

Rabbi Kenneth Chasen
"Why Be Jewish?"
Leo Baeck Temple
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Rosh Hashanah 5768

"Hey, Chasen," is how it would begin. There in the halls of Hillcrest Junior High School – I know it was just after the NBC mini-series "The Holocaust" was broadcast.

"Hey, Chasen," he would say.

And I knew what was coming next. I could tell by the look in his eyes. By the way he approached.

"Hey, Chasen, you're Jewish, right?"

"Uh huh," I would nod.

The "you're Jewish" came out gently enough. With a certain shyness. Driven by curiosity, not hatred.

"I've got a question for you," he would say.

"Here it comes..." I would think to myself.

"Shoot," I would respond.

"Well, you're Jewish, right?"

"Yep – still am."

He wouldn't laugh.

"Well, here's what I'm wondering..."

And I'm thinking: "Let the games begin!"

"How come you guys wear those little beanies?"

"How come you light all those candles at the Jewish Christmas?"

"How come you don't eat bacon?"

"Do you have any idea how good bacon is?"

"Is it true that Jews used to have horns?"

"Why did Hitler want to kill the Jews anyway?"

"My dad says Jew lawyers are the best. Is that true?"

Around Easter time, one of the more difficult theological questions would be asked: "How come you guys killed Jesus?"

My Sunday School teacher had not prepared me for that one. Truth is, I wasn't prepared for most of these questions.

I wondered how they all knew. When they asked, "you're Jewish, right?" They already knew. But how? I didn't look different from the other kids, did I? I didn't wear a yarmulke to school. No gefilte fish in my lunch box or anything.

I looked enough like the other kids. Acted like them, too. But somehow they knew. They always knew. And I knew too. I knew I was different. That we were different. It wasn't a hardship. Any anti-Semitism I experienced was rather tame. The questions I got were not motivated by hatred – just curiosity. But I was different. I knew it.

Once upon a time in America, this was the fate of the Jew – to be different. To be "other."

But today, arguably, that time has passed. For the first time in our history, total assimilation is possible. We don't have to be different at all. We don't have to answer those questions anymore, in this era in which every Jew is, essentially, a Jew by choice. Which begs a question of its own: If it's no longer a requirement, an inevitability, why, in the 21st century, at a time when religion and particularism are being questioned as never before, why be Jewish?

Let's face it... in the 21st century, "Why be Jewish?" doesn't elicit the easy answers that might have come from our ancestors, for there exists a rather interesting paradox inside a great many of us in this room. On the one hand, we're all here – our overwhelming, mass loyalty to these holidays suggests that our being Jewish is, in some way, fundamentally very important to us. On the other hand, many in this room would state – if not aloud, then in the quiet honesty of our hearts – that our Judaism is not, in fact, all that important to us. The paradox... We're deeply proud to be Jews, and yet admit to knowing little about what being Jewish really means. We want to guarantee a Jewish tomorrow – and we most surely want our kids and grandkids to be a part of that Jewish tomorrow – and yet if they asked us to tell them why, how many of us would essentially be stumped?

What *do* we say when asked by our children and grandchildren why being Jewish should matter to them? Most typically, the answer has to do with values of ethical humanism. "Judaism is about being good," we might say. "It teaches us that we are one with all of humanity, and it equips us to be decent human beings."

The problem, of course, with this explanation is that one need not be Jewish to be good... which means that being good is not, in and of itself, a means for defining and perpetuating Judaism. That is to say, we would all be delighted if every child in every one of our families grew up to be a good and decent person. But if, when all was said and done, none

of them were Jewish – well, that would gravely disappoint that part of ourselves that brought us all here tonight.

And that begs the question... why *should* it disappoint us? I mean, if all of our kids were good, ethical people, wouldn't that be enough? What would be the great tragedy if Judaism were to disappear from history, leaving behind only a generation of people dedicated to decency?

It's not surprising that we, of all Jews throughout Jewish history, struggle the most with that question. After all, living, as we do, in the splendor and safety of emancipation, we are naturally attracted to those ideas that we see as binding ourselves to all of humankind. We have been embraced by our host culture, and we are inclined to embrace it right back by shedding our divisive particularities and recasting our Judaism as a religion of universal humanism.

It's a tempting proposition – perhaps now more than ever before. After all, religious particularism has taken a rather ugly black eye in recent years. 9/11 hijacker, Mohammed Atta... Yitzhak Rabin's assassin, Yigal Amir... Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad... the Christian fundamentalists who held Terri Schiavo hostage... the wanton murderers of Hizbollah and Hamas... the ultra-Orthodox ideologues determined to settle all of the West Bank... the all-out assault on our country's separation of church and state by the Christian right – there's little wonder that we might hesitate before counting on any specific set of religious answers to the questions that face human beings, humankind and our world.

The question is whether we should be any more trusting of a rationalist, universal ethics that could purportedly connect us all. Our humanist hearts say yes... but our history books say no. Eugene Borowitz, long our Reform movement's greatest theologian, provided us with the sobering reminder when he wrote: "No caring Jew can easily forget that the very people that proclaimed itself the greatest example of universal humanism did its methodical best to destroy us while the liberal democracies found ways not to do what they might have done to mitigate the murder." Indeed, recent history is overloaded with countless human atrocities that cannot be placed at the feet of religion – the gulag, Mao, Cambodia... even the horror of Hiroshima. If we're counting on universal ethics to cleanse the world of its ills, we're going to be in for a long wait.

You see, there is a bit of hubris involved in our asserting that the values dear to us must also be dear to everyone else. Borowitz rightly described the ideas we call "rational" as the product of "conventional languages of a professional guild of male, white, middle-class, European Christian or Christianized university professors." That doesn't mean they're wrong. But they're hardly universal. As 17th century French philosopher Blaise Pascal put it: "There are truths on this side of the Pyrenees which are falsehoods on the other."

More than 300 years later, Pascal's words are, if anything, even truer than they were when he wrote them. In the weeks immediately preceding 9/11, a Harvard professor and former Ambassador to Sudan by the name of Werner Daum wrote the following words about depending upon our universal ethics to create a just and humane world:

"I used to be a convinced human-rights universalist," he wrote. "I believed that international human-rights tribunals should address the worst violations. But the wisdom of such tribunals may resonate only with a Western mind," he cautioned. "In Cambodia, one of the most horrifying genocides of our century occurred. While the international community demands a tribunal, the Cambodian government is dragging along, trying to retard and delay it. But it seems it is not just the government but also the people who oppose the tribunal," writes Daum. "Knowledgeable observers point to the Buddhist teaching that even the death of millions of people does not justify vengeance, which would only increase negative karma. I am not a specialist on Cambodia," concludes Daum, "but it seems that Cambodians wish to forget the millions of people who died because death, for them, means something very different from what it does to us."

So it seems that one person's justice is another's vengeance. We humans can't even agree on the meaning of death... what would make any of us think that we can agree on the meaning of life? Clearly, our trust in a universal ethics that would unite a just and moral world must be questioned.

But even here, in our own country, where everyone knows what we mean when we talk of universally held ethics – those who would entrust humanity's future to those broadly held rational norms do so at their own peril.

Consider this – every day, 16,000 children die of hunger-related causes... that's one child every five seconds. Last year, Americans spent 15 billion dollars on pet food. That's about four billion dollars more than our government spent on all of its hunger and development related foreign aid programs combined. It's also more than we Americans as individuals donated to international development and relief projects.

Now, I want to be clear – I have nothing against pets. I love my dog. *You* would love my dog. And these things aren't mutually exclusive. We can feed both our pets *and* the impoverished children of the world if we wanted to. But the reality is that the average American – perhaps even many of us – spent more money on pet chow this past year than on saving a starving child's life.

My point is that our faith in universal morality alone to create an ethical world is at best, misplaced and, at worst, criminally negligent. To be sure, our universalistic values have merit. They've increased tolerance, helped us to celebrate difference. But universalism, on its own, will not bring about the redemption of the world. And if that's the case, then maybe it *would* be a tragedy – a cataclysmic tragedy for ourselves and our entire world – if Judaism were to disappear. Maybe there's a reason why we *should* get queasy thinking about our children and grandchildren not being Jews. Maybe we and our world are depending upon Judaism for something. What might that something be?

Tonight, I want to propose three answers to the question: "Why be Jewish?" Each answer suggests something that is essential for us as individuals, as members of the Jewish community, and for the broader world. Each answer also explains how Judaism either best or uniquely provides that essential something. It's not an exhaustive list, mind you, but I think these answers are fundamental – and the best place to start.

