



Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

“To Serve and Protect”

September 29, 2008 Erev Rosh Hashanah 5769

We call it the “nice touch light.” It’s that little light that sits directly over the stove in the kitchen, up where there’s also a switch to turn on a little fan – the “nice touch light.” Why? It was shortly after Allison and I had moved into our first apartment together in Brentwood. It was time to head off to sleep, and I noticed one night that this little light over the stove had somehow magically turned itself on. Being a typical male, I hadn’t previously known that there was a light over the stove. Figuring that there was likely human intervention involved in this miracle, I asked my new roommate: “Can you tell me – why is that little light in the kitchen on?” “Oh,” Allison replied without hesitation: “It’s a nice touch.”

“But we’re not going back into the kitchen until morning.”

“I know.”

“The sun will be up in the morning.”

“I know.”

“So what’s the purpose of turning on the light?”

“I told you – it’s a *nice touch*.”

It was for me an important window into the nuanced world of marital communications. Remembering the coaching I had received from every happily-married person I knew about “picking my battles,” I learned to peacefully coexist with the “nice touch light.” It became my friend. I even caught myself turning it on every now and again, when I noticed its absence late at night. But adjusting to life with the “nice touch light” did not prepare me for the vast array of lights I would often find burning needlessly in our home. Porch lights on when we weren’t expecting anybody. Hall lights on just in case we might go back downstairs again. Laundry room lights on just because the dryer was still spinning. “Why do we need to leave all these lights on?” I asked.

“Look, I feel more comfortable with them on, okay? Is it too much for me to ask for a little concession to convenience?” asked Allison.

“Well, it’s wasteful,” I answered. “And given our feelings about the environment and all, I’m just surprised you’d choose convenience over preservation on something like this.”

“Really?” said Allison, clearly bemused by my sudden attack of sanctimoniousness. “Tell me... when you get through answering your emails late each night, why do you leave your laptop on until morning?”

“Wait a minute, that’s different,” I shot back, knowing full well that it wasn’t different at all. “That’s about being efficient – about getting things rolling as quickly as possible in the morning.”

“Did you know,” she said, “that leaving your computer on needlessly for hours on end wastes far more energy than all the lights I leave on combined?”

“I did not know that,” I replied. “But I do now.”

Every one of us has one. Most of us have far more than one. We’re talking about our little, personally excused environmental hypocrisies. It’s the water running in the sink while you brush your teeth. The endless string of single-use plastic water bottles you toss away. The habit of throwing your towel in the washing machine after you’ve used it just once. Those plastic grocery bags that are so much easier than paper or reusable bags you have to remember to bring to the market. Those few extra degrees on the thermostat that change the house from acceptable to wonderfully comfortable. That ten-minute-long shower that feels so much better than a five-minute shower.

We all have one. Most of us have far more than one... even most of us who are truly committed to planet preservation. We’ve heard about all the things we should be doing to safeguard the environment, and most of us have chosen one or two... or maybe even more. But we have also drawn a line regarding just how disruptive we’re willing to allow greening concerns to be in our lives. By and large, we have adopted practices that cause us to give up precious little of what feels comfortable and convenient. We bought a fuel-efficient car. We placed a recycling bin in our homes and offices. We nodded in the direction of environmental responsibility. What we failed to do was actually to change our habits – change our lives – for the sake of environmental responsibility.

My philosophy regarding that failure is that we, quite simply, have not yet accepted this challenge as an urgent, life-defending crisis. We just aren’t that afraid of losing the planet yet. We may have watched *An Inconvenient Truth* and shuddered. Maybe we even watched Leonardo DiCaprio’s film, *The Eleventh Hour* – and if you watched that and *didn’t* shudder, you weren’t paying much attention. We may have read the studies and reviewed the reports – but until the planet’s condition actually changes our life in some material way, we’re inclined only to go so far toward changing our own lives.

I hope – I sincerely hope – that I don’t have to spend all of our time tonight making the scientific case about climate change and humankind’s role in it. There was a time, some years ago, when I would speak here on this subject, and I would subsequently receive letters from worshipers who wanted to inform me of scientists who deny that the earth is getting warmer, and that even if it is, we humans have little or nothing to do with it. I hope those days are gone...although I suppose I’ll find out when I check my mail later this week. But just in case, I’ll share just a few commonly acknowledged facts.

Fact: The ten hottest years on record occurred in the last fifteen years.

Fact: The concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is at its highest level in the last 150,000 years – and it has undergone a 30% surge since the industrial revolution, just 150 years ago.

Fact: we Americans represent 4.5% of the world's population, and we contribute an estimated 25% percent of the greenhouse gases that are endangering the earth.

Fact: The rate of extinction today is one species every nine minutes. 150 years ago, the estimated rate was one species every five years.

Fact: The Union of Concerned Scientists – that’s 1670 scientists, 104 of whom are Nobel laureates – issued the “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity” fifteen years ago, declaring *then* that “human beings and the natural world are on a collision course.” The scientists continued: “Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society... and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know.” The ten hottest years on record then followed the scientists’ proclamation.

At this point, it is only the fringe of the fringe that would suggest that we don’t have a life-and-death problem to manage. But that’s what the scientists have to say. We’re here at temple tonight. What does our tradition have to say?

Well, before we answer that question, we would be well served to consider the whole notion of science vs. religion in general on the matter of our earth’s future. You see, most people presume religion and science to be somewhat at odds with one another regarding the role of human beings on the planet. That is to say, western religion is understood to portray the world as human-centric. God created the world and placed it at the unchecked disposal of human beings, who are assumed to have dominion over the earth. You certainly find that notion in the Torah. And then there is science, which acknowledges that this planet of ours is so obviously not human-centric – it has been around a lot longer than human beings have, and will, in whatever form, be around long after we’re gone. Science, therefore, places humankind in a more dependent and deferential relationship with the earth. This explains why appeals to science are being used to fuel the planet preservation agenda, while religion is frequently taken to task for giving humankind an unjustified free hand by declaring us to be the earth’s rulers.

The fascinating thing about that assessment of science vs. religion is that the opposite is actually true. Science, for all that it has taught us about the climate crisis, is actually dispassionate about our planet’s fate. If humans decide to heat up the earth, and it then becomes uninhabitable by most of today’s life forms, that’s perfectly fine with science – it’s even natural and to be expected. The planet evolves. The scientific record shows that it’s happened before, and it’s sure to happen again. But western religion – and for our purposes, most notably, our religion – is anything but dispassionate about what will happen to the planet.

To the sources that brought us the Torah, the earth was supposed to be like it is now – beautiful and capable of sustaining human, animal and plant life as we know it. In order to make that happen, human beings were precisely *not* assigned unchecked dominion over the earth. Rather, when you read about Adam and Eve – in fact, even before Eve enters the picture, and it’s just the story of Adam – you discover that we humans are commanded *l’ovdah ul’shomrah* – not to dominate or rule the earth, but literally “to serve and protect it.” Like the police. The familiar phrase, “to serve and protect,” actually comes from the Torah’s story of the creation of the world – and it’s first conceived not as a description of the caretaker role of humans over other humans... it’s conceived to describe the caretaker role of humans over the natural world.

L’ovdah ul’shomrah... the earth is only ours to serve and protect, not to use and abuse. According to the ancient rabbis of the *midrash*, God’s command to the first-ever humans included a clear directive: “See My world, how beautiful it is. Do not corrupt or destroy it, for if you do, there will be no one to set it right after you.”

To serve and protect... the 18th century Kabbalist, Rabbi Ezekiel Landau of Prague, taught it in his own way. He told the story of two men who once were fighting over the same piece of land. Each claimed ownership, so they put the matter before a judge. Unfortunately, he listened but could not render a decision. Finally he said, "Since I cannot decide to whom this land belongs, let us ask the land." This seemed odd to the disputants, especially as they watched the judge put his ear to the ground. Then he straightened up and revealed the decision of the earth. "Gentlemen," he stated, "the land says that it belongs to neither of you – but you belong to the land."

Our Jewish tradition would have us understand that we temporary sojourners on earth "belong to the land," not the other way around. We are part of a continuum that we recognize and honor on this Holy Day. Of this Rosh Hashanah day, it is taught: *Hayom Harat Olam* – today the world was created. Those words in Hebrew are the cover art of the prayer books we'll hold in our hands tomorrow morning in this sanctuary. We recognize, of course, that the evidence would demonstrate that the world was not, in fact, created on this day five thousand, seven hundred and sixty nine years ago. But it's a religious teaching, not a history lesson. *Hayom Harat Olam* – today we celebrate the creation of this world, the majesty and marvels of this world. What does our celebration demand of us? What must we do to honor the Torah's command *l'ovdah ul'shomrah* – to serve and protect the natural order we've inherited... before we and it are no more?

