



Senior Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

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“Leonard’s Sermon”

For sixty-five years, our congregation was blessed with a bedrock.

When twenty-eight-year-old Rabbi Leonard Beerman showed up to lead Temple Beth Aaron – soon to be renamed Leo Baeck Temple – the president of the United States was Harry Truman. The Dodgers played in Brooklyn; the Lakers played in Minneapolis. The new smash hit on Broadway was *South Pacific*, and a brand new song was soon to hit #1... Gene Autry’s *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*. The Soviet Union was just about to begin testing atomic weapons. South Africa had just instituted something called apartheid. And the United States had just officially recognized a fledgling new country named Israel.

This is the world to which Leonard Beerman began applying the teachings of the Jewish tradition in service of building justice. Think about everything he saw happen in the human story – the triumphs and the tragedies, the moments of terrifying uncertainty and moral questioning – and how he developed and honed a compass that would stand the test of time and circumstance... a compass he would share again and again with this community, as its members rode the tempest and stared at their souls.

It’s not often that a synagogue gets a bedrock at all, much less a bedrock for sixty-five years. But we had Rabbi Leonard I. Beerman to lean upon – and today, we will lean upon him again, and be reminded of the ways in which we will always lean upon him.

We are blessed to journey into our Founding Rabbi’s words today with a number of his most treasured partners as our guests. I am delighted to welcome my dear friend, Rev. Ed Bacon, the Rector of All Saints Church in Pasadena, who gave Leonard a home church at which to teach and inspire, to go along with his home synagogue. Here today also are Leonard’s cherished friends Mike Farrell and Shelley Fabares... who loved our rabbi, nourished him, and worked with him tirelessly to build a world responsive to the call of conscience. It is an honor to our community to have you all with us today.

And of course, Rabbi Beerman’s family is with us, as always – for this is their home. We know that you have all been navigating a great, great loss... and allowing us generously to share in that loss, we hope, without making your bereavement more difficult. It is good to see you together here on Yom Kippur Morning. And I want to offer some heartfelt words of thanks to Leonard’s beloved Joan. When I told her of my plans for today’s sermon, she asked me if I would like to come over to the house and sit in Leonard’s study to review his sermons. What a gift that was... what a precious comfort amid my own missing him. And what a perfect

opportunity to imagine him preparing for this day, searching for the words to bring to the flood of urgent moral crises of this year – the Syrian refugees... the nuclear deal with Iran... the laying bare of America's racism... the Israelis and the Palestinians... the deepening scourges of poverty and homelessness and violence.

I really can't hazard a guess as to what new language Leonard would have chosen this year to open us up, but one thing is for sure... it would have been colorful. But I felt it would be terribly presumptuous of me to try to guess at the sermon he would have brought us today. Even he wouldn't have known what it would be until he got to fashioning it. So my intention here is to bring you some of the words he has spoken in this space before... words that especially moved me, although I must confess at the outset that choosing from among Leonard's sermons is an unenviable task. I could have offered a dozen different combinations of excerpts this morning to equal effect, but I chose to organize my choices in a particular way designed to demonstrate the breadth and creativity of his rabbinic voice. For as we all know, even some of our rabbi's most ardent admirers were also among his critics – and he wouldn't have had it any other way. So this morning, I will share four excerpts from High Holydays sermons past, each responsive to a different challenge that he faced with such grace, respect and vision.

And so I offer this bricolage from Rabbi Beerman. Do you remember – eleven years ago, when he began his Yom Kippur Morning sermon by saying: "Among the many emails that come to me every day, there is one that I actually subscribe to called, 'Wordsmith, A Word a Day.' A few weeks ago it brought the word, 'bricolage,' which is something created out of a mix of whatever happens to be available. And that, I believe, could be a good description of my sermon for today."

Challenge #1 – some would say that Rabbi Beerman sought controversy... that he relished being a provocative, even a polarizing figure. Of course, if you knew him, you knew that he possessed an uncommonly loving nature, which he never surrendered, even when under attack. And he sought to teach that inclination from the bima. The "bricolage" sermon, delivered in 2004, concluded with the following words:

The world spins without the wisdom or the magnanimity of great leaders. There is nothing for the ear but the dull articulation of weary words and stale and unprofitable ideas.