Why be Jewish? Well, if you care about ethics, perhaps the most compelling reason to be Jewish is this: Judaism provides an outstanding foundation – the rationale – for living an ethical life. Fond of the concept of universal human rights? Judaism first voiced that concept nearly 3000 years ago in the Torah, a document that was so wildly ahead of its time that it remains a worthy and timeless ethical guide, even to this day. With a literary history like that, what better place could there be for us, as Jews, to learn the notion of universal human rights than by embracing our very own tradition?

With an authority and clarity that universal moral philosophy lacks, Judaism declares and demands the dignity of every human-being. It's right there in Genesis, Chapter One. It's how we Jews see the world: "*Vayivra Elohim et-ha'adam b'tzalmo*" – "And God made humanity in God's own image." However you may conceptualize God, Judaism asserts that each one of us – and not only Jews – is created *b'tzelem Elohim*. Each human being is created in that image of God you hold most dear.

In a world where basic human rights, defended on moral grounds, are much too frequently violated, our tradition seeks to change the language of human rights from that of morality to that of sacred obligation. There is the "stuff" of God in every human being, declares Judaism – even in those we might consider lesser than ourselves, if reason were to be the yardstick of human worth. And that means every person is entitled to certain rights. And this truth, fundamental to Judaism from its inception, is something that secular philosophy has failed to deliver. As Borowitz puts it: "Whereas contemporary philosophy can at best only commend universal human dignity, Hebrew Scriptures command it."

This principle is embedded not just in that stunning, revolutionary, foundational text in Genesis, but in dozens of other core texts throughout the Bible and Rabbinic tradition.

Leviticus, the very heart of our Torah, commands: *v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho* – love your neighbor as yourself. Today, it seems commonplace – like some sort of American secular invention. But no one had ever said that until Judaism did. Maimonides explains it as a matter of human rights... more than 800 years ago: To love your neighbor as yourself is... ultimately... to recognize that your neighbor has the same right to happiness and goodness as you do. Maimonides had a 600 year jump on Thomas Jefferson when it came to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." And while a lot of additional influences came along during those 600 years to deliver that worldview to our nation's founders, it's probably not a stretch to conclude that without Judaism getting there 600 years earlier, Jefferson probably doesn't get there at all.

The Talmud underscores this point in its famous teaching about the creation of the first human. It asks why humanity was created from a single, common ancestor? Why didn't God populate the whole earth all at once? The Talmud answers: "For the sake of peace and friendship, so that no one could say, 'my ancestor is better than yours.'"

Now whatever your beliefs are about how this world came into being... or about the authority of the Torah and Talmud in contemporary life... or about God's role in creation, what's important to note is that in Judaism's sacred narrative, in the story we tell that shapes the way we see our world, human rights are more than merely ethical – they're literally

embedded in the design of the world, a design humanity is commanded to respect. That's a vantage point that this world will still need long after you and I have left this planet.

Now, that alone should be enough to sustain our commitment to being Jews. But there's another equally compelling answer to the question, "Why be Jewish?" You see, if you're searching for holiness, for meaning, for hope, for answers to the fundamental question of what on earth it is that we're supposed to be doing in the time allotted us, Judaism is ready to respond... and its answers belong to us.

Judaism teaches us that meaning can be found in this world, in our own lifetimes; in our interactions with strangers and with family; in our mundane business transactions, and in the sacred business we conduct on days like today. Perhaps no insight allows for living a life of meaning more profoundly than this belief: what we do actually matters, and it matters in a cosmic sense.

Judaism emboldens us to believe that God, in a way we cannot fully explain or understand, actually cares about how this peculiar species of ours, living on this pale blue dot in the middle of a rather ordinary little solar system, behaves. And what insight could possibly offer us more hope, could possibly infuse our existence with greater meaning and holiness?

To be a Jew is to have the audacity to believe that at every moment we can partner with God in creating a better, more just, more righteous world. And even if it's not true – that is to say, if this belief that what we do matters is wrong, if at the end of time we were to discover that it was all a cruel joke, that there is no God, and there is no meaning – I would *still* maintain that Judaism had it right... because no matter the reality, it is simply better to believe that there is meaning in the world and that what we do counts. It's better for us as individuals, and globally speaking, any hope for morality in the world would literally fall to pieces without that assumption.

Now, there is a nuance to what Judaism teaches us about meaning that is critical if we are effectively and persuasively to answer the question, "Why be Jewish?" Judaism teaches that an essential part of living a life of meaning is the fulfillment of specific, Jewish acts. These are the acts that teach us how to create a *world* of meaning.

I've experienced this in my own life, and I know that you have, too, or else you wouldn't be here tonight. When you gather in a house of mourning to help a friend form a *minyán*, so he can say *Kaddish* for his father, you've felt it. When you call out the name of a loved one who is in need of healing before offering the *Mi Sheberach*, you've felt it. When you've stood with friends and family in the glow of a *havdalah* candle, acknowledging the sanctity in time, you've felt it. When you gather with your *havurah* to share a meal and to catch up with old friends, you've felt it. At your Passover seder, at a bablynaming, in Torah study class – you've felt it. For goodness sakes, in the smell of a simmering latke, you've felt it.

Why be Jewish? Because for us as Jews, that's how we've done it. That's how we've found our way to living a meaningful life – and to doing far more than should ever have been possible to contribute to meaning in this world. Being Jewish is how we shaped ourselves into the most destruction-defying, world-changing, tiny entity of a people that this planet has ever

known. It has all been tied up with our unique, sometimes strange, sometimes perplexing Jewish ways of being.

That's the vision that animates everything we do here at Leo Baeck Temple. And it's the vision that animates the plans we have for building Leo Baeck Temple... for this extraordinary project that will soon belong to all of us. Why build this temple? Because, quite simply, we – like every generation of Jews before us – need, deserve to have a place where we can seek meaning in this lonely world, and then *give* meaning to this lonely world. Forty-four years have passed since our congregation last created a timely home for the Jewish acts that we need to change us – to create us. Like every generation of Jews before, we have the duty to ensure that our home... which houses our congregation's unique and essential vantage point... will not disappear. A hundred generations have sustained their synagogues because their collective Jewish life depended upon it, and they sensed that our world somehow depended upon their collective Jewish life. It's our turn. Our President, Laurie Sobelman, will tell you more a little bit later about the exciting plans that are underway and what you can do to help.

You see, we need this temple. This is where we learn all those little things that declare together, "Life is meaningful." I cannot argue for it coherently or explain it fully, but I believe in my bones, in my Jewish *kishkes*, that my living a meaningful life – and being a source of meaning for others – is somehow wrapped up in my shaking a *lulav* in the *sukkah* each year... in my hanging a *mezuzah* on my doorpost... in my saying the *Sh'ma* at night with my children... in my placing earth upon the graves at which we stand together. Why be Jewish? Because I want a life of meaning and a world of meaning, and Judaism is how we Jews get there.

There's one last reason I want to share with you tonight. Like some of the other answers, it is not, in and of itself, sufficient. But if Judaism is to continue to play a role in advocating for fundamental human rights, in providing a foundation for human morality, in infusing our lives with meaning, this answer is crucial: Why be Jewish? Because the future of Judaism depends on it.

It's a heavy responsibility. Sometimes difficult to bear. But it's the truth. The future of Judaism depends on you. And it's not just about your children or your grandchildren – though, to be sure, it's about them, too – but it's about you.

Why be Jewish? Because only through your conscious, thoughtful efforts will this tradition of ours continue. And I know that that matters to each and every one of you, or you wouldn't be here tonight. You wouldn't bother. Your being here tonight is necessary for the continuation of Judaism and the Jewish people. But let's be honest – we all know it's not sufficient. One day a year, two days a year won't do it. Kind of caring about being Jewish won't do it. If the continuation of Judaism really matters to us – if we really do want it for our children and our grandchildren – well, then like anything else we really want for them, our behavior and our choices will have to demonstrate it.

The very survival of our people's noble heritage depends upon our being *good Jews*. And by that, what do I mean? Well, in the words of Elie Wiesel, a good Jew is any Jew who is trying to be a better Jew. Not a better person, mind you, though being a good Jew will help you be a better person. But a good Jew is one who strives to be a better Jew.

In this New Year, let us be good Jews by trying to be better Jews. By trying to be more just, more righteous, more loving, more compassionate than we were last year. Let's be good Jews by learning a little more seriously, by giving a little more freely, by connecting a little more deeply with this amazing community of ours.

Let's be good Jews by committing ourselves more fully to those unique Jewish acts that make us into vessels of justice and holiness: observing Jewish time through Shabbat and holidays; celebrating Jewish culture in the way we eat, sing, and dance; cherishing Jewish wisdom in the books we read, the classes we attend, and the languages we speak.

Why be Jewish? Because Jewish wisdom and Jewish community help me to be a better person than I am capable of being on my own.

Why be Jewish? Because being Jewish enriches my life in ways I can't fully explain. And in the most difficult, overwhelming moments of my life, I can be sure that my Judaism and my Jewish community knows what to do, how to help, how to support, what to say, what not to say.