For one thing, we can use the power of our votes. And in this most consequential of election years, if you're looking for one issue that is the nexus of domestic policy and foreign policy, as well as our barometer of conscience – of community spiritedness vs. self-entitlement – the environment is it.

Pick your favorite issue. Out-of-control prices at the gas pump? We're at the mercy of oil dictatorships.

The grip of poverty choking more and more Americans? Running a home – and heating and cooling it – has never been so expensive.

Disgusted by the indifference to the suffering of the poor in this country – especially people of color? What do you think will happen when our planet's resources become scarce? Who will get them... and who will get forgotten? What happened to the victims of Hurricane Katrina will look like the royal treatment by comparison.

Unemployment rates on the rise? The development of new energy technologies could create thousands of new jobs.

Worried about the danger that Iran represents to the United States, to Israel, to Jews, to free people all over the world? Do away with our oil addiction, and Iran will cease to threaten anyone.

Fearful of Al Qaeda's next attack? Starve the terrorists of our oil dollars, and watch the threat disappear.

The good news is that we've got two presidential candidates who have identified planet preservation as a key issue. They both accept the scientific conclusions that are prevalent and propose to lead our country to a responsible and prompt answer. And the timing for this conversation couldn't be better, for we get a chance to choose between them very, very soon. Given the gravity of the dilemma, I would suggest that your determination of which candidate is more trustworthy both to take the crisis seriously and to implement successfully a fundamental shift in national policy to address it should have a loud say in determining your vote – perhaps the dominant say. The economy is in a dangerous state, and people are really hurting. And national security is crucially important, don't get me wrong. But world security

would seem to be even more important – you can't have national security without it. And it all hinges on our response to the command to serve and protect.

But as important as your vote will be, let's face it – it won't be enough. For at the end of the day, politicians respond to our true will. They're extremely gifted at sizing up what really matters to us and then standing for it. Politicians ultimately reflect our truest values... and so, for that matter, do markets. And driving the market – even more than directly affecting climate change – is why it's time for us to choose more than one or two green practices... it's time for us to choose a green life.

Now, don't get me wrong – I'm not saying that we don't have real power to affect the fate of our planet. Brush your teeth without the water flowing, and you'll save 1,500 gallons of water a year. Put an aluminum can in a recycling bin, and it's on a shelf as a new aluminum can in ninety days. Put it in the trash, and we're stuck with it for one hundred years. Put a plastic bottle in the trash, and we're stuck with it for a million years. Our actions really can make a difference... and collectively, even more so. After all, if every American household replaced its regular light bulbs with compact fluorescents, the impact would be equivalent to taking a million cars off the road. Choosing a green life would certainly make a difference to the earth. But in my estimation, that's not the most important reason for doing it. If we seek systemic change – a change in how all of humanity lives – we need to be greener so we can create a green market.

We need to make it profitable for every industry in the global marketplace to develop products for us. We have to show them that we want those products... that we'll buy them. Already, many of the world's largest corporations are chasing big paydays in green technologies – and their efforts are actually outpacing the efforts of governments. Money talks. Leading venture capitalists see clean energy as their ticket to profits in the 21st century, so the more fully we reform our lives, the more fully they'll sell us what we're looking for. And then, before long, we'll have outmoded our planet-destroying products... they simply won't be good for business anymore.

Now, that's no small task. Driving a new green economy will require a lot from each one of us. It will require us to redefine our relationship with the planet, just as our Jewish tradition describes. When we go shopping, or come home from work, or step into the shower, or screw in a light bulb, we'll have to think of ourselves as servers and protectors of the Earth... *l'ovdah ul'shomrah*. We'll have to get in the habit of serving the planet before serving our own convenience or comfort. It won't be easy, and it won't come naturally, and it will never cease requiring more of us. Once we've established a new way of life with our cans and water and grocery bags and composting bins, it will be time then to start getting serious about a new way of life with energy-efficient refrigerators and air conditioning units and solar panels. Can we really expect our legislators and business people to commit to giving us, say, real, usable mass transit in a city like Los Angeles unless we show we're ready to take on the costs and disruptions necessary to make it happen? There's a long road to travel to a new way of life. But it will be a refreshingly selfless way to live... a refreshingly Jewish way to live.

We at the temple have tried to do our part to get into the habit of living a green life. With the inspired leadership of our LBT Green Team, we have been working passionately and consistently to set a worthy example of serving and protecting our natural world. In addition to the recycling bins that you can find throughout the temple facility and in every office and classroom, we now use 100% recycled copy paper wherever possible. We no longer purchase the bright "neon" paper colors because they are not recycled. This cup, believe it or not, is not plastic. It is made out of corn, and it is 100% compostable. It's designed for cold drinks, but a number of our temple kids at the Oneg Shabbat have discovered that when you dispense hot water into it, it completely evaporates into nothing. Very entertaining... do not try it at home. Our paper plates have been replaced with bamboo and sugarcane plates. We have also

asked for real mugs to be used at meetings, and I hope that you will consider bringing your own mug or reusable cup with you to temple events. Our bleached napkins and paper towels have also been replaced with recycled items. The new fixtures in our outdoor chapel and outdoor walkways use energy-efficient compact fluorescent light bulbs, and our main building has also been converted to CFL's – in fact, it was one of our Bar Mitzvah students last fall who replaced all of the bulbs in our sanctuary and atrium with CFL's.

These efforts have placed LBT among the trailblazers in “synagogue greening.” And soon, of course, the temple will be building, and sustainability has been at the forefront of our construction plans since we began interviewing architects. Our renovation and construction plans, once executed, will make LBT one of the most environmentally sustainable synagogue facilities anywhere in the world.

Truth be told, once we got through the heavy lifting of making all of these changes, it hasn't really been all that difficult to live green at LBT... which only means that there is plenty more for us still to do. As these changes become internalized as simple and natural habits, it will be time to take on the bigger challenges, the more systemic changes. What we do now will become just an appetizer to the fuller meal. You get used to thinking and doing differently... and so can we in our homes and offices. We can, and we must.

In the coming days, I will be sending out via email to our entire congregation a *brit adamah* – a “covenant with the earth,” which will include a long list of green practices which you can adopt in your personal life. I want to challenge every member of this community to make at least half of those practices your new routine. For once enough of us start to serve and protect, the consumer market will make everyone serve and protect. And that will guarantee the future of humanity and our irreplaceable home.

Today is a day for life and death questions. Our prayer books are filled with them – and so are the times in which we live. The great Babylonian rabbi of the 4th century, Rava, knew a thing or two about life and death questions. He wrote a teaching about a man facing judgment in front of a heavenly tribunal – he's asked to account for his life by answering a series of questions. Among them is a question that drives so many of the choices we make during this brief spot of time we are granted on this pale blue planet. “Were you concerned for future generations?” We've conditioned ourselves to think of that largely as an economic question. Well, that may have once been true, but there's no room left to deny it – if you want to take care of your kids and grandkids, you can't just do it with a trust fund anymore. Your will alone will not get the job done, for all they'll have will be a big pile of money, and no planet on which to spend it... and no children to whom they can give it.

It requires no great leap to see ourselves as caretakers – as servers and protectors – for our children. That's basic instinct. Perhaps 5769 will be the year in which we find that it's no great leap to see ourselves as caretakers – as servers and protectors – for this planet which gives us life.

For my children... and for yours... may we make it so.

Rabbi Leah Lewis

“Uncovering the Truths”

September 30, 2008 Rosh Hashanah 5769

Exactly 25 feet from each other, they are lined up. They move swiftly and with the efficiency that can only come with complete mastery of the simple, two-step task at hand. Open, close, open, close, open, close. As if they are keeping step to a timeless dance, the garage doors open in the morning to let the people who live there out, and then they close. At the end of the day, they open once more as people return home. Close. Occasionally if you have the time and the motivation to watch, you can catch a glimpse of the occupants as they pick up their morning paper, get the multi-colored bins lined up on the curb for garbage pick-up day, pull a basketball out of the garage or step onto the sidewalk to talk with one another. Everyone is very friendly here. Everything is very pleasant here. Welcome to Roseville, to Glenville, to Rosedale, to Glendale...Welcome to Suburbia, USA. Given this cliché of a scene, it is easy to think that everyone in it is the same – same school and work schedule, same commute, same thing on the table for dinner at exactly the same time, same relationships, same people. Same, same, same.