Where are you? We need a place to stand, do we not? Here we surely are as Jews, standing in our place in the great processional of the Jewish people over the centuries. Here we are, we with our love for each other. Here we are, holding on to our lives.

Israel's most celebrated poet, the late Yehuda Amichai, once described it this way: "The pressure of my life brings my date of birth / closer / to the date of my death / as in history books / where the pressure of history has brought / those two numbers together next to the name / of a dead king / with only a hyphen between them. / I hold on to that hyphen with all my might / like a lifeline, / I live on it."

Yes, life for all of us is always too brief, not much longer than a hyphen, to be loved, to be clung to. We feel that yearning here on the edge of a new year, in a world we never made. Yes, we are not so naïve as to believe

that terror will vanish, that the evil of human suffering will not be with us, here and everywhere for a long time to come. But we still have a choice to make.

Oh, we could try to create a new politics, a shining one. A shining politics. Or we could even, minimally, consider what some of the modern Kabbalists believe, that what we give in love remains forever, that no love, no act of giving, no kind thought or feeling for another is ever lost. It makes reverberations in the heavens. And the opposite is true, as well: wherever we manifest hatred, we add to the great cosmic accumulation of negativity in the world, the very negativity that has brought all those powers of destruction upon human life. So, as Rav Berg puts it, we can each contribute to the power of good in the world, replace darkness with light and merit the blessing of God for ourselves and for all humanity...

Is it not part of the wonder of this holy day, that it provides us with an incomparable opportunity to renew our hope, to renew our faith in ourselves, to reassert what we know is perennially valid in the conviction of this people of ours, the imperative to preserve ourselves as a people, and, simultaneously, the imperatives of justice and love; the demand for the freedom and dignity of every person; the protest against brutality and war; the passionate concern for the poor and lonely and abandoned; and the struggle against exploitation and the abuse of power? Yes, there are always enemies of hope all about us, and in us. But there are also allies everywhere. There is a lot of love out there. There is, in truth, in every one of us a coercion to love.

Feel it. Feel it. It cannot be stifled.

Challenge #2 – some would say that Rabbi Beerman deferred too frequently to darkness... that he judged the world and humanity so harshly that it left little room for hope. The written record tells a different story, just as he himself did by the way he lived.

The following words were the conclusion to Leonard's sermon on Yom Kippur 1968. He and his congregants had lived through a year that had battered hope. The assassinations of Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy. The escalation of the war in Vietnam. The explosiveness of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Hope was on the ropes, out of fashion. This is what Rabbi Beerman had to say:

The synagogue must be the place where we come to reckon with the problems of war and violence and poverty, with all of the issues that shake the tranquility of life. It must be the place where we explore the moral dimensions and articulate the moral conscience. That is the way we fulfill the mandate of our Jewish heritage. We Jews are, after all, experts in the world's injustice. The destruction of more than a third of our people in our lifetime warrants such a claim. Our whole tradition, our very history sets a seal upon it.

I believe with perfect faith that this time of turbulence is a time of great hope for man; not for despair and cynicism, but for hope. Last week I stood on the court house steps on Spring Street to participate in a religious service that would link me in spirit and in ambition with two young men who were about to go on trial on the charge of having violated the Selective Service law by refusing to be inducted into the armed services. The words they used in their trials were not those I might have used, but I responded to their courage and drew

hope from it for this troubled, cynical time in the life of man. This is a time to be hopeful by reason of the lonely acts of courage through which men affirm their dignity. I draw courage also from the heroic example of the Czech people and their leaders who have so manfully withstood the aggressor and who will emerge victorious in spite of the defeat they now endure. I draw hope from the example of six lonely people – among them a writer, a housewife, an art critic, a scientist, who little more than a month ago stood in the middle of Red Square in Moscow – that broad and awesome place – Russian citizens all, and in broad daylight unfurled a banner expressing their opposition to the occupation of Czechoslovakia. Can you imagine what courage was in that moment? More courage I believe than all of us combined could summon up.