I love being Jewish. You want your rabbi to feel this way. But I am certain that this tradition and this community has so much to offer you, too. And I know that Judaism has something *irreplaceable* to offer the larger world. Good Jews have made this world a better place time and time again. Our history books testify to it. Good Jews bring us all closer to the time of redemption. Will we do our part? Will we sustain the story?

Jewish philosopher Will Herberg wrote in our time about the dangers of "cut-flower ethics" – the too-common attempt to carry forward the ethics of Judaism without the Judaism. "Cut flowers," wrote Herberg, "retain their original beauty and fragrance, but only so long as they retain the vitality that they have drawn from their now-severed roots; after that is exhausted, they wither and die. So with freedom, brotherhood, justice, and personal dignity – the values that form the moral foundation of our civilization. Without the life-giving power of the faith out of which they have sprung, they possess neither meaning nor vitality."

Why be Jewish? Because our gift to ourselves, our descendants and all of humankind must be more than a glorious display of cut flowers. Our gift deserves to last.

These days, I don't often hear, "Hey, Rabbi Chasen, you're Jewish, right?" Nobody seems to ask anymore. But I suspect that some of you hear that question. Maybe at work or in social settings. Maybe your kids hear it from time to time in school. Your answers – what you say... what you do... how you live – will determine whether the flower of Judaism will see any water or sunlight in this generation... or the next. Our souls, our kids, our congregation, our country, our world – they're looking to us for more than a withering bouquet.

The water, the light, the nutrients and perhaps most importantly, the gardeners – everything that's needed for that flower to flourish is in this room. I'll see you in the garden.

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

Leo Baeck Temple
Rosh HaShanah 5768
Rabbi Leah Lewis

Humanizing the Robot in My House

This has been the summer of meltdowns. 116 degrees...that's what the thermometer read in the Valley just a week and a half ago. 8 straight days of triple digit temperatures. Those of us who were in town during that eerie heat wave are still trying to recover. And despite the way it may feel right now, we will recover from it. Unfortunately, not all of this past summer's meltdowns can be remedied by simply turning an air conditioner on or having a cold drink.

It is the news of a different meltdown that has filled the headlines this summer, specifically because it does not appear that it will be remedied anytime soon. This meltdown has attracted much attention in my home – and, no, I am not talking about the meltdowns that actually happen in my home, choreographed by a one year old and his four year old brother!

Meltdowns, they are. Newsworthy, they're not. But with the future of those two young boys always on my mind, I, like many of you, have my eyes fixed on the stock market. And for good reason. This summer has been a wild ride on Wall Street – meltdown after meltdown after meltdown. The primary cause for this financial roller coaster ride, as we've been told, has been the sub-prime mortgage industry.

Here's the good news...in recent years, mortgage companies made owning a home a reality for millions of Americans who, before this time, could not afford to do so. No cash for a down payment? Not a problem. Monthly payments hopelessly out of reach? Not anymore. These loans reduced mortgage payments to all-time-low levels. In record numbers, people began to own homes. It seemed almost too good to be true!

Turns out...it was. So here's the bad news...Late last spring, the interest rates on these variable loans began to skyrocket. The very individuals who were only in the housing market because of sub-prime loans, were the ones who would never be able to afford the new terms. By the time this sub-prime mortgage situation was deemed a 'crisis,' it became clear that for those millions of homeowners, the financial machine that made this so-called American dream appear to come true, was just that – a machine. And much like it happens with the meltdowns in my own home, it did not take long before the debate about who was to blame began.

One side argues that the blame falls upon the people who took the loans. They made financial commitments that they could not fulfill. Others argue that the blame falls upon the sub-prime mortgage industry and on Wall Street as a whole. Financial analyst for the New York Times, Gretchen Morgenson, describes it as “financial engineering.”

According to Morgenson, financial engineering requires a 'dehumanizing' of the people who are borrowing the money. “Wall Street has come up with this wonderful system of packaging mortgages into big, huge pools of thousands of mortgages.” she said, “Slicing them up, cutting them up, and selling them to investors.” In an unprecedented way, the process of coming to own a home has become mechanized. More than ever, it is about buying and selling and measuring profit margins. Less than ever, it is about building lives and creating homes. Less than ever it is about human beings and human connections.

There was another meltdown this summer – one that most of us missed while we were sweating out the high temperatures and the stock market fiasco. It was the meltdown of “Mertz.” Now,

who, you may ask, is Mertz? Are we talking about Fred and Ethel Mertz? Some new crisis on “I Love Lucy?” Or maybe Mertz is a character in the last installment of Harry Potter? No. Mertz is a cutting-edge project of graduate students at MIT. Mertz is what is known as a sociable robot. Like many other robots, it has a metal head on a flexible neck, and it comes loaded with a human-sounding voice, large eyes and eyebrows that appear to respond empathetically to input from people. But unlike your average robot or the computer that we may have in our own homes, Mertz and other sociable robots of this sort, are not programmed with some finite amount of information. Instead, these sociable robots evolve much as humans do – by using their senses to have experiences and their experiences to learn. While humans learn by seeing and touching and smelling, though, these robots “learn” through video cameras and gyroscopes and key words.

Perhaps you learned about this particular robot when it was the cover story of the *New York Times Magazine* back in July. Robin Marantz Henig, the author of the story, encountered Mertz on an off-day - it was on the fritz – having a meltdown. Instead of looking directly at her and initiating conversation as it was commanded to do, Mertz blurted out a stream of disconnected statements: “You are too far away.” “Please teach me some colors.” “You are too far away.” And what Henig saw was evidence that, no matter how evolved and human-like our computer, robotic and technological world becomes, it will continue to fall short in articulating the answers about life’s real, tough, human questions – questions about what it will take for each one of us, during this new year, to come closer to others. Put simply, what distinguishes us from the most advanced robots is that we have the capacity to connect. Regardless of how evolved Mertz and its so-called ‘peers’ become, it is they who will always be “too far away.”

If we want to be closer, the logical place to start is at home. *Bayit*. In Hebrew, it is just one small word. One of the things that I love about the Hebrew language is that there are no such things as simple words. A word not only describes an object or action, but an entire values system. *Bayit* is a prime example of this. Most commonly translated, it is a house, made of bricks and mortar. It is a *beit Tefillah*, a house of prayer or a *beit Midrash*, a house of study. But in Hebrew, *Bayit* is not only a house, a physical object. It is also a home – filled, we hope, with feelings of comfort, safety and love – a place where what we value most is lived. And in this day and age, when the money-lending crisis has created such anxiety about the financial realities of home ownership, perhaps we should be equally concerned about what it will take, beyond money, for us truly to “own” our homes – not just because we’re current on our mortgage, but because we’re current on the human capital that exists between us.

We began our service this morning much like we do any morning service -- with the words of the Midianite prophet Balaam, who was called upon by Balak, the Midianite king, to curse the Israelites. When Balaam came upon the Israelites, camped in the wilderness along their path to the Promised Land, he was unable to curse them because what he saw was good. According to Rashi, the great Medieval commentator, the good that Balaam saw was the fact that the Israelites’ tents were grouped together in community, yet their tent flaps faced away from one another. All along their path, our ancestors built a closely connected community that always allowed for each individual family to maintain a semblance of intimacy. “*Mah tovu ohalecha Ya’akov, mishkenotecha Yisrael*,” Balaam declared. “How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel.” Balaam saw a community of Israelites who had created for themselves a *bayit* – a safe space, a peaceful place, that allowed each individual within it to be

at 'home.' For them, it did not matter that these tents lacked the permanency of bricks and mortar. The connections that they made, both within the larger community and within their own families, became the foundation for creating and maintaining a sense of *bayit*. Balaam knew that what he saw was, indeed, worthy of blessing.

It turns out that our ancient sages found Balaam's blessing to be so important that they inserted it into the liturgy of the morning service. Each new day, this Midianite prophet reminds us to step back and look at our homes, and to ask ourselves whether or not they are, actually, places of peace for each person who lives within them.

It is during these High Holy Days that Judaism obligates us to do something about it. Today, we enter the 10-day period between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. During these *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Repentance, Judaism obligates us to reach out to those who are closest to us, whether they literally live under our roofs or not, and to take the risk of exposing ourselves, our flaws and our mistakes, for the sake of connecting. It is when we draw close and work to mend broken relationships that we create homes that are *shalem* – peaceful, whole.

Shalom Bayit, this core Jewish value, prioritizes creating and maintaining peace in the home. Although it is never named in the Torah, it is clearly one of our most fundamental precepts right from the very beginning of our biblical tradition. It goes straight back to Adam and Eve, whose very existence, we are taught, was for the express purpose of creating a home together. And it was clear that there would be no home – no Garden of Eden - unless there was intimacy. Yes, they needed physical intimacy. But it was the intimacy of the heart and soul that allowed them to transform their garden into a *bayit*.