I should know. After all, most of you are aware that during this summer, I entered the world of suburbia – hesitantly at first, I'll admit, since I was convinced that *my* family's lifestyle was nothing like *theirs*. But at the end of June, the moving truck pulled into our new neighborhood and rounded the bend into our subdivision and stopped to unload in front of model number 6 – the single story. And before I knew it, that truck pulled away, empty. David, Gabriel, Jonah and I were officially suburbanites. Orange County suburbanites, no less – which surely breaks new historical ground for the clergy of Leo Baeck Temple!

It is no surprise, then, that it caught my attention when PBS aired a story about an exhibit at the Walker Art Center in downtown Minneapolis, entitled, “Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes.” The exhibit's purpose was to shine a light on the difference between those perfectly aligned garage doors and that which really exists behind them.

Laura Migliorino, a professor of photography at a community college in one of Minneapolis' many suburbs, was the driving force behind this exhibit. You see, for years, she had done a reverse commute from her downtown bungalow. She would drive past countless suburbs, each of which appeared to her to be exactly alike. And then, one day, she got curious. She was inspired to pull off of the highway, camera in hand, and take a closer look at these homes which, for her, had always simply blended into the background through her car window. What she found was that behind the uniform architecture was a diverse spectrum of family configurations, socioeconomic circumstances and ethnic backgrounds. Her photographs capture the contrast that exists between her expectations for suburbia, and its reality.

Migliorino and the other artists that contributed to the exhibit show us that despite any outer appearance of similarity – and all of the biases associated with that – there are actually unique people, families and lives to be found on the inside. “Challenging preconceived ideas and expectations about suburbia,” the

Museum spokesperson stated, “[the artists] hope to impart a better understanding of how those ideas were formed and how they are challenged by contemporary realities.”

Now, lest you suspect that I’ve been sent by some neighborhood association to spread the gospel of life in Irvine, I want to ask you to consider the broader message being sent from that exhibit in Minneapolis. Challenging our preconceived notions about others. Questioning how we reached them. Asking what they tell us about ourselves. These High Holy Days demand that we take an honest look at everything – and everyone – that we have allowed to blend into the background. What are our preconceived ideas about all of our neighbors – the people with whom we share a society, a community, a synagogue, a home – and what is the reality?

The task of *Cheshbon haNefesh*, taking a good, deep and honest look into our souls, is a difficult one, and a uniquely personal one. Nobody can do it for us. And while coming to services and meditating on the themes of these Holy Days can give us the spiritual space to do the work, at the end of the day, the task is ours to own. For better *and* for worse, each of us is a unique individual with particular gifts that cannot necessarily be seen from the security gate or the subdivision sign, or even from our own bathroom mirrors. Too often, the truths about who we are lay buried deeply within our souls.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a great sage of the Mishnaic period, told a parable:

When God was about to create Adam, God turned to the ministering angels for advice. And just as if it were today, they split into two groups, locked in passionate disagreement. “That,” they claimed, “Is why it is written in Psalms: ‘Mercy and truth collided, righteousness and peace engaged in a clash’.”

Mercy said, “Let the first human be created, for he will do merciful deeds.” Truth said, “Let him not be created, for he will be false.” Righteousness said, “Let him be created, for he will do righteous deeds.” Peace said, “Let him not be created, for he will never cease quarreling.”

What did God do? Citing an older midrash, Rabbi Shimon said that God took Truth and cast it into the ground. (Gen. Rabba 8,5)... God chose mercy and Adam was created. And with that single story, our tradition acknowledged that human beings exist because of our incredible capacity to do good in this world.

In thinking about this midrash, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel asked the question that we need to be asking ourselves today, “Indeed, after all the heady discourses are over, the intoxication gone, one begins to wonder: is Truth really buried in a grave?” While we are busy doing the good work of our lives, Heschel worried that the truest, most intensely honest parts of our souls get buried. I share his concern because we don’t even realize that it is happening – that is, until these Holy Days come along and ask us to take our shovels out of the garage and begin digging, exhuming our truths. It is a daunting task to do the honest work that is needed to renew ourselves for this new year because when we do, we see just how, to steal a word from Al Gore, “inconvenient” the truth can be.

In just nine days, when we sit here together once again, our prayer books will remind us that when it comes to raising self-awareness, the task is simultaneously deeply personal and communal, shared by every one of us. The liturgy of the season...*Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi* – for the never-ending spectrum of sins that have likely been committed by one or more of us during this year, we confess in the first person plural. Together, ‘we’ confess for what ‘we’ have done because ‘I’ may not even be aware of my actions. What we define as the challenge of seeking atonement is really, in its essence, the difficult work of uncovering buried truths; truths about ourselves and truths about those around us.

It may be the ancient rabbis who raised the question, but it was a handful of chimpanzees in the late 1960's that demonstrated just how much self-awareness can be gained if we surround ourselves with others and open ourselves to their truths. Dr. Gordon Gallup, a professor of psychology at the State University of New York at Albany, placed a set of mirrors into the habitat of a group of chimps, and he watched their spontaneous behavior in front of them. Over and over, from every angle, the chimps examined themselves, seemingly fascinated with what they saw. Phase one.

In the experiment's second phase, the animals were anesthetized and an odorless dye was used to mark their foreheads. When they awoke from the anesthesia, they had no way of knowing that the mark was there...that is, until the mirrors were reintroduced. Immediately, the chimps' behavior changed and they looked intensely at the marks. For Gallup, this was proof that these chimps had some amount of self-awareness. They knew that they were actually looking at *themselves* in the mirror rather than some other creature, and that they recognized the change that had occurred. But when this 'mirror recognition test,' as it came to be known, was repeated with other animals, like gorillas, the results were split. Dr. Gallup found that it was only the animals who were raised surrounded by other animals and people that had developed the sense of self they needed to recognize themselves and to notice the change. For the chimps and gorillas, it was clear that social interaction actually increased self awareness. Given our evolutionary line, it is no surprise that the same is true for us.

Perhaps that is why the Torah's account of creation goes beyond the first human being – beyond the single, unique individual, and continues with a statement. “*Lo tov heyot ha'adam levado*, It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a partner fit for him.”

By consulting with the angels, God, in the midrash, modeled just how essential learning from others is to our pursuit of uncovering our buried truths. But when we are busy going about the business of our lives, we too often forget what it means to be a partner – to be in an open, intimate, self-disclosing and self-enlightening relationship that is mutual. In Hebrew, a *chaver* is more than a friend. It is a partner who learns about his own individual truth from the other's. A *chaver* is someone with whom we share. By virtue of us being here, together, sharing this sacred space, we have the potential to be *chaverim* in this synagogue community. We are partners if we open ourselves to the truths of our *chaverim*.

In his 2006 book, *Yearnings*, Rabbi Irwin Kula writes about the wisdom we can gain by interfacing with the humanity of others. “Jewish wisdom encourages us to be sacred skeptics,” writes Kula. “Many think skepticism is paralyzing, hopeless, cynical; but it's the opposite. Skepticism inspires us to know more. Skepticism can be revelatory. When we both hold and question our truths, we become lifelong learners rather than absolute knowers. ...Not seduced by certainty, we can be open to the truth.”

A great exemplar of this notion of sacred skepticism was the 19th century Kotzker Rebbe. The idea that the truth, which has the potential to emerge from living and learning, yet lies suppressed, kept him up night after night. It may be buried, he wrote, “Yet it remains alive. Truth wants to emerge, but man does not permit its appearance. Man's structures stand like a mausoleum on the grave of Truth, preventing it from raising its head...Deep in every soul there is a longing to embrace Truth.”

The longing is there, but the act of actually opening ourselves for that embrace can feel herculean. Especially when we suspect, deep in our hearts, that the truths that others have to present to us are not the same as our own. The benefit of diversity is the potential for wisdom. Its challenge is the potential to be mired in difference.

Back at the beginning of my time in Rabbinical school, I had the opportunity to work with a group of developmentally disabled Jewish adults here in Los Angeles, called *Chaverim*. During my year-long

internship, we shared classes, Shabbat and holiday celebrations, and moments of personal transformation. I came as an outsider who, like many of them, was also part of a synagogue community. But where I did or did not fit into the broader Jewish community was not important because their name – *Chaverim* – could not have been more apt. We were all partners in this one-of-a-kind community, open to learning from one another. Sadly, I remember wondering whether, when the circumstances were reversed, these individuals could ever be embraced as true partners in the synagogue community.