I draw hope from young people all over the world and especially here in our own country. Yes, they are romantic and unrealistic and immoderate and unpredictable. They have respect for some of our ideals but they are justly suspicious of our ability to realize the values we have taught them. They are looking for values not to talk about but to live by, and they want to fill the spiritual emptiness left by the rich thing world in which we live so uncertainly. They are searching for ways of being more open to one another. They want to create institutions that include, institutions that vitalize, humanize and strengthen those they touch. They are looking for a new concept of man that acknowledges each man's unique individuality without denying his social responsibility. I draw hope from them.

And I draw hope from being a Jew, from being a part of a tradition that commands me to imagine a world of men as it should be, that asks me to dream because there are still dreams worth having, and more than that to advance confidently in the direction of my dreams. Thoreau was not a Jew, but he once wrote a passage that many of us learned as school boys: "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."

This synagogue, the whole of our Jewish tradition is where we turn to build castles in the air. Then we must go forth into the city of man, and there we must put foundations under those castles we envisage here. That is what we must do again in this New Year, to redeem the evil we have done, to dream the impossible dream of a world as it might be, and then advance confidently in the direction of our dream.

Challenge #3 – some would say that Rabbi Beerman was not very religious... that he lacked God. On Yom Kippur 1972, just weeks before Richard Nixon was re-elected in an overwhelming landslide amid seemingly endless war in Vietnam, here is the religion that Leonard chose to teach, the God that Leonard chose to seek:

When we (rabbis) try to be serious about our task, we know that what we say will not only comfort but also disturb. I have no burning desire to disturb you, upset you, but I am convinced that there are enough sedatives and tranquilizers traversing the bloodstreams of the members of this congregation alone, without adding to their number. There are enough clergy around to perform this role. As a model for this, one should go to the East Room of the White House on a Sunday morning, where each week, two or three hundred invited guests, especially invited choirs and soloists, hand picked preachers who are token blacks, token Jews, token priests and pastors... all of them solid, respectable, all of them giving their blessing to whatever it is that the President is doing.

Wherever it appears, in the White House, in churches or synagogues, this is not authentic religion. Wherever religion does no more than sedate and tranquilize, it becomes a drug, a snare, a delusion.

Some of you have been complaining that this pulpit and this temple are too political. A religion must be political. A religion divorced from politics is a religion divorced from life and from people. This world is political, for this world has to do with the decisions that men and women make, the decisions that determine how they shall live and how they shall die. A religion which does not help us, cajole us, to confront our conscience is an opiate, or at the least a subordinate amusement...

A religion which blunts the conscience is corrupt because it is rooted in selfishness. It is cowardly because it is afraid to define and expose what is morally atrocious. It is sterile because its passion is artificial. Those who want a Judaism which blunts the conscience would rob Judaism of what I believe is its moral grandeur, its heroic dignity, its power to exalt and condemn.

In the light of these convictions, what could a rabbi say to his congregation on... the Day of Atonement? He might say that because of the serious expectations and demands of Yom Kippur, to confront our conscience, to seek repentance, to acknowledge our moral failure, the observance of Yom Kippur by this congregation is an appalling absurdity. From God's point of view, it is an attempt to blackmail with a show of morality. The whole performance is intolerably pretentious. The smugness, the self-righteousness, the dogmatic refusal to admit your complicity in evil, the prayers, the fasting add up to sheer nothingness.

Lest you think I am being arrogant or blasphemous, what I have just said was a fairly accurate paraphrase of the words of the prophet, Isaiah, which we (heard just minutes ago). After a scathing denunciation of the day and its rituals, Isaiah demanded freedom for all, and an end to poverty. He called for a radical change of both a social and personal nature. I can assure you that he displeased more than 80 percent of those who heard him, and had very few friends at the end of his sermon. That his words were preserved at all is a tribute to the passion for justice and truth that may weaken but never totally disappears from the Jewish people...

So we are challenged not to blunt the conscience, but to awaken it; not to pretensions of virtue, but to the acknowledgment of moral failure.

