousness, instead of permitting the wrongs to deepen our awareness that we are all in need of some repentance, some humility."

We need some humility, but we also need a far greater, wider, brighter vision of what it can mean to be a Jew. Israel's first Chief Rabbi, Abraham Isaac Kook, once said that there are many rungs in the ladder of perfection which must be climbed before the height of a truly universal human being is reached. "There are those who sing the song of life and in themselves find everything. There are others who sing the songs of their people. They leave the circle of private existence for they do not find it broad enough...they attach themselves with tender love to the whole of Israel, sing her songs, grieve her afflictions and probe the content of her inner essence. Then there are those whose spirits extends beyond the boundary of Israel to sing the song of humanity and this is the life source from which they draw their thoughts and their yearnings and visions. But there are those who rise even higher, uniting themselves with the whole of existence, with all creatures, all worlds. It is of such that the tradition has said that whosoever sings a portion of this universal song each day is assured a life in the world to come."

This is Yom Kippur, and the spirit of Yom Kippur has no boundaries. It sees repentance as the most creative force in the universe. It comes to tell us that life can be a time that we throw off our helplessness and that we can be the bearers of love and forgiveness, of compassion and hope.

Listen, my friends. One – two – three each physical moment passing, passing, just then, just there. We can't make time stand still. The mind will be paralyzed that tries to make time stand still. But what will sustain us is to uphold an image of hope and beauty. The sun is here. Life and the earth in all their complexity are here. And before us the great mystery before which we all stand equally. I see the people standing in Tyre, Sidon and Beirut; I see them in Kiryat Shemona and Jerusalem; I see them in Ramallah, and in Kalkilya, in Isfahan and Teheran, in Baghdad; I see them in Watts and here in Bel Air, all standing equally before the great mystery, in awe and in ignorance. In this ultimate humility the human spirit can find a home, a place of safety.

Al tira, do not be afraid. *Al tira*, the commandment that appears more frequently in our Bible than any other. *Al tira*, do not be afraid.

One – two – three – each physical moment, just then – just there.

AMEN

Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

“Leaving the Light On”

“What to do with all that silence?” That was the question I remember pondering as I sat for the first time in a Yizkor service like this one. “What does this moment demand of me? What work am I supposed to be doing? How am I to bring the loved ones I am remembering today near?”

I don't think I realized it at the time, but at that first *Yizkor* service, I established a habit – a mode of operating within that silence. I would picture the face of each one. Invariably, they were all wearing my favorite smiles, their eyes set in their softest glances. While looking into their faces, captured in their kindest poses, I could begin to feel the strength of his hand around mine... or the smoothness of her cheek, as it caressed my face. I could smell the perfume that always told me she was entering the room... and feel the impress of his strong arms upon my back as he embraced me, his whiskers brushing against my forehead.

At *Yizkor*, I would share this brief, loving moment with each of them. Each would get his or her own snapshot, upon which I would linger for a few sacred seconds, before surrendering the view to make room for another.

Yizkor after *Yizkor*... until there came a time, when I noticed that these snapshots no longer seemed so satisfying. They were lovely, to be sure – but they were oddly static, unlike the people whom they faintly represented. The visions were comforting, but no more comforting than the old photographs that I pulled out from time to time at my home. They were beautiful and important keepsakes, but they never changed. They lacked the dynamism of what we had shared. No new loving could emerge from them. And when this realization settled in me, I was overcome with a painful gnawing in my stomach – or maybe it was the pit of my soul. The gnawing said: “These stagnant images are more a reminder of their deaths than of their living.”

Still, I think there is no mystery as to why we summon such images when we remember those we loved who are no longer here on this Earth with us. It's only natural to cling to those identifiable markers – the sights and smells of a beloved human being, that unique way that only he or she felt to the touch. We miss being close enough to see and smell and feel those things. We miss being held by them. We ache for the reassurance that their mere presence provided. And we are determined – bound by our love – never to forget what that felt like.

Perhaps the hardest part of mourning is learning to accept that while we can remember those things – while we can savor our recollections of those aspects of presence – they remain the sole elements of our loved ones' essences that we cannot bring back. We may wish, with all of our might and fervor, to experience their physicality again, but with every numbing day that passes without it, we are forced to acknowledge that those precious pieces of our loved ones are forever relegated to the photographs – displayed on our walls, stashed in our albums, and huddled in our minds and hearts. And all photographs fade with time, no matter how much we treasure them.

So what *can* we bring back? What survives the body's death, such that it can continue to enrich our lives dynamically, reminding us that our departed loved ones have not faded into the passive and passing pages of a picture book?

What remains is, arguably, the most important part of our loved ones' lives – and we can still receive it from them, if only we will open ourselves to the possibility and the surprise. Rabbi Irwin Kula, one of American Judaism's most influential voices and the President of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, relates the following story in his brand new book, entitled *Yearnings*. "My dead grandfather once came back to me in a waking dream; I couldn't believe it when I heard his voice, but there it was, clear as a bell. He had always been really tough on me, pushing me to follow a conventional path to success and giving me such a hard time about my long hair. He'd often ask me, 'Who do you think you are, Jesus?' Before he died, I'd become an assistant rabbi at a major congregation, and I'd finally made him happy. But in my vision, or waking dream, he urged me to leave that very job to take a far more risky, unconventional one I'd been contemplating and was very conflicted about... the experience was real, and it comforted me deeply."

We, who mourn, know what the rabbi experienced – and it doesn't matter whether he heard his grandfather's voice or just his grandfather's substance. The guidance he received was real. And it was not guidance frozen in the moment of his grandfather's death. The old man was not stuck in the pose of an old photograph. The rabbi was hearing a new response, to a new life circumstance. All those years of being urged to proceed down one road did not drown out this new message, coming from the same source.

How did the old man, years after dying, come up with a new and different message? He did it because he was a living person, not a rigid refrain – and the rabbi knew and loved and remembered the living person, not the rigid refrain. He knew his grandfather fully, beating heart and loving soul, and so when he found himself standing at yet another fork in his life's road – the kind of fork at which he customarily turned to his grandfather for wisdom or discipline or encouragement, the old man was still there, still capable of responding to the moment. The rabbi knew, deeply within, what his trusted grandfather would say and do for him – so he was still able to say it and do it.

The loved ones we miss at this hour of *Yizkor* reached into our lives in so fundamental a way that their influence endures *and* evolves – not just because we remember what they used to tell us or model for us, but because what they said and modeled has been so firmly implanted within us, it still lives and breathes and grows – like anything well planted.

Will we forever be pained by what we *can't* keep from them? Of course. It's heartbreaking to know, as we do, that some of those precious physical markers – the ones we miss but can't manufacture – will fade from our memory. Some years from now, we'll be unable to remember fully what that touch or embrace felt like – we'll only recall that we loved it and that we miss it. But Yehuda Amichai, the poet laureate of twentieth-century Israel, wrote of this phenomenon that "Forgetting someone is like / forgetting to turn off the light in the back yard / so it stays lit all the next day. But then it's the light / that makes you remember."

When it is darkest, the light is still on – still illuminating the path we walk. We may forget the details in some of those dear old photographs. But we will never forget what is permanent, dynamic, forever alive. When it is darkest, the light is still on. Let us bask in it.