The word – intimacy – it comes from the Latin, *intima*, meaning “inner” or “innermost.” This suggests that intimacy is ultimately created when we expose ourselves – deeply, to our innermost core – in order to bare the truest pieces of ourselves to our loved ones. Taking that risk – finding that vulnerability, mutually embraced – is what makes our most important relationships healthy and safe. It’s what makes a house into a home of shalom.

But as we all know, pursuing intimacy and creating a sense of *shalom bayit* is easier said than done. The challenges that we face are nothing new. In fact, the family dramas of our biblical ancestors make our own struggles look quite tame. The Book of Genesis is filled with examples of dysfunctional families, silenced by the task of turning their tents into homes. We need look no further than the horrifying story that we read just a few moments ago. Given the circumstances – the wood, the altar, the knife – we can understand how pursuing intimacy might have been a tall order. How could Isaac have even hoped to open himself to trusting his father? What might have been necessary to awaken Abraham to who his son was and what his needs were? How much courage would it have taken for Abraham to share his angst with Sarah, rather than leaving her in the dark? Amid all of that tension – that absence of peace – they walked for three days – three silent days – without even a single moment of honesty or intimacy. Not exactly a home that Balaam would have blessed.

I can’t help but wonder how we would read the story if it had been written to teach us by *positive* example, instead of *negative*. Imagine if someone – Abraham, the dad... Isaac, the son... Sarah, the silent mom – imagine if someone, anyone, had mustered the courage to

expose themselves, as human beings, and speak a little truth about what was unfolding between them. What a different story – what a different legacy that would be.

In my role as a rabbi, I am often asked questions to which I do not know the answers.

Thankfully, if five years in rabbinical school taught me anything, it was how to look things up!

But I have learned that no matter how much I search, there is no page of Talmud or encyclopedia article that provides answers to the toughest human questions about how we can draw close and honestly “own” our homes.

Recently, I had a conversation with a father concerning his teenage son. “He seems so angry. I have always done whatever I could to take care of him, to get him what he needed. I only want what’s best for him.” It turns out that, for years, his son has had a different idea of what he wants, of what he needs and of what is best for him, and he feels like his parents are just not interested. Now, it is he who is not interested in much that his parents have to say. “I want to talk to him,” the father tells me, sadly, “But I am afraid. I am afraid to talk to my own son.”

Take away the wood, the altar and the knife, and it’s not too hard to feel ourselves taking that silent three-day walk to Mount Moriah.

At one point in our lives, each of us has been a child. And whether we can relate to the experience of this teenage boy or not, I doubt that the challenges that come with trying to do right by our parents are foreign to any of us. The Book of Exodus teaches, “Honor your father and mother” (20:12). Leviticus instructs, “Each person shall revere his parents” (19:3). In looking at these two verses, the ancient rabbis of the Talmud taught that whereas honoring parents has to do with providing them with physical and material needs, revering them has to do with caring for them emotionally – maintaining a sensitivity to their place, and to ours.

And, so, when a congregant in her fifties comes to tell me that she is tormented because every day, the task of caring for her aging parents both physically and emotionally is taking its toll on her, there are no simple answers. She is being pulled from both ends, busy caring for her children and her parents at the same time. Resentment is slowly replacing reverence, and she feels terribly about it. If only she could find the courage to choose intimacy... to tell her parents how she felt... there would be a chance for their house to become home once again.

In the big picture, the fractures often start small. Off-handed comments not considered, phone calls not returned, forgetting a date that was important to a loved one. Despite their seeming insignificance at the time, we know that without the proper care, these small breaks never seem to heal. Unattended over time, they worsen and create obstacles to real, human connection. They can, and too often do, lead to abuse, either of the physical or the emotional kind. Sadly, this cycle of wearing down the foundations of relationships over time occurs most with the people who mean the very most to us – the people who share our homes.

I will admit that I often struggle to act in accordance with my values. My guess is that I am in good company. When I come home after a long day, my mind is frequently filled with temple matters and toddler meltdowns. And without a moment's thought, I find myself shutting down at the very moment when there is an opportunity to connect standing right next to me. When I stop to think about it, I know that closing myself off from my loved ones only puts stress on my own intimate relationships. I know that I have a partner with whom I have chosen to share my life. But when I get busy with the tasks of living that life, it is he who suffers the most. If only I could remain mindful, even when on 'autopilot,' I could build my home. We all could.

Isolated parents who cannot reach their children. Alienated adult children who are overtaxed and worn down. Disconnected life partners. We spend our days answering the ever-increasing demands of jobs, errands, relationships with peers, financial planning, traffic jams...there is so much outside of our homes that fills our days. Too often, it feels as if we have nothing left for the very people who are part of our *bayit*. And so we distance ourselves. It seems easier, more economical. But the cost is actually quite high. We stand to lose our homes – at the very least, we stand to lose what matters most in them – if the emotional mortgage comes due, and we're unable or unwilling to pay.

Shalom, peace, wholeness. It is a lofty goal that may seem out of reach. But when forgiveness is possible, and we seek it from those in our homes whom we have hurt...or when we forgive those who have made us less than whole, we distinguish ourselves from machines. We become *b'nei adam* – human beings who, like the original Adam, give, risk, work to bring intimacy in our relationships.

"Bakesh shalom v'rodfehu," the psalmist says, "Seek peace and pursue it." The great 20th century Jewish thinker, Martin Buber, was one in a long line of commentators who questioned why the text would bother to use both verbs with regard to the notion of peace – 'seek it' and 'pursue it.' His explanation gives an order to the process of building peace. "Once a man has made peace within himself," Buber said, "He will be able to make peace in the whole world."

It makes a whole lot of sense. But when Buber interpreted the psalm, he must not have had this season in mind. We need to seek wholeness in ourselves, yes. But before we can hope to

make the whole world whole, each one of us needs to make our own, personal mortgage payments. This morning, our task is to take an accounting of our souls – to look deeply within to see the hard, often scary, and always personal work that needs to be done so that we can draw close to our loved ones. This afternoon...and this evening...and throughout these High Holy Days...our task is to do just that. Now is the time for each of us to be bold enough to seek out our loved ones and pursue intimacy in our homes.

No matter how much it evolves, Mertz will never know the trepidation that comes with reaching out to loved ones who have, for one reason or another, become distant. Mertz will also never know the joy of being truly intimate with those we care about.

In the wake of this summer's sub-prime mortgage meltdown, millions of people are left struggling to find a house to call their own. But many millions more – us, among them – are struggling to find a *bayit* – a home – to call their own. Shouldn't that struggle be every bit as urgent to us?

We may be fortunate enough to have a roof over our heads. But we still face the risk of 'homelessness' – living without a solid foundation of *shalom bayit*.

As we enter this new year, 5768, may we each find the strength to discover that peace within... and the courage to extend it to those who await our love. *Mah tovu ohalekha Ya'akov*, how good our homes can be.

Cain y'hi ratzon, may it be God's will.

Rabbi Kenneth Chasen
"The Window Which Is Not Black"
Leo Baeck Temple
September 21, 2007
Yom Kippur 5768

You might say that this sermon actually began a little more than three and a half years ago. You have my promise that it will not end three and a half years from now.

It was February 2004, about seven months into my first year here at Leo Baeck Temple, and the world's Jews were filled with anxiety over the release of Mel Gibson's controversial and grotesquely violent film, *The Passion of the Christ*. It was the kind of moment when Jews look to their synagogues – to their rabbi – for guidance. I remembered having experienced a few such overwhelming moments when I was working in New York, and being grateful that our Senior Rabbi had provided us with the necessary direction in those moments. And while I was struggling with the multitude of questions raised by Gibson's film, looking for answers, I remember a realization that hit me with total clarity and full force: "Oh wait... I *am* the Senior Rabbi."

It was time to offer direction. So I went to see the film, spoke about it to the largest Shabbat evening crowd I saw during my first year at the temple, and enjoyed my first collaboration with my dear friend, Rev. Ed Bacon of All Saints Church in Pasadena, as together, we moderated a panel of Jewish and Christian experts who responded to the film at a shared event for our two congregations. My own words, at that time, about Gibson and his film included the following: "I can't say whether Mel Gibson is anti-Semitic or not. That is, I can't know if his intent – or the intent of his film – is to generate hatred of Jews or not."

This was my effort to embrace the Jewish value of *dan l'kaf z'chut* – give the benefit of the doubt. But, as you can imagine, I was left feeling pretty foolish when just a little more than a year ago, Gibson was pulled over for a DUI, and instead of asking the officer how fast he was going or commenting on his driver's license or registration, the first thing that Mel thought to say was: "The Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world. Are you a Jew?"