For a long time, people with special needs, be they physical or developmental, were practically invisible in Jewish life. Thankfully, the notion of inclusion has begun to enter our lexicon. We see that it is not only our responsibility and moral obligation to invite people in, but to acknowledge that we have something to learn from them. Contemporary voices are demanding that the community provide for the needs of everyone who walks or limps or is wheeled through the synagogue doors. Invisibility is out. Every individual needs to be visibly in. We, at LBT, are taking new steps in this direction, but we know that it is only a beginning. From the outset, our building renovation project has been committed to making our place of prayer accessible to all and, so, a full 72 square feet of the remodeled sanctuary will be designated for a ramp. You may make plenty of excuses why you'd rather sit innocuously in your seat instead of being called up for an aliyah, or to help lead part of the service, but an inability to ascend this bima will no longer be one of them!

And while it has come to my attention that there are a few Religious School students who would actually rather stay home after school and during the weekend to polish up on their Play Station 2 skills than be part of our learning community, an inability to have their learning, social and spiritual needs met will no longer be a justification they can use! I am happy to announce that starting in this new year, our Religious School will for the first time employ an Inclusion Specialist to work with students with special needs and their families, as well as with teachers, equipping them with the tools they need to convey a distinct love for Judaism to every one of their distinctive students.

Again, it is the story of creation. "*Lo tov heyot ha'adam levado*, It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a partner fit for him." We are not meant, each of us in our own unique splendor, to walk alone. We are designed for support, for companionship and for love.

And while that is most certainly the case when it comes to acknowledging the needs of every person and to raising a generation of children who learn that their needs are taken seriously, so too is it the case when, like Adam, we are fortunate enough to find a fitting partner.

That is why for centuries, Jews have stepped under the chuppah to have their marriages consecrated with the traditional seven blessings. They begin with words that celebrate our uniqueness: *Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam, shehakol barah lichvodo*. You are blessed, Adonai our God, the sovereign of the world, who created everything – every aspect of who we are - for Your glory.

Early this summer the California Supreme Court ruled that a categorical ban on marriage between two people of the same gender was unconstitutional. Chief Justice Ronald George, writing for the majority, said that the ability to "responsibly care for and raise children does not depend upon the individual's sexual orientation...We therefore conclude that in view of the substance and significance of the fundamental constitutional right to form a family relationship, the California Constitution must be properly interpreted to guarantee this basic civil right to all Californians, whether gay or heterosexual, and to same-sex couples as well as to opposite-sex couples."

Though love is as unique as the individuals who share in it, the institution of marriage is not. Anybody who has ever been married knows that marriage is hard work. It demands an abundance of discipline, patience, determination, forgiveness, respect and humor. It is a covenant between two people. It is a commitment partners make to heighten their own self awareness by opening themselves to one another's deepest truths.

For three months now, same-sex couples have been lining up at city halls and county clerks offices around our state to legally wed, even though many of them have been living in covenant with one another for years already, or for decades. And finally, we Californians get to watch thousands of committed couples share in the benefits that come from being recognized by the law. There are huge economic and social benefits, for sure. But as human beings, we can't afford to overlook the psychological benefits that come from knowing that our government and the population at large are open to learning from these committed couples – about the gifts of true partnership and about the real and painful challenges that they continue to face.

It is no secret that the resistance to granting legal honor to gay and lesbian unions is large, and it is loud. Perhaps those who oppose it fear that their own children, if exposed to committed, legal same sex couples that have been accepted by our society, could have their sexual orientation influenced. Perhaps they fear that gay marriage could somehow affect the stability of the institution of marriage. Perhaps they fear that even though our society is ready to recognize that a full one in ten human beings is a gay man or a lesbian – and that no legislative action or societal gains can change that -- they are not ready to accept that truth.

As you know, these opponents of same sex marriage have created a powerful campaign to reverse the California Supreme Court's decision establishing the right of gay and lesbian couples to obtain the same civil status and legal privileges as heterosexual couples. Proposition 8 would overturn the ruling of the justices of the California Supreme Court. It would permanently amend the state's Constitution to ban gay marriage, thereby actively removing rights that already exist.

Opposing these opponents, the Board of Rabbis of Southern California – comprised of rabbis from Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Orthodox synagogues – is working on a resolution to oppose this proposition. So, too, has the Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis, our movement's rabbinic body, unanimously approved a resolution in opposition to Prop 8. Like the supporters of the proposition, we rabbis used our large and loud voice. Rooted in the notion that everything and every person is unique, created in God's glory, we made a clear statement that as Jews, turning away from the basic human and civil needs of so many people – many of whom we are sitting next to as we enter this new year, sharing a communal confession of sins - is simply not acceptable.

I want to be clear – the opposition to Prop 8 on the part of so many rabbis has nothing to do with religious ritual or spiritual sanction. That is a discussion wholly separate from that of the election. At the heart of this debate is an essential matter of civil and equal rights being afforded to every citizen under the law. But as Jews... particularly as we gather at this season of truth-seeking... Proposition 8 is unacceptable not only because we have the responsibility to be inclusive, but because we have the capacity to grow. This is the time to embrace all truths.

Martin Buber, the great 20th century thinker, is famous for having said that every person who is born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique. "Every single person," he wrote, "Is a new thing and is called upon to fulfill our particularity in the world."

No two of us are the same –and it is to our benefit. But what we do share is an ability to be sacred skeptics – living and learning. Nobel Prize winning physicist, Niels Bohr, taught that the opposite of a fact is a falsehood. But the opposite of a profound truth is very often another profound truth. When we open ourselves to the humanity and the reality of others, we have the capacity to learn something new about ourselves. As we enter this new year, 5769, may we each find the strength to take a close and honest look in the mirror because if we do, we just may discover that a profound Truth has surfaced in ourselves and in each other.

Amen.

Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

“What Keeps You Up At Night?” October 8, 2008

Erev Yom Kippur 5769

I know it won't come as a surprise to most of you that I spend a lot of time working out at the gym. After all, a physique like this one does not come free, believe me. By “a lot of time,” I'm talking once, sometimes twice each and every month... for up to thirty minutes – and that includes my commuting time from home.

When I go to the gym for my workout, I like to be prepared. I have my two-liter reusable Nalgene water bottle – because when you work out like I do, even for just half an hour, all of your body fluid can actually evaporate, literally turning you into dust. I've got my hand towel, because even at only level three on the StairMaster, I can work up a frightening sweat. I've got my iPod – need my tunes, my power songs, my songs of inspiration. Sometimes when I need that little extra push to get through the toughest part of the workout, I'll fire up a little Hall & Oates, or maybe some Josh Groban, or, when the going gets really tough, a little Air Supply.

I also like to bring along something to read. It keeps my mind engaged and helps the workout go faster. Sometimes it's the newspaper or a magazine or even a book. In fact, I just finished the first volume in the "Harry Potter" series during my workouts at the gym. It took me seven years.

The other day, I was getting set up on the stair climber when I realized that I had forgotten to bring a paper or magazine. I looked around to see if perhaps some fellow gym rat had left behind the New York Times or a Newsweek or even a USA Today – anything. The best I could find was a business magazine. Not really my specific area of expertise – a lot of large numbers and words I don't understand, like “equity” and “return on investment” and “profit.” But it was the only reading material I could find, and I knew it would distract me from my back-breaking exercise regimen.

I came across an article entitled, “What Keeps You Up at Night?” The author, a business consultant, shared the wisdom of how this question can help you clarify what your chief concerns are. He related

how a CEO for whom he used to work used this question to begin an executive retreat. By asking, "What keeps you up at night?" he helped his senior management team think about the key areas on which they needed to focus in their work.

Next to the article was an advertisement for a conference sponsored by the Human Resources Association entitled, "Ten Human Resources Challenges that Should Keep You Up At Night." Topics included: how to get a seat at the executive table; how to take a dysfunctional team from unproductive to extraordinary; and how to make employees excited to come to work.

Maybe it was the endorphin rush, or maybe I was a bit dehydrated, or maybe it was the egg salad from lunch, but I suddenly had this vision, a revelation: Yom Kippur is the executive retreat of the Jewish People. And God – the Holy One of Blessing – is the CEO who convenes the meeting. And all the liturgy and all the readings and all the reflection is really just another way of asking, "What keeps you up at night?" – and demanding that our answers will be of consequence.

