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“That One”

One of my teachers used to say that a sermon should be like a bathing suit: long enough to cover the essentials... short enough to be interesting. It's a new year. I shall try to transcend myself.

As I wrote in our current temple bulletin, this year's High Holydays are occurring historically early in the month of September. That is to say, September 4th is literally the earliest possible date on the Gregorian calendar for Rosh Hashanah eve, and I am confident that none of us can ever remembering it happening before, because the last time it did was in 1899.

There are some liabilities that come with Rosh Hashanah beginning on September 4th. Practically nobody is thinking High Holydays while summer vacationing. It's harder to prepare, both spiritually and logistically, for this season in the heart of the summer. But sometimes, “early” can be “just right” for the High Holydays, particularly when the world's events leading up to the new year inspire the kind of self-reflection, as individuals and as a community, that is supposed to fill these days.

We experienced one such world event exactly one week ago today, when our nation paused to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington. The greatest American sermon ever was delivered that day on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Fifty years have passed, and it still reaches into us, even those of us who are only old enough to have heard it after it entered history. Schoolchildren will still be studying its words on its one hundredth anniversary and well beyond.

The rhetorical genius of Dr. King's words and presentation is obvious, but I have long felt that there is something more to the power of this speech. It has become for us a symbol, just like the March itself. In our national memory, the March is a symbol of a different time – a time when the world could be changed, and would be changed... when grand, future-altering progress was still possible. Dr. King said, “I have a dream that one day... the crooked places will be made straight” – and we believed him. We could see in our mind's eye the crooked in

this world being made straight. We felt capable of that, because we knew we were part of a mass of humanity that wanted it, hungered for it, and was ready to lay it all on the line to get there.

A powerful symbol – powerful enough to cast its imposing shadow upon us fifty years later. Last week’s anniversary was an occasion for looking inward to America’s soul, and a lot of us weren’t crazy about what we saw when we looked. We thought about whether we actually believed Dr. King anymore... whether the crooked places could ever be made straight... whether they were instead only becoming more and more irretrievably crooked. Former President Clinton stood last week upon the same steps where King once stood and said: “Martin Luther King did not live and die to hear his heirs whine about political gridlock.” I listened, and I couldn’t help but think: “Yeah, he kind of did. It wasn’t what King wanted, that’s for sure – but fifty years later, the dream is gridlocked, and not just the dream of racial equality, but so many of the dreams we hold for our nation. The political game has descended to that bottom.” Perhaps you thought that, too, if you heard President Clinton’s words. Or perhaps you’re thinking it right now.

Last Wednesday, I found myself despairing over what Dr. King would say about the gun control saga in America today – about the fact that there is a clear consensus in this country to institute at least a few common-sense protections... to ban military assault weapons... to use background checks to keep guns out of the most dangerous and unstable hands. And yet despite that clear consensus, nothing changes – because the crooked cannot be made straight... because the money and influence of those who profit from unfettered gun sales has purchased the conscience of cowardly lawmakers. We wonder: what magic words would Dr. King have for that?

Many of you know that I was invited by Rabbi Shaul Praver, the rabbi in Newtown, Connecticut, to help lead an interfaith evening of music and healing just eight days after the massacre in December. It was a night I’ll surely never forget, an extraordinary instance of testimony to the resiliency of the human spirit. For this was a congregation still in shiva for Noah Pozner, the six-year-old little boy who was growing up at that synagogue, not to mention grieving over so many others they knew from around town... a town to which they had all come precisely to escape this kind of danger, the random violence we associate with the big city, not places like Newtown. I expected to encounter paralyzed hearts co-opted by fear and maybe even by vengeance. Yet somehow, the eyes I looked into while visiting Newtown were already trained on the future, on the opportunity that had to be mined from the tragedy. So when I asked people what we could do for them – what they wanted from us – I heard a consistent refrain: “What we want is not to be known as that place where the massacre happened. We want to be known as the place where meaningful change was born.”

They gave me this “Angels of Sandy Hook” wristband before I left the following morning, and I can’t make myself take it off. Why? Because I am picturing Rosh Hashanah eve in Rabbi Praver’s shul. And I am picturing what they are saying to one another right now. And I am wondering whether our nation’s weakness of will is creating an even greater wound in their hearts than the initial tragedy itself. “We want not to be known as that place

where the massacre happened. We want to be known as the place where meaningful change was born.” Only meaningful change isn’t being born. Meaningful change is barely even being discussed anymore. In less than nine months, gun reform went from being an absolute expectation – the President’s personal crusade – to vanishing as a matter of public discourse. And a new year has arrived at Congregation Adath Israel in Newtown. What are they saying to one another tonight?