You may recall that Gibson asked for our forgiveness – yours and mine – after this incident. This is what he said: "I acted like a person completely out of control when I was arrested, and said things that I do not believe to be true and which are despicable. I am deeply ashamed of everything I said. I want to apologize specifically to everyone in the Jewish community for the vitriolic and harmful words that I said to a law enforcement officer the night I was arrested on a DUI charge. I'm not just asking for forgiveness," Gibson continued. "I would like to take it one step further, and meet with leaders in the Jewish community, with whom I can have a one on one discussion to discern the appropriate path for healing. There is no excuse, nor should there be any tolerance for anyone who thinks or expresses any kind of anti-semitic remark. Hatred of any kind goes against my faith. I am reaching out to the Jewish community for its help," Gibson concluded. "I know there will be many in that community who will want nothing to do with me, and that would be understandable. But I pray that that door is not forever closed."

Well... I don't know about you, but I remember hearing Gibson's words and thinking, "You know, this is a pretty big leap that this guy wants me to make. With everything I know, with everything I've seen – to buy these words... to buy that he doesn't believe what he told that cop?" Indeed, I could be counted among the many in the Jewish community who wanted nothing to do with him. And then I saw that Abe Foxman, the head of the Anti-Defamation League, was ready to comment on Gibson's statement of contrition, and I got myself ready to watch Mel take a stiff shot to the jaw. And then came Foxman's words: "This is the apology we had sought and requested. We are glad that Mel Gibson has finally owned up to the fact that he made anti-Semitic remarks, and his apology sounds sincere. We welcome his efforts to repair the damage he has caused, to reach out to the Jewish community, and to seek help. Once he completes his rehabilitation for alcohol abuse, we will be ready and willing to help him with his second rehabilitation to combat this disease of prejudice. You can't just say I'm no longer a drunk; you can't just say I'm no longer a bigot. You need to work hard at it, and we're ready to help him."

At first, I was shocked. Of all people, the head of the ADL – ready to forgive Mel Gibson, who had arguably done more than anyone in our time to portray Jews as worthy of hatred? If *he* could forgive him, why couldn't I?

Perhaps because forgiveness is not something that comes easily for us. We know we're supposed to... but actually doing it – fully and unequivocally – is awfully hard. These holidays are all about *teshuvah* – about returning to the right path in our lives. The tradition is crystal clear about how we're expected to do that. We're to seek out those we've wronged, ask for their pardon, and resolve not to repeat the misdeed. The only element in the equation that we don't control is whether our request for forgiveness will be accepted... and it is that very acceptance which, so often, is the difference-maker in our attempts to change ourselves. That's why our ancient rabbis affirmed that once a person has approached you earnestly three times to beg your forgiveness for a particular failure – and you have refused to respond with your pardon – the weight of the sin in question, at that point, shifts to you.

You see, no matter how much we crave acceptance for our own apologies, we are frequently not the most forgiving of creatures. Our own Torah foreshadows it. After all, as I emphasized on Rosh Hashanah evening, our Torah teaches that we humans are created in God's image – and that image is wildly unpredictable when it comes to the virtue of forgiveness. The God of our Hebrew Bible is a lot like us. Sometimes, God is astonishingly patient and willing to forgive – a model for generosity of spirit. Example: God carves our people's laws onto stone tablets, and Moses, in a temper tantrum, smashes them to bits. One would think there's no saying sorry for something like that. I mean, as a kid, if I lost my cool, and I broke a vase or a lamp – that was scary. I knew I was in for it. Moses broke sacred tablets carved by God! He had to know that he was *divinely* in for it. He must have been scared. But God not only refrains from punishing Moses in any way... God does so without any evidence of an apology from Moses whatsoever. Those broken tablets are so holy that they're ultimately placed into the ark right along with their replacements – even broken, they are sacrosanct. And yet, Moses gets a free pass after destroying them.

Of course, there are other times... when the God of our Bible is hopelessly vengeful. No apology will do. When Moses strikes that rock to bring forth water, instead of commanding it to do so, he suddenly –and without warning – is barred from entering the Promised Land.

There is no court of appeals. He's out. He didn't break the rock. He just hit it instead of talking to it. It would seem to be a fairly minor offense – certainly, a much lesser tantrum than the one that led to the first Tablets of the Law being turned to rubble. And yet forgiveness this time is out of the question. The rabbis of the midrash say that Moses desperately sought a pardon for this offense. He would have done anything to receive a second chance. But none was to be had.

Same God. Same Moses. The inconsistency is troubling – but no more troubling than the grand inconsistency that is the human condition. Created in the image of God, we are sometimes soft, sometimes hard – and sometimes, there is no rational explanation for our movement between the two. To be sure, there are those sins which are so heinous, so truly evil, that the only just thing to do is to withhold forgiveness – forgiving them would, in essence, provide sanction for their repetition, and possibly even their magnification. But these are the exceptions, not the rule. In the overwhelming majority of instances in which our forgiveness is sought, it can ethically be offered. The task, of course, is to work as hard as we can, especially on days like this one, to draw closer to our softer, kinder selves – the part of us that is as ready to grant pardon as it is ready to request it.

It all sounds very simple. But in practice, it's harder than we might care to admit – and it may be harder today than ever before. After all, we've become increasingly conditioned to look with cynicism upon the motives of those seeking our forgiveness in this, the era of the "overly-lawyered apology" – that odd concoction of words that speaks strangely of remorse and responsibility and then studiously admits to nothing. We're treated to them all the time. Just this past week, Bill Belichick, head coach of the National Football League's New England Patriots, received the stiffest penalty in league history for cheating – he'd been caught red-handed videotaping the defensive signals of his opponent. His contrition was expressed in a carefully crafted written statement that he never bothered even to read – he simply released it to the media. Forget about love – apparently, it's cheating that means never having to actually say you're sorry. Belichick's statement included the requisite acceptance of the penalty for his misdeed, and then veered into the bizarre, as he attributed his actions to a misinterpretation of the league rule which explicitly bans videotaping another team's signals from the sidelines... which is, to the letter, exactly what Belichick dispatched one of his assistants to do.

Some apology. But Belichick's charade doesn't even qualify for my personal top ten. We each have our favorites. For my money, there may never be an apology that surpasses the one which ran in the July 4, 2004 edition of the Herald-Ledger of Lexington, Kentucky. It read: "It has come to the editor's attention that the Herald-Ledger neglected to cover the civil-rights movement. We regret the omission." It seems that the paper had previously adhered to a forty-year policy of relegating all news of sit-ins, marches and similar unwelcome disruptions to the desire to be prejudiced in peace to a small section buried deep in the paper, entitled, "Colored Notes." Oops. Perhaps this Kentucky-style apology accounts for the elevation of another one up my personal list. Maybe you caught it, about four years ago, when Assistant U.S. Attorney Kenneth Taylor referred to potential jurors residing in the eastern Kentucky mountains as "illiterate cave-dwellers." His statement of contrition? "The comment was not meant to be a regional slur," he declared. "To the extent that it was misinterpreted to be one, I apologize." I'm sure the misinterpreting, illiterate cave-dwellers were relieved to hear that the attorney's slur was not, in fact, regional. It was only personal. Thank you.

Look, we humans are really no better at apologizing than we are at forgiving. All the more reason why we simply have to avoid letting the failure at one cause failure at the other. Sometimes – maybe a lot of the time – we’re going to be denied the satisfying apology to which we are entitled... and even then, it’s still in our best interests to find a way truly to move on, just as God did when an unapologetic Moses broke those tablets. There are so many good reasons to do it. We should do it because our tradition establishes forgiveness as a sacred value. We should do it because forgiving plants the seedlings for a more peaceful world. We should do it because it’s in our own best interests to forgive. Countless studies over the past ten years suggest a long list of health benefits to relinquishing the toxic grudges that we carry around with us. Forgiving seems to lower our blood pressure, lower our heart rates, decrease muscle tension, improve kidney function – put it all together, and it seems that forgiving actually helps us to live longer. As psychologist Brenda Goodman puts it, “If physical exercise had a mental equivalent, it would probably be the process of forgiveness.” And the benefits transcend the physical – forgiving people have been shown to be more empathetic and warm, more skillful at maintaining satisfying relationships, and less lonely. They even succeed more at business – forgiveness seems to be associated with collective outcomes such as higher morale, greater job satisfaction and increased trust in the workplace.

We’ve got every good reason to be more forgiving. So how do we do it? Well, for these twenty-four hours that we’re spending here together, there is a familiar refrain that we share. We sing it in Hebrew and say it in English, over and over again. “*V’al kulam, Eloah selichot, s’lach lanu, m’chal lanu, kaper lanu*” – “For all these sins, O God of forgiveness, bear with us, pardon us, forgive us.” You could say it with me without even opening your prayer book. We’ve memorized that plea... but have we truly made it our own? Have we thought about what we’re asking God here, and whether we’re ready to ask it of ourselves, too?