To be sure, these days there is no shortage of things that can keep us up at night. We worry, with plenty of good cause, about our jobs and our financial well-being. Will we be able to send our kids to college? Will we ever be able to retire? Will we have to go back to work? These are real concerns.

During more stable times – remember that idyllic era... say about four weeks ago... remember those halcyon days of yore? Well, back then, in the good old days, during a stressful time at work, we'd toss and turn thinking about matters which we knew were not of ultimate concern. They are not trivial matters, but we know that they are not life-and-death matters either. If we don't get a seat at the executive table, or if our dysfunctional team just keeps on being dysfunctional, or if, due to the crisis we're in now, we don't get that promotion or can't afford the bigger house or the new car, or even if we're out of work, as painful and as frightening as that surely is, we know that these are not the kinds of ultimate concerns that make the universe tremble.

But let me be clear about one thing: I know that some of the people in this room were up last night worrying about personal matters of ultimate concern – their own health or the health of those closest to them. In this room today are some folks who didn't sleep well last night because they were worrying about test results and treatment protocols. And, for some of us, the very prayers of these days are what keep us up at night – that is to say, when you or someone you love is facing serious illness, the very thought of having to come here and recite a prayer about "who shall live and who shall die" can make you toss and turn.

Still, that only makes it that much clearer what this day is all about. Yom Kippur comes each year to remind us that the things that keep us up at night should be ultimate concerns – the kinds of things that make the universe tremble.

Instead of losing sleep, as most of us – myself included – so frequently do, over work-related minutiae whose consequence will be lost upon us a year or even a month later... or over our fears that we'll be unable to make it through the complex patchwork of household commitments that await us the next day... or over our bitterness toward another person who slighted or incited us... or over our frustrations that we can't have everything we want to have, or be everything we want to be – perhaps instead of losing sleep over these things, we might lie awake wondering, "Why is my sleep uninterrupted by the calamitous suffering that exists outside my window... a suffering so dense that it literally calls into question the justice of life itself... a suffering that is actually treatable and perhaps even curable, if only our sleepless hours, and then our waking hours, were fixed upon it?"

What would be worth losing sleep over? For one thing, there are more than 862 million people in the world who are going hungry – 862 million people who lie awake fearful that they won't have anything to eat come morning. This, on a planet that could easily feed every human being twice over. Perhaps we could toss and turn over the fact that effective debt relief to the world's twenty poorest countries would cost \$5.5 billion – equivalent to the cost of building EuroDisney. Our nation has spent these past weeks vigorously debating a \$700 billion bailout of America's banks designed to rescue small business loans and retirement savings and college funds and family estates – none of us will dispute the importance of protecting those resources. But for the comparatively low price of \$80 billion, just 11% of the banking bailout, we could provide universal access to basic social services and transfers to alleviate income poverty all over the world. \$80 billion would do that, and while that's surely a lot of money, it's less than the combined net worth of the two richest men in the world.

What would be worth losing sleep over? Since our beds are situated in the finer neighborhoods of the wealthiest nation in human history, I would say that forty-seven million Americans lacking health insurance, and therefore lacking assured access to decent medical care, should awaken us in our beds at night. It is a phenomenon that is unique to the United States among all industrialized nations. Every other westernized country treats health care as a human right. And while they all have systems that are flawed and can be easily critiqued, only the United States has no system at all. Imperfectly or not, every other nation that we would consider civilized has been able to solve this problem. We have not. And why do we tolerate it? Because, quite frankly, most of us have health insurance. And while we rightly lie awake at night agonizing over our own illnesses and the illnesses of those we love, have you ever stopped to think of the middle-of-the-night agony of those facing the same illnesses without any hope of a skilled physician's care? The wisdom and dedication of our doctors is often our only emotional life raft during those frightful hours of the night. All of our hopes and prayers are pinned to that doctor's help. And yet we sleep soundly as the crisis is faced by countless doctorless Americans who have no reason to hope.

What would be worth losing sleep over? How about the fact that as many as 500,000 people have been killed in a genocide in Darfur that the world has now tolerated for more than five years. Two and a half million innocent civilians have been forced to flee their homes and now live in the squalor of IDP camps in Sudan or refugee camps in neighboring Chad. And this has been going on for more than five years. Five years of world complicity. You've heard us talk about it so often that the term "Darfur Fatigue" has entered the lexicon of humanitarian organizations. "Darfur Fatigue" means that genocide activists know full well that we're *not* lying awake at night troubled by the wanton murder of dark-skinned Darfurians. We're fatigued... bored hearing about it. We've adjusted to the genocide as an unfortunate but persistent part of reality, and we've convinced ourselves that it is so global and so far away that we are helpless to stop it. But we know, of course, from every other instance of genocide in the past 100 years, that when the world takes action to stop the killing, the killing will stop.

Now, you're probably thinking, "Gee, thanks Rabbi... in addition to tossing and turning about all the usual things I worry about in my life, now you've reminded me of some truly awful things that should be keeping me up nights. Thanks."

But there's actually a pretty reasonable explanation for why, most nights, you and I don't lie awake thinking about the problems I just described. The reason problems like these don't awaken us at night is not because they don't bother us – it's because we feel that there is essentially nothing that we can do to solve them.

That reasoning might hold up, were it not for the reality that there are, in fact, some people who actually are kept up at night by these kinds of crises – and not coincidentally, they happen to be the people who

make the biggest difference in combating them. We all know one or two of them. They're the ones whose commitment to one of these issues borders on the fanatical, at least as we see it. It plagues them around the clock. It's the prism through which they see everything. These folks aren't always much fun at parties, but you know what? They lead other people to take these problems seriously. And what little we do to fix them probably wouldn't happen if it weren't for those singularly purposeful individuals who lie awake at night because of those things that make the universe tremble.

Back in 1993, Roméo Dallaire was a career soldier who had reached the rank of Brigadier-General in the Canadian Army... which likely means that he saw almost as much combat as I did in my one year as a seventh-grade religious school teacher. With his twenty-nine-year Canadian military pedigree, he was tapped by the United Nations to serve as commander of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Rwanda. It appeared to be exactly the kind of assignment well suited to Dallaire's background. It was a simple mission of helping the Rwandans to implement the Arusha Accords, to which the Hutus and Tutsis had already agreed in ending their civil war. Of course, we know now that the mission was anything but simple. Thrown into the very center of the 100-day Rwandan genocide which resulted in over 800,000 murders, an undermanned Dallaire heroically risked his career and his life repeatedly to save tens of thousands of innocent lives and to rally the support of the world community to end the savagery.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning genocide scholar Samantha Power wrote the following about Dallaire: "The genocide in Rwanda cost Roméo Dallaire a great deal. It is both paradoxical and natural," she wrote, "that the man who probably did the most to save Rwandans feels the worst. By August 1994, Dallaire had a death wish." Dallaire recalled, "At the end of my command, I drove around in my vehicle with no escort practically looking for ambushes. I was trying to get myself destroyed and looking to get released from the guilt." He returned home to Canada and tried to outrun his nightmares, but when he was called to take the stand at the UN tribunal four years later, everything that was causing him to lose sleep at night unraveled before the court. Wrote Power: "As Dallaire spoke, it became clear how omnipresent the genocide was in his life." And with his voice cracking and his eyes cross-examining everyone in the tribunal chambers, Dallaire said haltingly: "It seems... inconceivable... that one can watch... thousands of people being... massacred... every day in the media... and remain passive."

One would have forgiven Dallaire if he had simply slinked back to Canada and descended into depression. But that wasn't possible. What would he do with the sense of obligation that kept him awake at night? Today, 62-year-old Roméo Dallaire is a Canadian Senator. His Roméo Dallaire Foundation builds schools and orphanages in Rwanda for the children of the genocide. He is also the force behind the Child Soldiers Initiative, which works to prevent the recruitment of children into armed groups all over the world. He has written a book on his experiences in Rwanda that has garnered numerous international literary awards and spawned a full-length feature film. And he has become one of the world's most renowned activists on genocide prevention and conflict resolution.

This is what we do during the day when our nighttime is haunted by the ultimate concerns – the kinds of things that make the universe tremble.

Yom Kippur is supposed to be a day of ultimate concerns. A day to make us tremble. A day on which we reflect about the people that we are and the people that we ought to be.