No doubt, they are trying their best to hold fast to hope, but can they be experiencing anything other than a crushing loss of faith in their nation? After all, they’re Americans – and if the researchers are right, most of us believe far less in America today than Americans did fifty years ago, when the groundbreaking changes that the March on Washington produced came in the form of legislation passed by Congress. Today, Congress is viewed favorably by 17% of us – a high number, frankly, considering that this 113th Congress is on pace to become the least productive in American history. Congress has passed a grand total of twenty-three laws this year – and that includes one to name a bridge and another to promote fishing in Tennessee’s Cumberland River.

So Americans really can’t be blamed for distrusting our elected officials. They’ve earned the distrust. But curiously, the consequence for that distrust is not Americans throwing the bums out of office. Instead, it manifests itself in a gnawing feeling of futility within Americans – the sense that this is America now, and that we’re stuck with it. It’s what those folks in Newtown are surely agonizing over right now, and so are we. A TIME Magazine Poll released just this past June demonstrates that only one-third of American citizens believe that our country is headed in the right direction – something of a marked departure from the nationalistic pride still displayed as recently as a decade ago in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Of course, a case might be made that a little diminution of nationalistic fervor could be a good thing for America. But one doesn’t have to be jingoistic to want to feel proud of his or her country... to believe that it has a promising future... to want to be a part of creating that promising future. And the sad reality is that most of us just don’t feel that way anymore.

So that’s why the 50th anniversary of the March speaks to us – because it reminds us of a different America, one that we believed in, and we want that belief back. But there’s only one problem with that thinking. The problem is that it’s based upon a recollection of 1963 that is, quite simply, fiction. That is to say, the very factors that cause us to lose faith in our country today were every bit as much a part of yesterday. In many cases, in fact, they were an even larger part of yesterday.

In our romantic visions of that earlier America, our best politicians showed themselves not to be so feckless at the moments of greatest consequence. They stepped forward to provide leadership when the conditions demanded it.

In the reality of that earlier America, Congress had failed to pass any sort of civil rights legislation since 1875. And as for the President... a Democrat who remains a hero in the progressive memory... he spoke up plenty in favor of civil rights, but when citizens wanted to march on Washington because the government wasn’t turning

all the talk into action, President Kennedy was not exactly a supporter. He was, at best, highly anxious about the march, and at worst, something of a resisting force to it. Wrote Harry Belafonte, who was responsible for recruiting the March's star-studded celebrity lineup: "One of the things that I said in my conversations with the Kennedys in discussing why they should be more yielding in their support of our demonstration was the fact that there would be such a presence of highly profiled artists – that that alone would put anxiety to rest." I doubt that a Democratic president today, regardless of his or her skin color, who had to be coaxed and cajoled not to oppose a movement crying out against injustice would be viewed by progressives as a leader.

In our romantic visions of that earlier America, nonviolent protest became the commonly acknowledged and respected means for achieving social change.

In the reality of that earlier America, nonviolent protests became violent because they were met with government-ordered brutality. Cattle prods and fire hoses and attack dogs were dispatched against demonstrators who repeatedly refrained from lifting even a finger in violence to make their case. Outrageous... unthinkable today, regardless of which political party is in power. But fifty years ago, the peaceful protesters were seen as rabble-rousers who endangered safety and order, as opposed to rallying for order. This is why the Kennedy Administration ordered the National Guard to loom over what was probably this country's greatest achievement in justice activism – why the President drew up a draft declaring martial law in preparation for the day we remember now for "I Have a Dream."

In our romantic visions of that earlier America, leaders of change movements organized rallies and marches because they knew they could turn out huge crowds. That was how America worked back then.

In the reality of that earlier America, the organizers of the March on Washington entered the big day fearful that people wouldn't come. Eleanor Holmes Norton, who served on the staff at the March headquarters, explained that "the major work of those... who actually (staffed) the March was... in fact, getting people to come... talking on the phone about how you get there." But after that work was done, the transportation director for the March – a Jewish woman by the name of Rachelle Horowitz – estimated that 67,000 people were going to attend, a number well shy of the 100,000 participants that had been sought. Of course, we now know that four times as many people as she had expected actually came – but that happened only because one by one, somewhere on the order of 180,000 individuals woke up that Wednesday morning and decided that they were going to get themselves to Washington for this.