Well, whatever we’re asking, it seems like we’re asking it three times in a row. The prayer does seem redundant, doesn’t it? Why the list of synonyms for forgiveness? Our sages are quick to point out that the three words are not, in fact, synonyms. They represent three different levels in the whole that comprises Jewish forgiveness. So it would serve us well to become better acquainted with each one.

S’lach lanu – literally, it means forgive us. This is seen by Judaism’s greatest teachers as the foundational level of forgiveness in our tradition. The great twentieth century scholar, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik spoke of *selichah*, forgiveness, as the “process which cleanses and sanctifies the... personality.” And with a scholar the likes of Soloveitchik, it’s no surprise that his interpretation holds up etymologically. You see, the word *selichah* is derived from an ancient Akkadian word, *salachu*, which means “to sprinkle water.” So we’re talking here about a simple act of purification – an acknowledgment of some sort... not a profound resolution, but a demonstration of openness from one to another that enables healing to begin.

It’s the willingness simply to speak to an estranged family member after years of silence over a falling out. It’s the conscious effort to cease reminding someone of the time when he or she hurt you most deeply. It’s the offering of an intentional, knowing smile... the sign that it’s okay to resume contact on some meaningful, human level.

Even though *selichah* may be the most fundamental level of forgiving, it is, in some ways, the hardest to achieve, for it represents that uncertain first step in repairing a genuine

breach between two people. It requires the forgiver to be courageous – to break the dam of hard feelings, when it’s much easier and arguably safer just to leave it alone. It demands a leap of faith – that a generous, hopeful act on my part might lead to a healing act of contrition from you.

Tonight is a night for thinking of those awaiting your *selichah* – your forgiveness. Is there someone on whom you’re ready to take one more chance? Someone who will probably never set things right between you unless you move the bar a little lower... unless you send the message that it’s safe to try? Is there somebody who, if you’re fully honest with yourself, has suffered your anger or indifference or grudge for longer than is truly justified? Might this be the moment of turning?

M’chal lanu – pardon us. This is actually a juridical concept in Judaism... an interpersonal mechanism that is drawn from civil law. *Mechilah*, or a pardon, is a release from further responsibility that can be given by a creditor to his debtor, for whatever reason he may choose. Like a pardon that might be granted to a convicted criminal by the President of the United States, a Jewish pardon is a statement that no further reparation must be made in response to the crime that was committed. In interpersonal terms, *mechilah* takes place whenever an offended party makes it clear that “the person who hurt me no longer owes me anything for what happened between us.”

It’s the word of reassurance to a friend who self-punitively continues to go overboard in trying to make amends. It’s the nod of acceptance from a grown child to his or her mother, indicating that she will no longer be blamed for every failure or weakness that was learned or observed during the growing-up years. It’s the statement made between adult siblings: “Who you were when we were kids is not who I will assume you to be today.”

Mechilah poses a great challenge to us. It calls upon us to surrender our marker... to affirm that the statute of limitations has run out on our right to be compensated for the wound that another person has caused us. It forces us to relinquish a claim that has long been an important part of our identity... that has been our strength, our emotional armor, in facing the vulnerabilities we feel before a person who has injured us.

Tonight is a night for thinking of those awaiting your *mechilah* – your pardon. Is there someone in your life who really deserves to be let off the hook by now? Someone whose apology can be found in the innocent passage of time since the breach occurred between you? Is there a person – perhaps dead, perhaps alive – who has waited long enough for you to signal that the emotional debt is paid in full...or that you are ready to write off that part of the debt that remains – that you’re okay with bearing some measure of it? Might this be the moment of turning?

Kaper lanu – grant us atonement. *Kaper... kapparah* – the Hebrew word bears the same root as *kippur*, as in this *Yom Kippur*, this Day of Atonement. The word is borrowed from Jewish property law, and it means “acquittal” – acquittal from sins – and it carries the same associations that we usually attach to acquittals... freedom, liberation, the unfettered contentment that comes with knowing that something painful or daunting or frightening is truly and completely over. It can never come back to haunt you. This is more than just a pardon, which releases a guilty person from any further obligation to answer. *Kapparah*

suggests that the grounds for having had to answer in the first place are now gone. They may not be forgotten, but they are genuinely forgiven, and the matter is forever closed.

It is much harder to describe what *kapparah* looks or feels like, as compared to *selichah* and *mechilah*, since *kapparah* is a transformative experience in which the reality between the two parties is reshaped. That is to say, we're not just talking about a claim being completed or satisfied... here, the claim itself is withdrawn. The cause for its existence disappears. You see, *kapparah* comes from an Arabic root, meaning "to cover over" – the offense is now permanently covered over, obscured. Where *mechilah* is like a prisoner being either paroled or released from jail because his sentence has expired, *kapparah* is like a prisoner going free because he has been exonerated of all charges. In a court of law, we know what that looks like. But in our personal worlds of repentance and forgiveness, something unplanned and unmanipulated must occur for *kapparah* to happen. Something indescribable. Something holy.

It is *kapparah* for which we all long. We may not even realize it on a conscious level, but that's what brings us to temple on these High Holydays. It's this notion that we can somehow be relieved of these onerous weights that we carry – the dream that we can wipe the slate of our guilt so clean that its former markings on our souls will be undetectable.

So tonight is a night for thinking: Might there be one person in my life with whom *kapparah* – true acquittal – could be possible? Is there someone that I love so much – someone whose place in my heart is so invulnerable – that, together, we can take all the risks and speak all the truths that will clear the ledger and open us to a healing holiness that defies reason? Might this be the moment of turning?

I cannot say for sure. None of us can. But neither can I suggest any more worthy pursuit to which we could devote the minutes and hours of our lives.

The Israeli poet, Chaim Guri, gave voice to the wonder, and the mystery, and the blessed optimism of that pursuit – to the prospect of what forgiving can do for us – when he wrote:

For this is not the road against which stand enemy lines, or foreign languages
Or muteness....
I walk and...
I come at last to the house. I stop. I knock at the door.

All men who forgive say. What has been has been. I repeat.
All women who forgive stand on the porches sooner or later.

There is a window which is not black. There is a letter which is
not lost on the way.
And if it did not arrive yesterday it will certainly arrive tomorrow.

May we be brave and dedicated and open-spirited enough to walk to that house of forgiveness... to peer through that window which is not black, and to await that letter which is not lost on the way. For if our efforts are bold and sincere, that letter... it will certainly arrive tomorrow.

Yom Kippur Morning, September 22, 2007, 5768

Rabbi Leonard I. Beerman

There are many ways to begin a sermon for Yom Kippur and I no longer remember how many of them I have used in the 63 years I have been trying to do it since my student days. I do know that sometimes, and with some hesitancy, edging my way into the occasion, I made use of a poem as an epigraph. Today, thinking of age and time, as someone my age must do, I could bring you the words of the Polish Nobel Laureate, Czeslaw Milosz, "I see in evening air/ How slowly dark comes down on what we do." Or his summing up of what it means to be truly human, "Not that I want to be a god or a hero,/ Just to change into a tree,/ grow for ages/ not hurt anyone."

Or another way would be in tribute to my friend, Anthony Day. Tony Day, the brilliant editor of the editorial pages of the LA Times, in its glory years, died two weeks ago. On June 7 of 1970 his then striking editorial appeared under the headline "Get Out of Vietnam NOW." "The time has come," he wrote, "for the United States to leave Vietnam, to leave it swiftly, wholly, and without equivocation."

The analogy is too obvious: This is Yom Kippur, the day of repentance. No time could be more appropriate to seek repentance for the human agony we have helped to bring to Iraq. The time has come to leave it swiftly, to leave it, without equivocation, NOW.

Or, I am certain you all read the news last month of the death of the distinguished writer and poet, Grace Paley. She once told the story that when her father was old and ill, his heart very weak, sitting on one pillow and leaning on three, he offered her some last minute advice and made a request. "I'd like you to write a simple story...the kind Maupassant wrote or Chekhov, Just recognizable people, and then write down what happened to them next."

"Why not," she said. "I want to please him. I would like to write such a story, if he means the kind that begins: 'There was a woman,' followed by plot, the absolute line between two points which I've always despised. Not for literary reasons, but because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life."

I have a feeling that my father and mother, *zichronam livrachah*, although they never uttered it, would have wanted something similar from me on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur when they once sat here in this sanctuary. A simple sermon, the absolute line between two points, something recognizable. Something you could describe in a single sentence when it was over, if someone asked you what the rabbi had said.