It's hard work. But luckily, our tradition provides us with tools and teachings and symbols that can help us be the people we ought to be. The overarching symbol of these Days of Awe is the shofar. We all love to hear it. We all think we get it. But the great medieval sage, Maimonides, arguably the greatest rabbi who ever lived, teaches us the true meaning of this symbol of these sacred days. The blast of the shofar, he writes, cries out to us: "Awake, O you sleepers, from your sleep! Awake, O you slumberers,

from your slumber!” It is, in fact, the sound of the shofar that is supposed to startle us from our sleep. The echo of the shofar is what is supposed to keep us up at night.

And once we’re up, well then what? Maimonides teaches, then: “*V’zachru boracheim* – Remember your Creator.”

It’s an interesting and somewhat unexpected teaching. The sound of the shofar will wake us up, and then we’ll remember our Creator? Or maybe better, when we are truly awakened, when we are spiritually awakened, then we’ll remember our Creator?

What is Maimonides trying to tell us? “*V’zachru boracheim* – Remember your Creator” is a plea to do better than agonizing over our place at the executive table or our dysfunctional team in the middle of the night. The shofar reminds us that the ultimate goal is to get beyond ourselves, to think beyond ourselves – to transcend ourselves. For this is the mark of those fanatical few in our world – the ones who make justice happen. They willingly – or perhaps they simply can’t help it – they surrender a significant portion of their self-concern to what they envision to be God’s ultimate concerns.

Now, I don’t claim to know precisely what those concerns are. I don’t know what keeps God up at night. My guess is that God worries about things that are bigger than we can possibly imagine.

But I do know that our tradition imagines a God that wants our concerns to be bigger than they usually are – a God who wants us to put the other first.

Our Torah reminds us thirty-six times to remember the stranger. We are told to leave the corners of our fields for the poor. Even in our rejoicing, we are to think of others: on Sukkot, the Festival of our Rejoicing, we are commanded to make sure that those who work for us, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow are able to rejoice, too. To remember our Creator is to transcend the self and to move toward the other.

We sit here each year on this day, considering what makes the universe tremble. Might we consider this year what might be possible if we decided to make the universe tremble? If we were to worry not just about our kids’ college funds but also about kids halfway around the world and right in our own back yard of South Los Angeles being able to go to university, we would transcend ourselves – refurbishing libraries, tutoring young readers, building book shelves, changing the world.

If we were to worry not just about our own medical needs but also about making sure that children halfway around the world and right here in LA have health insurance, we would transcend ourselves – organizing, advocating, changing the world.

If we were to worry not just about being able to get a loan for our small businesses or for our own homes or cars but also about ensuring that economic opportunity exists for the poor, both here and throughout the developing world, we would transcend ourselves – funding free loan societies, providing micro-credit where it is needed most, changing the world.

The belief that we can do that... change the world – it is the pipe dream of lunatics – but of the very lunatics who actually do change history. Or as anthropologist Margaret Mead famously said it, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” Are the problems too big? Is there nothing we can do? Well, Roméo Dallaire and every other sleepless lunatic like him teach us about how one person can make a world of difference.

We can make a difference. We might not, all by ourselves, be able to solve the big problems, but we can make a difference. Our individual efforts might not change the educational system in this country, for example, but we can certainly make a heck of a difference for one kid or for one school. And who knows... maybe we *can* change the educational system – after all, a Princeton undergraduate named Wendy Kopp wrote, as her senior thesis in 1989, an idealistic plan to eliminate educational inequity in America. We all write stuff like that in college. But the next year, Wendy founded Teach for America, and 14,000 inner-city teachers later, she has become another lunatic whose pipe dream is coming true.

One person can't make a difference? Tell that to my friend and teacher, Danny Siegel – *mitzvah* maven extraordinaire. Danny's passion is *tzedakah*. Raising *tzedakah*. Giving it away. Teaching kids and old people and families all about it. Over the past twenty-five years, Danny's grassroots *ZIV Tzedakah Collective* has given away over fourteen million dollars. And he's inspired legions of synagogue youth groupers and HUC rabbinical students and Sunday School teachers and students. Danny's "crazy" – crazy about inspiring others to believe that they can make a difference. Spend an afternoon with Danny, and you'll wonder who's the "lunatic." Is it Danny? This compassionate, hyperactive, off-beat, selfless man whose inability to sleep at night has driven him to raise and distribute over fourteen million dollars as the volunteer executive director of a grassroots non-profit with almost no overhead? Is he the "lunatic?" Or is it most of us most of the time, the "sane" ones who are kept up at night not by the plight of hungry families or disabled children or elderly Holocaust survivors who can't make ends meet, but by the more routine worries that we know are hardly "ultimate concerns."

One more insight for Yom Kippur especially: even if this whole process, this attempt to transcend ourselves and to focus on ultimate matters, even if it fails – even if it doesn't change the world at all – there can be no question that it will still change us.

We will be different people. We will be better people.

Look, we're going to toss and turn. We're going to have our share of sleepless nights. The only question is the content of the disruption. Wouldn't we rather rise up in the morning inspired, energized, hopeful about how our efforts will make it so others can sleep more peacefully?

This new year dawns against a backdrop of intense anxiety. Times are tough. And it's tempting to turn inward, to focus more deeply than ever solely upon our own needs, our own self-interests at this time when they are undeniably great.

But we have this wake-up call, we Jews... the call of the shofar. "Awake, O you sleepers, from your sleep! Awake, O you slumberers, from your slumber!" The universe is trembling. What will keep *you* up at night? And what will you do about it come morning?

Let us sleep the fitful sleep of the righteous – including a good, worthy nightmare or two – and then awaken to a brand new day of sacred work.

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

Rabbi Leonard I. Beerman

A Sermon for Yom Kippur Morning

October 9, 2008 Yom Kippur 5769

I have had some difficulty, considerable difficulty, in preparing this sermon. It might have to do with age. That would be understandable. It might be that the subject was everywhere, asking for a response, and therefore not easy to bring into the focus of a reasonable amount of time. Maybe that's what it's really all about.

To begin with, what's happening at this very moment, right now, right here: Here I am, standing here, in this place, in this sanctuary, with the realization that if everything goes according to plan, this will be the last time I will be seeing, you will be seeing, this building, this sanctuary as it is, as it has been since April 17, 1963 when we entered it for the first time. Of course, everywhere in this building there are signs of age and use and decay. But everywhere there are also the memories. Think of all that has happened here, the words that have been spoken, the music sung. Are those sounds crowding against one another, still reverberating in this very reverberant room?

I am remembering the controversy that greeted the first encounter with this building. Hardly an aspect of the design, color and workmanship escaped the careful scrutiny of the members of Leo Baeck Temple. But the last word may have been spoken by the children, when Judith Palarz, then the fifth grade teacher in our religious school, brought the children of her class to visit this sanctuary, and then asked them to write how they felt about it, what they liked, what they did not like. Here is what a few of them said. We printed this in our bulletin in 1963.

“Our new sanctuary is very beautiful and nice in the dim light. It makes you feel as though you were walking into the place where Moses was himself. The things that are not good about the sanctuary are its colors.”

Another: “I like the size of the Temple. When I first walked in I felt very proud. But the colors are awful. It's too bright for me. I liked where the organ is. I love the ark. I must say it is pretty. Purple is my favorite color. So I guess I like it.”

“I think the Temple is ugly. The colors are too bright for a temple, the mixture is sickening. Part of the temple looks like an auditorium and the other part looks like a playhouse. It's prettier than some temples. It's not real fancy. After a while I'll get used to it.

“I think the new Temple is very pretty and glorious. When you first walk in you feel very important. I like how high the ceiling is. I love the sound of the organ. So far I haven't found anything wrong with the temple.”

What I recall now is something that occurred not many months after we came here, I into my beautiful new office, one that Sandy Ragins would come to occupy for seventeen years, and now Ken Chasen for

the past five. The office has a door that leads to an enclosed brick covered patio with a garden wall that looks out over the religious school below. The first rains arrived, a heavy rain, and flooded the office carpet, leaving behind that stench of dampness. The engineer and contractor were called and they calculated that the problem was that there was no outlet for the water gathering in the patio. We must carve a hole in the external wall to make it possible for the water to drain. And it was done.

Not too many weeks later the patio was swarming with what seemed to me to be a thousand bees. The bees had created a hive in the hole in the wall. I called our executive director, Melvin Harris. I'll get the exterminator, he said. Whereupon, my secretary Trude Forscher said, I was at a meeting the other night, and I met a beekeeper. May I call him to see if he has a suggestion? Of course. And the next day an odd looking man, wearing a pork-pie hat, arrived, walked out into the patio, the bees swarming all about him, stuck his nose into the hole, and returned to say, that if we could give him two months, maybe three, he could educate the bees to accept another hive. Go ahead, I said, but tell me, what are you wearing that you are able to go out there with the bees? Nothing at all. You don't bother them, they won't bother you.