Nostalgia can be a wonderful thing, but not when it deceives us into rendering today futile. The corruption of power... the unjust influence of money... the abuse of authority... even the suppression of the masses with the thought that they are powerless – we know that none of this is an invention in our day. These threats to justice are as old and predictable as society itself.

This past summer in our outdoor chapel, my teacher and our fellow Leo Baecker, Dr. Lewis Barth, taught an ancient Midrashic story attributed to Rabbi Yochanan, an early Talmudic master from nearly 1800 years ago. In it, the rabbi tells of a man who goes up to Jerusalem to seek justice in court – only the judge decides to use his authority to make him jump through a few hoops in order to get his case heard. First, the judge asks the man to split some logs for him. Then he requests that the man fill some casks of water. And the chain of random chores continues until the man finally runs out of money, forcing him to leave Jerusalem without justice and with a broken spirit... which sounds bad enough. But while he is on his way home, he comes upon a widow – someone who is, of course, at much greater risk in society than he is – and she asks him how his lawsuit came out. He tells her that he ran out of money, so he got nowhere at all. And she responds: “If this person, who is a man, got nowhere at all with his case, all the more certain that I, a widow, will get nowhere with mine.”

It’s an 1800-year-old story... and in reality, a much older story than that... this story that we are living and resenting and regretting in America. We are only the latest in a long line of people who have lost faith in the system. And let’s face it... in Rabbi Yochanan’s story, you and I are not the widow – we’re the man. We’re the ones who have power and position in this country – so if we’re losing hope, what do you think America’s “widows”... America’s underclass... thinks of their prospects for justice? We fear that our kids and grandkids might not be able to live out the American dream anymore – what dream is available to those who look to us and yearn only for the opportunity we already possess?

It’s Rosh Hashanah – a day for telling the truths we choose to avoid all year long. And the truth is that the factors that stand in the way of justice – that make us doubt that the crooked places can ever be made straight again – are no different than they’ve ever been. So if we think the nation has descended to unprecedented depths, the only reason for that can be *us*. You and me. Not Congress. Not the lobbyists. Not the moneyed interests. They’ve all been there forever. If our country is truly headed in the wrong direction right now, we must be consenting to this in ways that those before us did not. And that’s what makes the March worth remembering. Yes, Dr. King gave an unforgettable speech – but without those 180,000 extra people who just woke up and decided to come, who decided to put themselves out, to inconvenience themselves, to tax themselves, because they refused to be overwhelmed by the futility of it all (and ask any African-American senior citizen, and they’ll tell you that civil rights looked plenty futile in 1963) – without those 180,000 individuals, it’s doubtful that Dr. King’s message enters the history books. After all, you might not know that Dr. King had already spoken the most famous phrases from his dream in a speech he gave at a Detroit rally in June. But the same words two months later made history. Why? The biggest difference was those 180,000 people. They trusted that things could change, and only because they trusted did they change.

To be fair, when we see things like the gun control debate after Newtown, or the Citizens United ruling on campaign finance, or voter suppression efforts in American elections, or chemical weapons attacks on innocent

Syrians being used as a political football – when we see a federal government that isn't even functional enough to fund itself – it's pretty tempting to give up. But when we surrender our faith in the system, we become its engine. When we abdicate, we do just what the opponents of justice count on us to do. And on this evening of great honesty, how many of us can honestly say that in this past year, we truly put ourselves out, inconvenienced ourselves, taxed ourselves financially and with our time in a substantial way, to turn this country in the right direction? How many of us can honestly say that if another march for another matter of justice were inconveniently set for next Wednesday in Washington that we would even seriously consider going? Even if you were one of those 180,000 get-up-and-go activists in 1963, would you be one of them next Wednesday? Or would the plane ticket cost too much? Or the hassle be too great? Or the time too hard to carve out?

Before you answer, here's another thing about the March on Washington that you may not know but should: the next-to-last speaker on the program was Rabbi Joachim Prinz, the President of the American Jewish Congress. His was the last voice heard before Dr. King's. How did he use that once-in-a-lifetime platform? He said, "When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community of Berlin, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned is that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problems. The most disgraceful, the most shameful, and the most tragic problem is silence."

For one who says, "I will sin, then I shall repent" – for him, there is no repentance, says Maimonides. The severity of that sin is too great. Will there be repentance for us?