Of course, every rabbi knows: These holy days are a sacred time of enormous power, and need no rabbi to give them force or significance. So what this moment may need from me, at most, is indeed something very simple and direct. Nothing struggling to be profound, nothing reverberating with high cause or theological niceties or literary allusions. And surely nothing tormented with Judaism as it applies to war and peace and poverty, tormented with Israel and the Palestinians, tormented with questions about the justice and the agony of the mothers and fathers whose children were killed by terrorists and anti-terrorists, the horror, the horror of it, and the moral responsibility of Jews who attend a synagogue in the well-guarded

comfort of Bel Air. No, none of that raucous stuff. No, something more religious, something more spiritual, something, even, some of you might be thinking, something more Jewish.

I remember years ago at the conclusion of a children's service on the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah at which I had spoken. One of the parents came up to me, full of appreciation, in a voice gently pleading: "Why don't you speak like that to us, to the adults in the congregation?" And here (I found this in an old sermon) is what I had just said to the children:

On Rosh Hashanah we wonder about ourselves. About things that happen, deep inside of us. Sometimes we are kind. Sometimes we are mean. Sometimes we love. Sometimes we hate. Sometimes we're happy and then we're sad. What makes us like that?"

There is a story about a man named Zusya that might help us. Zusya was a good man. Zusya tried to be helpful wherever and whenever he could. But as much as he tried, when he looked inside himself, he saw he had not done enough. There was always more to do.

One day Zusya prayed to God, and said: "Oh God, if you would make me an angel in heaven, then from morning to night I would do only good things." God heard his prayer and made him an angel in heaven. And not long afterwards, Zusya came running to God, with sadness in his voice saying: "Oh God, I don't want to be an angel." "Why not?" asked God. "Aren't you happy doing good things that only angels do?" "No, Zusya," answered. "Angels are only good. They never forget, they never make mistakes. They are always the same. They never change. I'd rather be Zusya again, as I used to be-- Sometimes happy, sometimes sad, sometimes helpful, sometimes hurtful, but always trying to be someone better."

And God was happy with what Zusya had said, and made him Zusya again.

Something of that sort would do, would it not? On Yom Kippur we do wonder about ourselves, about the things that happen deep inside of us, about the crazy contradictory lives we lead. Our lives are so full of conditions, demands, requirements, obligations, that we often wonder what is expected of us. What does it all mean? If only we could reach into ourselves and discover there our own freedom, "For a woman or a man who is free within creates a space where others feel safe and want to dwell," as Henri Nouwen once said. And when we meet a free person there are no expectations, only an invitation to reach into ourselves and discover there our own freedom. Can I be that person? And is that where God is, where true inner freedom is?

If only I could go on from there for a brief while, and bring to a close the simple sermon, the almost absolute line between two points. Is that what this Day of Atonement asks of me? I feel that it wants something more. Something much more.....

So I must go back and consider what lies at the heart of Yom Kippur. It is the conviction of our Jewish tradition that there is a kind of warfare taking place in the soul of every human being. Two contradictory impulses, the good and the evil inclination can be found in every one of us. According to this old notion, the evil inclination, the *yetzer hara*, is dormant for the first nine years of life, but in the tenth year it becomes a visitor, then a permanent resident when it turns our hearts into an arena where good and evil are forever at

war. They *yetzer* can never be destroyed. It flattens itself out in the shadows and at the first sign of inattention it lifts itself up and moves out into the broad daylight.

With incredible adroitness of thought, the ancient rabbis, 1800 years ago, wrestling I assume with themselves and their own passions, came to the conclusion that the evil inclination was also the source of ambition, competition, generation, creativity. It was a power transformable. It could be stalked, cornered, corrected; love and good deeds could control it. It could even be sublimated in study. But without love and good deeds the *yetzer* could become master over us. It could burst forth with all of its surging, destructive power.

Those ancient teachers knew what we know, that there is in all of life, the power to negate life. There is always the impulse to dominate, to build our own security on power over others. This can occur within individuals and it can occur within nations. And history records those eruptions of the barbarism of war where the use of power became justified in the name of the common good, national honor, Aryan purity, the justice of God, freedom, democracy, the possession of weapons of mass destruction, or protecting the world from the spread of this or that.

Tragically, we have come to see that in our own country. American policy is powered by the fantasy of manifest destiny and the unrelenting need to demonstrate our power; and combined with this the insistence on seeing our enemies as totally evil, depriving them of all human attributes. Nothing so clearly demonstrates this as the ongoing horror of the war in Iraq.

Look my friends: Most of us are good people and we live honorable lives, and everywhere bringing a full measure of compassion, and surely adding something significant to the store of human decency. We are indeed a cause for celebration. Yet many of us have managed to live with the unpleasantness of this war, and go on with our lives as though nothing significant has occurred about us. On the other hand, those of us who are utterly appalled by the war, many of us before it even began, find that it relentlessly invades our lives and our imaginations. We retch at the thought of its blood and its pus and its gaping wounds, We mourn over the almost 4000 young dead American soldiers, and grieve at the unremarked and unremembered 80 thousand and more dead Iraqis; the 4,000,000 hopeless refugees who have fled from their homes, half of them across the border to Syria and Jordan. Our lips as we pray form the words *Grant us peace*, and we wonder at the mockery of these words in a nation that is actively pursuing not peace but a brutal violence, because it arrogantly presumed that it had the wisdom and the power to invade and occupy another country, homeland of an ancient civilization, determined to transform it into an instant democracy, there on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates, the very place, the Torah tells us, where Abraham received the call to go forth-get out, get out for God's sake, get out of this place. And that is the call that comes to us now.

This is a day for seeking forgiveness. Are we to be held accountable for this violent rampage on which we have been engaged, and the more violent one we helped to unleash? We sent forth our army on a mission based on our sense of empire or the illusion we were fighting selflessly for freedom and democracy. Should we be held responsible for the consequences of our behavior, or are we alone among the nations to be allowed to bring death and destruction without being called to account?

“When the big powers act with impunity,” Rami Khouri has written—“entering, destroying and leaving distant countries at will-- smaller powers and ordinary people understand that we are playing without rules. When nobody is accountable, nobody has an incentive to act rationally or peacefully.”

We don't have to wade in blood to reckon with the dangers of terrorism, or to illuminate the beauty of democracy. War is not the answer. Religious communities cannot give their blessing to war, as my friend George Regas has been saying forever.

Fear is the greatest danger we face. Fear, as Brian Jenkins, the expert on terror at Rand, declared, “fear can erode confidence, and provoke us to overreact, and tempt us to abandon our values.” And we have seen that happen.

And fear in these troubled times has become a particular problem for us as Jews. And our fears have brought us to very edge, often over the edge of intolerance. Many of us, the older the more likely, are afflicted with a visceral feeling of vulnerability, for reasons that are well known to us, and regardless of our privileged station in life. And that makes us hyper sensitive to anything that might be perceived as critical of Israel or of Jews. I feel some of that myself; I get defensive when I hear non-Jews being critical of us or of Israel.

Look at what happened to Jimmy Carter. He wrote that “notorious” book, *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid*, a title obviously chosen to be provocative. He used the word *apartheid*, used it to refer not to Israel itself, but to the occupied territories. Hardly a surprise, some Israelis have been using it for years. And I myself have employed the word on rare occasions, particularly after my visits to the West Bank and Gaza where I saw the conditions under which the Palestinians live. It's a word that would very well come to your mind if you were to go there instead of limiting your visits to Israel proper. Carter, who did write a few objectionable things in his book, was attacked from all sides. He was accused of being a liar, a plagiarist, an anti-Semite. At any event, our Jews were so aroused by his book that we helped to catapult it into becoming a best seller, a work, not being particularly profound, that might have gathered dust without that attention.

Carter was invited by Brandeis University to speak there last January, and when some critics complained, the invitation was suddenly changed and Brandeis said he could come only if he debated Alan Dershowitz. When he refused to come under those conditions, the original invitation was honored, with the understanding that Dershowitz would speak at a separate time on the same day. 2000 students came to hear President Carter and gave him a standing ovation-- as if in confirmation of the recent study whose lead author was Steven M. Cohen of the Hebrew Union College, a report which showed that Jews under the age of 35 show far less caring for Israel than their elders. But he also got some tough questions from the students, which led the moderator of the event to say, “No soft matzah balls here, Mr. President.”