The rabbi who ventures to lead his congregation up this path is aware the he is engaged in a dangerous mission. For the rabbi is the bearer of a dark secret. He knows he is the servant of a religion which was not fashioned in a comfortable suburb, a religion which rarely developed any passion for the dilemmas of the privileged and the affluent. The calf worshipers of old who stood at the foot of Sinai sincerely believed that they were worshiping the God of Israel. A rabbi who serves a congregation as fashionable and respectable as this one, feels more like an Aaron, the brother of Moses, who took the gold, fashioned the calf, and gave the people what they wanted. The rabbi who serves the enlightened and privileged knows he is the bearer of a religion whose God pants after the disinherited, the underprivileged, the lonely, the abandoned, the forgotten, the pursued. Its God is the God of the hunted, not of the hunter, of the defeated, not of the victor...

The path that leads to repentance is the path of yearning for the beautification of all existence. The path that leads to repentance is a winding way, overgrown with the thorns and thistles of hatred and suspicion, and it leads through a wilderness of doubt and despair. Only those whose faith in human decency is unlimited by fences of national, racial, ethnic or religious differences, only they may dare to tread this path. But the reward will be equal to the effort, for the path leads to the very summit of our hopes. And when we have at last climbed to the top and by our own effort ascended the highest peak, then God will show us His vision of the future, for only then will we deserve to see it. On that day, mankind will be cleansed from its sins and will sing a hymn of victory for the human spirit.

Challenge #4 – and this is one I heard often – Rabbi Beerman was accused by some of failing to offer solutions, only railing against the problems.

Some of you may remember that on my very first Yom Kippur at LBT, Leonard very generously lent me some of his own words for my sermon. I had asked him to send me something that he had written when he was my age – just shy of thirty-eight years old at the time. He sent me a beautiful excerpt from his Yom Kippur sermon in 1959... but he never actually showed me the whole sermon. I found it in his study, and talk about burying the lead. Here's how it concluded... and how we'll conclude today... he wrote:

A close friend, commenting on my Rosh Hashanah sermon of last week, said to me: "You are very good at stating problems but you don't provide the answers. You don't tell us what to do."

I shall be truthful with you. I don't have the answers. I am not like the yeshivah bocher who meeting another on the street asks: "Do you have a question? I have a wonderful answer." I don't have the answer. It may well be my function to help you feel some of the questions and to make certain that you do. But I do have a few suggestions, and they may prove helpful to some of you.

You have a mind – use it. Use it to think, to choose, to dream, to read, to study. Use your own mind, not somebody else's. Use your own mind to reflect and to meditate, to pray, and to be silent with. Don't let it be enslaved to routines. Let it break loose from its own comfortable chains, opening itself to new thoughts, new experiences. Don't defile your intellect. Don't let it become enfeebled by the petty distractions that clutter all of our lives...

You have eyes – see with them – a stone, a rock, a leaf, a blade of grass, the miracle of human decency and kindness, the loveliness of a work of art. Never tire of looking and seeing the ugly and the beautiful and all that is a part of the experience of being alive, the joy and the misery of all that breathes.

You have ears – hear with them – the sound of music, the wind on a lonely street, the surf, the endless, insolent, vulgar roar of the automobiles, the sigh of lovers, and the laughter of children.

You have a heart – feel with it, love with it. Your wives, your husbands, your children, your families, your friends... let them feel your love and not just see your courtesy. And if you want to know the greatest

courage – your enemies, let them feel your love. You have a heart, let it feel the infinite reach of freedom and human sympathy that go beyond the fine lines of the law, beyond all personal convenience and group pressure.

You have a faith and a tradition, know it, open your mind and your eyes and your heart and your ears to all it can offer. Let yourself experience and participate in its imagery, poetry, myths, legends, its beauty, and even its decadence.

You are a human being – be one. Don't enmesh yourself in trivia. Cultivate your intellect. Know the abiding peace that comes from communicating genuinely with another person. Know the rapture that comes from telling someone of your love, and know the exultant joy of telling someone who deserves it, to go to Hell.

These are just a few suggestions. I hope somehow they will be helpful to you in the year ahead.

Y'hi zichro baruch – may the memory of his love, his wisdom, his conscience bless us forever.