Fortunately, not every meaningful call to justice requires us to drop everything and get on a plane. Tomorrow morning, Rabbi Timoner will suggest a few ways you can inconvenience yourself for justice right here at home. But in the meantime, for the past year, our Reform movement in California has been organizing to achieve immigration reform in our state via the TRUST Act, a bill which will stop the deportations of thousands of immigrants with no criminal records. Right now, immigrant children in our state are ending up in foster care because their parent was jailed and then deported for something as minor as a traffic ticket. And when any discussion with the police can turn into an immigration arrest, we shouldn't be surprised that immigrants are now becoming unwilling to report crimes. Too many Latinos in our own state now see police protection as a luxury item that they cannot afford.

As an immigrant people ourselves in America, we think of this country as a place that has always been a safe harbor from that sort of fear, not a perpetrator of it. Fifty years ago, the Jewish community stood with the African-American community because we as a people had lived some version of their plight. Can we, whose loved ones came to these shores dreaming of what our lives actually became, do any less for those attempting to complete the same journey today?

I knew only one of my great-grandparents personally... my Bubbie, who suffered a stroke on the evening of my Bar Mitzvah party, but is there in all the photographs that morning. To me, she was the little old lady with the Eastern European accent in our family, but when I learned her story after she had died, I discovered that she was a whole lot more than that. My Bubbie was a mail-order bride – and when she got to this country and met the guy who brought her here, she didn't like him. I have to think she felt about as powerful as the widow in Rabbi Yochanan's story. But somehow, she mustered the courage to ask her "fiancé" if she could go to work in order to buy her way out of the arrangement – and incredibly, he allowed her to do it. And because she pulled it off, she ended up marrying my great-grandfather instead, which, of course, is what made my life possible.

Dig deeply enough, and almost every single one of us has in our family narrative a loved one who did something unbelievably brave for us. They stared down every challenge – language, employment, living conditions, anti-Semitism, you name it – all so we could sit here comfortably in Bel Air and greet the new year. The fight for immigrant justice is our fight if we are at all interested in the crooked places being made straight.

So once again, this "early" Rosh Hashanah is actually "right on time" – for the California State Senate will be receiving the final amended version of the TRUST Act within the next few days... before Yom Kippur will have come and gone, in fact. And it appears the votes are there to pass it – so all we'll need then is for Governor Brown to sign it into law... and that means all we need *now* is an avalanche of phone calls to the Governor, insisting that he turn our state back in the right direction.

You know, one of the big reasons we often choose silence over action is that we don't like losing. And fighting for justice means a whole lot of losing – and somehow continuing to believe after every defeat, continuing to fight until victory is won. Governor Brown vetoed our last attempt at a law of this sort. The pressures of the status quo upon him were greater than the pressures from those demanding justice. We get to decide whether they will be again. We get to decide whether we'll fuel the national movement for immigration reform by creating success in our state. We get to decide how we want this episode in the American story to read to those who will stand in judgment of us fifty years from now.

So in the next few days, once the TRUST Act reaches its vote in the Senate, I am going to email you and ask you to call the Governor that day. I want his switchboard to break. My email message to you will provide simple instructions for making the call – and even if you made the call when we asked a couple of weeks ago, we need you to make the call again. Just our congregation alone could produce many hundreds of calls, and hundreds of calls might just be the difference between a veto and a signature this time. Will you put yourself out?

Let there be no doubt – our nation is struggling in all of its crooked places. And whoever you've decided is most responsible for that struggle, you're probably focused in the wrong place. You see, the great rabbi of Berdichev once sought to get his entire city to change its ways... to do *teshuvah*... to turn the city back in the right

direction. However, he quickly discovered that there were members of his own synagogue, his own shul, who had not made the personal changes necessary for *teshuvah*. So he turned his attention just to his own congregation, only to discover that members of his own family had not changed as they needed to change. So he concentrated only on his loved ones, but soon he realized that the impediment to their transformation was that he himself had not changed. He needed to do *teshuvah*. And once he began to change, he found himself able to inspire his family, his community, and his entire city to follow a better path.

So the failure of society was all the rabbi's fault. Or maybe not. Yes, I have to do *teshuvah*. But so do you. For Dr. King didn't get those 180,000 extra people to come to Washington just because he had prepared an exquisite speech. Each of them came on their own – transcending their own resistance, their own excuses, their own skepticism, their own faithlessness. One additional person came... 180,000 times... until a quarter of a million people, led with vision, made history.

In this year 5774, may each of us be that one.