Well, I was never convinced about that, and I won't bother you with all the details, but approximately two months later, carrying what seemed to me to be a white box, surrounded by a huge mound of bees, he strode from the patio, through the office, and left the temple. Leaving behind a message for me, a powerful metaphor: There are always alternatives; there are ways other than the use of force and violence, to deal with perceived threats to your existence. This obviously applies to individuals, institutions, and certainly to nations, nations like our own which have demonstrated such a remarkable appetite for preemptive invasions.

But there is surely another subject calling for attention: The eruption of the profound economic crisis that is engulfing all of us, the confusion and fear and the real suffering that have been engendered. What should a rabbi who remembers all too well what it means to be poor, what it means to live through a real depression, what it means to see your father humiliated by it; what should a rabbi who knows almost nothing about the credit default swaps, merger arbitrage strategies, collateralized debt obligations, what should such a rabbi have to say?

The synagogues of the world, like ours, are crowded this morning, and there is indeed something glorious and full of wonder in our being here. I know that I marvel at it always. But the question is, what depth is there to this demonstration of piety? Judaism as a religion is not the major force in the lives of the Jewish people, nor is religion the most significant force in the lives of other Americans, in spite of the polls about belief in God, in spite of the rise of religious fundamentalism, the mega churches, and the piety displayed by some of my favorite athletes. The landscape of every city is dominated by the high rise buildings of commerce. Are not those the real cathedrals of America, the cathedrals of commerce? It is there you will find the common religion of all Americans. It is not accidental that the coinage of our realm is stamped with "In God We Trust." Money is the ultimate concern. Money is the one unambiguous criterion of success. The money maker has no serious rival for repute. A society that narrows the meaning of success to the big money will inevitably produce the sharp operator, the questionable deal. Can a society that in its higher circles is widely believed to be a network of clever deals, produce men and women with an inner moral sense? Can a society that is merely expedient produce people of conscience? (cf. C. Wright Mills)

Back in the early 1900's, Lincoln Steffans, a remarkable investigative journalist, did a study of political corruption in several American cities, St. Louis, Chicago, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New York, and he discovered a common pattern—a collusion between business interests and public officials. Boodlers, he called them. But he perceived that, even if you got rid of those responsible, others would

rise up to take their place, such was the condition in each of the cities, the nature of how cities were run. Steffans wrote a book about this, *The Shame of the Cities*, and lectured on the subject, actually came to Los Angeles to speak. When he finished his talk, an Episcopal priest in the audience arose and said, “Mr. Steffans, you’re not telling us what we want to know. You’re telling WHAT is responsible, and we want to know, WHO is responsible.”

Steffans responded: “Most people say it was Adam, the man, he was responsible. But Adam said, no, it wasn’t he, it was the woman, Eve, she was responsible. And Eve said, no, no, she wasn’t responsible, it was the serpent that tempted her, it was the serpent who was responsible. And that’s where you clergy have stopped ever since. You blame the serpent, the devil. Now I come, and I’m trying to tell you that it is not the man, and it is not the woman, and it’s not the devil, it’s the APPLE that is responsible.

The apple: The very design of global free market capitalism, the central instability of its development, so structured that it seems condemned to produce periodic crises, and so arranged that some, in most recent years, through the use of exotic financial instruments, are able to be catapulted into enormous wealth, while the bulk of our citizens are reduced to more and more deprivations in their lives. And when the system fails, as it has, ordinary people are left to bear the burden of it,

But in addition to the crisis that emanates from that little street in Lower Manhattan that stretches from the East River to where it ends in a graveyard, there is, very obviously, another subject that cannot be ignored, the presidential election, the excitement of it, democracy at work. And the wonder of it. Yet it also brings with it—the uncomfortable awareness that close to half the voters in the country hold views totally different from yours and mine. And the ugliness that accompanies the candidates, the lies and the counter lies their campaigns engage in—many of which come to be believed and transmitted by millions of people, thanks to the internet. And of course the election brings with it, as always, those endless, ponderously spoken platitudes.

And there is something else that comes with the election, the role of religion in all of this: Politics and religion—always a contentious subject. Our friends at All Saints in Pasadena have given churches, synagogues and mosques a live course in the Internal Revenue code as it applies to religious organizations. So, I hardly have any wisdom on this matter to bring to my friends George Regas, and Ed Bacon, the rector of All Saints, Ed, who led the fight on this issue and who, happily, is with us again today.

Reading the provisions of the tax code, I was embarrassed, because I became aware of how timid I had been on this issue. I had thought that a clergyman was not permitted to endorse a candidate for political office, but that is so, it turns out, in a limited sense. Clergy cannot endorse candidates within their churches, (the generic term used by the IRS) or in church publications, but they can endorse candidates anywhere else, so long as they do not say they are speaking in behalf of their religious institutions. But for more than 59 years I scrupulously avoided doing that. I wouldn’t even give a prayer during a campaign for public office. There was one exception: in 1976, when Jimmy Carter was running against Gerald Ford, and two of my close friends, heavily invested in the Carter campaign, pressured me to give the invocation at a Beverly Hilton Hotel banquet in Carter’s honor. And, this being the day of confession, I succumbed to them. Tormented about that, I constructed what I told myself was an “equivocal” invocation.

Invocation for Jimmy Carter Dinner, Beverly Hilton, May 20, 1976

This is an evening of celebration, and here at the edge of it, it might be good for the soul if we were to begin on a somewhat different note. For surely we have come here tonight with many different thoughts. Think for a moment of the possibilities. (And here I used some of the cadences I drew from Rilke)

Is it possible that this festive dinner and hundreds like it throughout the land, which those who aspire to the presidency, such as our honored guest, endure, might be part of the playing out of a divine joke?

Yes...it is possible.

Is it possible that the process of politics, the painful banalities, the hectoring, allow us merely a time to gesture, act, but leave untouched the abiding problems of human beings and their destiny?

Yes...it is possible

Is it possible that because of what we have done to the sweet air and the good earth, and because of the cruelties we have visited upon one another, here and throughout the world, we have been condemned to live in an age that will make no significant contribution to the human spirit?

Yes...it is possible.

And is it possible that in such an age as this, the man and woman of sensitivity, of wisdom even, cannot know for certain what the responsible use of their talents should be?

Yes...it is possible.

Then if all these and more are possible, are we not all, in our vulnerability, in need of blessing? Shall we not pray that our capacity for decency be liberated, that we be given the courage to be compassionate, that we be unashamed to be tender with one another, and that we be moved to action by a vision of a community of men and women who are dedicated to each others fulfillment?

God, bless us in our being here, and bless us in our possibilities.

Religion and politics: I've said this before, and I want to say it again. A religion must be political. A religion divorced from politics is a religion divorced from life, and from people. I am not talking about partisan politics in the synagogue. No, religion must be political because this world is political, for this world has to do with the decisions we make, the decisions that determine who shall live and who shall die, and how we live and how we die.. A religion that does not help us, cajole us, nudge us, to confront the moral issues present in all of this, is another anti-depressant, another anti-anxiety medication, it is at best a subordinate amusement. It does not denounce, it adapts. It does not move the heart, it hardens the heart. It does not stir the conscience, it blunts the conscience. Those who want a religion which blunts the conscience would rob Judaism of what I believe is its moral grandeur.

Who shall live, who shall die. How we live and how we die. I have lived through almost all of the years since 1914, and those years have been the most barbaric in human history. The total number of deaths associated with the wars fought since 1914 has been estimated at 190 million. And these years brought with them a qualitatively different kind of war, more inhumane. In my father's war, World War I, five percent of those who died were civilians, but as Eric Hobsbawm has written, in World War II the burden shifted, when civilians became 66 percent of those who died, not only died, but were the actual object of

military operations. We saw in the Nazi bombing of London, American bombing of Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Allied bombing of Dresden, or as the German and Soviet armies and the Allies, raged, killing one another across the continent; not to forget our own six million. And as for today, it is estimated that 80 90 percent of those who die in war today are non-combatants, a grotesque moral transformation.