So it was that two months later, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the rabbinic association to which we four rabbis belong-- Chasen, Lewis, Ragins and Beerman-- after having scheduled a visit to the Carter Center in Atlanta where our conference would be holding its annual meeting, then, as an act of public protest, cancelled the visit. I thought that was an ill considered, infantile, insulting act to a man whom I often couldn't bear when he was president but who has been making such remarkable contributions in his retirement; moreover,

in 1978 he had brought about a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt which has endured to this day. So I, who had no intention of attending this conference, then decided I would go to Atlanta just to visit the Carter Center, joining a small number of colleagues who felt the same. But I cancelled the trip to Atlanta, when I received an invitation from the Nation Institute to present an award to Carter at the National Press Club in Washington. I did this in early April and said there that he had displayed a persistent moral sensibility, even about the most sensitive and contentious issues, such as the rights of the Palestinians, and that he had crossed every green line, every barrier, every fence, every wall, and that at his best there were no borders in the geography of his conscience.

It is out of fear, I believe, that the major Jewish organizations try to enforce a political orthodoxy where Israel and the entire middle east is concerned, trumpeting the invasion of Iraq, and now the importance of military action against Iran. They try to give the impression that they represent the thinking of American Jews. Which they do not. Although they have successfully intimidated the members of Congress, and all of the candidates for president. They are not serving Israel or us by trying to shout down every criticism of Israel. That is why it is important for those of you who agree with me, to raise your voices.

In Israel, there is a mother named Nurit Peled-Elhanan, a member of the faculty of the Hebrew University, whose thirteen year old daughter Smadar was killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber a few years ago. She became one of the founders of the Bereaved Parents For Peace, a forum for Israeli and Palestinian mothers and fathers encouraging dialogue. "Having a dialogic approach," she wrote, "means being willing to detain your truth or your personal or national narrative and make room in yourself for the truth of the other. Dialogic people do not believe in eternal realities. In fact, in Hebrew the terms finding, reality and invention all have the same root. And that means that reality is what we invent, and it can be changed."

"We, the victims of either terror or anti-terror terrorism, are the only ones left to tell the world that there is no civilized killing of the innocent or barbaric killing of the innocent, there is only criminal killing of the innocent. And there is no clash of civilizations, that in the every-growing underground kingdom of dead children there is no clash of civilizations. On the contrary, true multiculturalism prevails there, true equality and true justice."

"We are the ones who remind the world that after the death of a child there is no other, that no one can avenge the blood of a child because the child takes into her small grave, with her small bones, the past and the future and reason for war and its consequences. Therefore we are the ones who would end war, because we know that it doesn't matter what flag is put on what mountain, it doesn't matter who looks where when they pray, and that nothing is more important than to secure a young girl's way to her dance class."

"We are the ones who cried like the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, when we saw our little girl or boy for the last time...: *Why does that streak of blood rip the petal of your cheek?*"

My parents were part of a generation of Jews whose highest ideal was embodied in the Yiddish word, *Menschlichkeit*. As Irving Howe once defined it, "the readiness to live for ideals beyond the clamor of self; An ability to forge a community of moral order even while remaining subject to a society of social disorder, and a persuasion that human existence is a deeply serious matter for which all of us are finally accountable."

Here we are, a congregation of Jews who persist in believing, as naïve as it may seem, that there is in every human being the possibility of what is humane, sometimes just a senseless decency, and that every moment we are given the opportunity to transform the human situation. Because we have the extraordinary power in the midst of the vulgarity and brutality of contemporary life to recognize that every human being (as Heschel once taught us) is a disclosure of the divine, all of us knowing the fragile brevity of life and love, and all of us wanting to believe that our lives don't have to be just the absolute line between two points; that everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life.

Rabbi Kenneth Chasen
“Their Kaddishes”
Leo Baeck Temple
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I was already a young adult before I had ever heard the term, “my Kaddish” – those words that have so often been spoken by a Jewish parent in reference to his or her own child... “He is my Kaddish” – the one who will say Kaddish one day for me. It was never spoken in my presence when I was growing up – perhaps because it was a concept that was a little too Eastern European for my Midwestern American Reform community... perhaps because it was the sort of thing that was said *about* your young son, but not *to* your young son.

Whatever the reason, it wasn't until I was in my twenties and off on my own that I first heard the term, “my Kaddish.” And while I know that the phrase was invented to provide comfort – for the speaker to assure him or herself of a legacy, a place on earth long after death – I have to admit that my first reaction to it was that it seemed a little morbid and discomfoting. “Is this what children are supposed to be?” I wondered. “Little grieving machines, created to lament their parents' passing forever?”

Well, it all depends upon how we define grieving... or more specifically, how we define the function of gathering as we do today, to recite Kaddish and our entire litany of Yizkor prayers, as we bring the memories of those we love and miss daringly close to our hearts. You see, there are many who would resist an exercise like this, replete with the raw tears it elicits. “Why affirm the absence?” they might ask. “Why stare at it, when looking away in distraction is so much less painful?”

Those who embrace this exercise know the answer. Yizkor is not an affirmation of absence. Yizkor is our brave acknowledgment of the embedded presence of our loved ones, set so deeply within us – in ways so palpable and so real – that we can almost feel them sitting right next to us, the shape and texture of their hands holding ours, stroking our hair, touching our hearts. They are *in* us – right here. And being courageous enough to reach for them – to let them in, as we always did back when the exchange was immediate and so much easier – it is both gratifying and heart-wrenching. Yes, it is less painful to look away in distraction. And we all do it... we must, or else we would cease to function. But if we *only* look away in distraction, neglecting the prospect of daring moments like this one, we pay an unacceptable price to escape our pain. The unthinkable price... the banishment of our beloved dead from our lives.

While we are all sharing this earth together – before death complicates the equation between us – we never even consider such a banishment. We all welcome thoughts of the eternity we will one day grant to those who predecease us – it’s a loving duty that we promise without hesitation. We raise no resistance to it. Before we or they die, it all makes perfect sense. That’s when we treasure having someone – hopefully, multiple someones – to be “our Kaddish.”

My friend and congregant from New York, novelist Steven Schnur, wrote a brief and beautiful essay about his now adult son David, entitled, “My Kaddish.” In it, David is still a very little boy, not even five years old, and his father describes their blessed discovery of each other through their encounters at sunrise, when David awakens... and awakens him. And though the anxiety of parting would likely be the furthest thing from the mind of a fascinated, young dad, still these words conclude the father’s essay, as day turns into night: “This is the boy, I tell myself in the quiet of his shade-drawn bedroom, who will perpetuate my name, say Kaddish over my grave; the one most likely to become me in form and feature, who will carry many of my own thoughts and impulses, who will hear my voice and feel my arms when embracing his own children. This is the son I did not have imagination enough to conceive, fully half the equation of a new world, a blessing beyond words.”

Those who are here today remembering their parents certainly know what it’s like to feel the weight of the honor and the responsibility that David’s father placed upon his son’s tiny shoulders. But the truth is that while those who speak of “my Kaddish” are usually thinking of their children, the honor and the responsibility surely extends to the other sacred bonds that we share and that are loosened by death. For our departed spouses... our departed siblings... even our departed children – we are the ones who are most likely to “become them,” to be compelled by the duty that their memory places upon us, now that they are gone. We are the ones who carry their thoughts and impulses. We hear their voices. We feel their arms when we embrace all those we love, all those who share with us this duty of remembering them.

The Kaddish, as many of you know, does not call upon us to affirm anyone's absence. Quite to the contrary, being another person's Kaddish only requires us to affirm God's wondrous, mysterious, artful way of building this bridge that we can scarcely comprehend – this bridge between life and death. Being another person's Kaddish demands that we take notice of the embedded presence within us – that we acknowledge the sanctity in those powerful, painful, pristine moments when the ones we miss are so close that it almost frightens us. Being another person's Kaddish is our way of saying, "I will not look away, even though it's easier. I will not dodge the tears, even though I fear them. For the price of armoring my heart is simply too severe. And what's more, there is this promise between us – a promise born from the love that we shared – a promise to sustain the story of your life... the lesson that you taught... the seed you wished to plant."

This is the contract, spanning the bridge between life and death, that compels us to share in this hour of Yizkor. This is how we Jews remember. It has been that way from the very beginning. Our father Abraham – patriarch of the family to which we all belong – was the first to count upon someone to keep that promise. He chose his beloved wife Sarah – the woman with whom he built his legacy, the woman whose death plunged him into the deep pain of mourning. But long before they were separated by death – back when their story was really just beginning – Abraham told Sarah, "*V'chaytah nafshi biglaleich*" – "I will live on because of you."

It was his way of saying to her, "You... you are my Kaddish." He couldn't have known then that she would die first... that, in fact, he would end up being *her* Kaddish. But that wasn't important then. What mattered was the promise, held firmly between them – "*V'chaytah nafshi biglaleich*" – "I will live on because of you."

We know it isn't easy. Drawing them near used to be our greatest joy. Now it carries a mixture of joy and trepidation and heartache. But our destiny is not to be grieving machines, terminally lamenting what was lost. Our destiny is forever to sustain what was found.

We are their Kaddishes. Let us speak these words in their name.