In thrall to the drive for the presidency, the human dimension, the sorrow and the pity and the horror, and the maiming and the killing of soldiers and little children, that occur daily, and will go on in the willingness to enlarge and extend the battle in Afghanistan, these go largely unremarked. Almost a year ago, at the annual dinner of Human Rights Watch, I heard a poem read, a poem that in its unnerving simplicity, brought the human reality of war into my consciousness, into my kishkes, so that I vowed to myself that I would learn it, and carry it with me wherever I spoke. And I have. It was written by the Colombian poet, Jotomario Abarlaez.

A day after the war

if there is a war,

if there is a day after the war,

I will hold you in my arms

A day after the war

if there is a war,

if there is a day after the war,

if after the war I have arms,

I will make to you with love.

A day after the war

if there is a war,

if there is a day after the war

if after the war there is love,

and if there is with what to make love.

Who shall live and who shall die. How we live and how we die. How shall we live in this unbalanced world whose unbridled economy is cracked in a hundred shivers, a world fraught with the danger posed by our enemies, the brutality of terror, and the cruelty of the last eight years of our own exaggerated force and bravado?

We have come again to this sanctuary, and our presence here is a vivid, dynamic expression of the vitality of the Jewish spirit..It was more than 3000 years ago, the Torah tells us, that our ancestors, the ancient Israelites, there in the desert, constructed the first sanctuary, building it out of the gifts brought by the people, men and women .Gifts of gold. Gifts of blue, and purple and crimson yarns, (like those in our sanctuary) and fine linen; and the women, who excelled in that skill, spun with their own hands, the blue, purple, crimson, fine linen, and goats' hair.

A tiny, insignificant, people, our ancestors, who fashioned ideas of startling depth, ideas that were to stir human beings in every succeeding generation--the faith and the teaching of a little people, clinging to its ideals, always building upon them. Thought and feeling, searching out the experience of life in a quest for meaning and purpose, asking probing questions about human life, and our place in the universe, a universe we never made, a universe which filled us with fear and wonder, and celebrating, always, wisdom, the miracle of human thought, Leo Baeck called it, all of this joined with a compassion for everything that lives, and the quest for a world of justice and peace--this is where Jews found their vocation.

(Are not these qualities precisely the ones we would hope to find in those we choose to lead our country?)

Yom Kippur, in all of its glory, has brought us here again. And Yom Kippur, we know, is always having to say you're sorry. Always having to consider the harm you've caused, the respect you've withheld—having to consider (what follows here are words adapted from the poet Philip Schultz) all the callous, cruel, stubborn, joyless sins in your alphabet of woe, so that you might be forgiven. You are asked for one night and one day to starve your body so your soul can feast on faith and adoration. You are asked to forgive and you are asked to and remember, to gaze across the desert of your heart and see a *shener velt*, a more beautiful world. To believe that no matter what you have done to yourself and others, morning can come and the mountain of night can fade. To believe, for these few precious moments, in the utter sweetness of your life.

That is why this day is given to us. May it come with the blessing it wants us all to have.

Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

“The Dammed River”

October 9, 2008 Yizkor Yom Kippur 5769

One of the earliest pioneers in the mind/body health field, Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, tells the story of her struggle with Crohn’s Disease, which she contracted as a teenager. “At the beginning, I reacted to suffering and limitation with rage,” Remen writes. “I needed to consult my disease on the simplest matters. Would it allow me to eat a piece of cheese? Did I have the strength to walk up this flight of stairs? The authority of this disease would brook no argument from me. It still shapes my life,” relates Remen, “but with a far lighter hand.”

Remen recalls how she felt many years after learning to live with her diagnosis. As she headed toward the completion of her medical training, she was offered a senior residency at an outstanding hospital, but she doubted that she’d be able to accept it. Already, she barely had the necessary strength to get through each day... how could she add this significant piece to the puzzle, no matter how meaningful the experience might be? And her anger at her predicament surfaced anew: “Here was one more dream stolen.”

But something was different this time. After years of venturing in and out of this rage against everything denied her, Dr. Remen didn’t drown this time in her despair. Instead, it passed, leaving an awareness of vitality that she had never felt in herself before. Reflecting on this shift, she wrote: “My anger was my will to live turned inside out. In that first moment of surprise, I had a glimpse of something fundamental about who I am; that at the core of things, I have an intense love of life, a wish to participate fully in life and to help others do the same. Somehow this had grown large in me as a result of the very limitations that I had thought were thwarting it. Like the power of a dammed river.”

The phenomenon that Remen describes is not limited to the awakening from our struggles with chronic illness. The story speaks just as powerfully – perhaps even more so – to the awakening we seek at this hour of *Yizkor*... the awakening from our struggles with mourning. After all, we who remember know that our mourning is, in some very important ways, a chronic condition all its own. We, too, become locked inside a certain rage... or perhaps it can better be described as a paralyzing melancholia. The years go by, but our suffering and its concomitant limitations do not disappear just because “it’s time to let go.” The persistent absence of our dear ones – the parent whose counsel and assurance can never be replaced... the sibling whose deep understanding of us emerged from the lifelong journey we shared... the spouse who was also best friend, and whose departure has created a painfully lonely home... the child whose unfinished story has left an ache that never heals – the persistent absence of those we loved leaves us disabled. Too often, the living joys that come our way even years after our losses are tinged with our grief, rendering them joys we are unable to claim. Each one is “one more dream stolen” by our bereavement, and it deepens our despair. We are forced, as Dr. Remen once was, to consult our mourning on even the simplest matters, and the loss in our lives continues to mount.

Perhaps that is why so many of us have made a habit of attending this service. We recite these words of Yizkor each year on Yom Kippur, renewing a strange and tense dance with the holes in our lives that at once enslave and ennoble us. We are here partly to return to the oddly nourishing pain of grief, and partly to revive our hope of subduing it. We wonder: “Might this be the year when my mourning is shown to be ‘my will to live turned inside out?’”

In our hearts’ deepest wells, we sense that our grieving is ultimately the most powerful testimony for our passion for life. Our losses wouldn’t hurt like they do if they weren’t reminders of just how glorious it is to love and to be loved. We miss our partners in that love terribly when they depart this earth, but the passion for living that they kindled in us does not depart with them. It simply lies in wait, until we are able to see it right there in our grief – grown larger by virtue of the very limitations that we feared had thwarted it. Love of life... the dammed river that still flows inside us.

The contemporary Jewish poet, Adam Sol, wrote about this will to live turned inside out. He describes a grieving woman who might well be one of us, “her nose tissue-sore, her eyes dry as ash.” She agonizes over time marching on, uninterrupted by the calamity of her loss. Even the garbageman making his weekly visit is an affront to her: “Shouldn’t the air be full of grief?” she wonders. “Couldn’t the processes of the world – for one day – cease?” But she knows the answer to her own question: “Of course not.” And just when she might have descended into permitting her bereavement to become her remaining living story, she instead welcomes that garbageman’s weekly return, “faithful as a compass.” That compass points her back toward life – a reminder that she need not forever assign absolute authority to her grief. The dammed river can flow once again. And the poet concludes: “It’s enough to make her grief as thin as paper, and as precious.”

It’s hard – even shocking – to think of our grieving as something precious. We know from experience that it certainly doesn’t feel in any way precious. But perhaps we should, at this hour of remembering, consider the possibility that the doctor and the poet may be right. Perhaps our mourning is a container for our love of life, a container that can be reopened once we will permit it. You see, there can be no denying – our departed ones created in us a craving for life. That’s what we miss. With them, we discovered just how good it can be. We felt the power of a unique smile or embrace. We were moved by the dignity of another person’s example. We learned how the passage of time can be filled with richly sanctified moments. And no matter how much we may lament that it will never be the same without them, it is those very people that we miss who have taught us to hunger for love and life once again.

This is our purpose in “consulting our disease,” as it were – our mourning, as we do on occasions like this. Staring at our losses, we are striving to reopen the life container within us. We know better than to try to dispose of our grief... we need it, as the doctor said, still to shape our lives, but with a far lighter hand. For that will allow us to reclaim our inside-out love of life that our departed ones helped us to acquire. They bequeathed that to us. They certainly never wished to take it with them into the earth, which is why we know what they’d tell us today, if only they could. They’d remind us that our grief has served us well, but that it was always intended to lead us back to life... to undam the river.

Wrote the Israeli poet, Leah Goldberg:

In everything there is at least an eighth
of death. It doesn't weigh much.
With what hidden, peaceful charm
We carry it everywhere we go.
In sweet awakenings,
in our travels,
in our love talk,
when we are unaware,
forgotten in all the corners of our being –
always with us.
And never heavy.

Let us gently carry their memories like a gift, not a burden... and with loving honor.

