



Rabbi Leonard Beerman

“A Sermon for Yom Kippur Morning”

October 8, 2011 Yom Kippur 5772

Imagining this moment, of my standing here before you, what it would feel like, what it would look like, the splendor of it all, my aging mind drifted back into time, and I remembered once seeing some old minutes of the Board of Trustees of the Temple of a meeting held in December 1948, well before my arrival in Los Angeles. It included this information: Services for Shabbos were being held in a building at 955 South Crenshaw Boulevard. Rental fee was \$8.00 a week; \$12 if refreshments were to be served. The minutes further recorded that the Board unanimously determined that it would be better to serve refreshments. There was \$700 in the bank. It was also noted that the Cantor agreed to sing for a weekly fee of \$10 until the membership reached 60 when his fee would be \$15. It never reached 60 members during his stay with the congregation. There was about half that number when I arrived in July of 1949.

So here we are, 63 years later, in a dramatically different place and time, no longer on South Crenshaw, and with a different budget, and still serving refreshments on Shabbat, but not this one. And it must be the same for you – trying to reckon with what is going on in our world today? Most of the time, it seems to me, as someone has said, that there are only two things that are certain – the sun will rise and the sun will set. Most everything else is up for grabs. Forces of change are erupting all over the place. It is as though we are living at the end of one era and the beginning of another. And it can be emotionally wearing to live at such a time, vaguely knowing that something is ending, something is being born.

So, it is surely not a surprise for you to hear that preparing a sermon for the High Holy Days is made more difficult for many rabbis. Of course, it has always been difficult for me, and age and experience have not worked to make it any easier. I have never completely understood all the reasons. Is it the novelty of a large congregation? Is that what it's all about? A kind of performance anxiety? Some of that, I'm sure.

So what happens to rabbis who have to reckon with their holy day anxiety? No mystery there. They reach out for help, for advice; although advice often comes whether they ask for it or not. Two weeks ago, the Israeli Foreign Ministry, through the Los Angeles office of the Israeli Consul General, made

available to all rabbis a publication entitled “Seeking Peace: A Resource Guide.” It included written essays, biblical excerpts and wisdom from our ancient sages to modern day religious and secular leaders. The collection touched on wide ranging topics including what it called, Israel and Israel’s ongoing efforts to bring peace. You can imagine that, like so many of my sermons, Israeli gathered resource material, as fine as some of it was, has its own particular point of view. In the section concerning efforts to bring peace, I searched for a reference to Israel’s 44 year-old occupation of the West Bank and the expansion of settlements as a possible source of tension and conflict in the region. It did not appear there.

Unsolicited advice also came from another source: Dennis Prager, in a caustic article in the Los Angeles *Jewish Journal* attacked those rabbis who talk about social justice and therefore, he said, “politicize the high holy days,” instead of doing what he does at his services, teaching about how to be a better person in the coming year. How could he imagine that there would be rabbis who do that sort of thing? (Ken Chasen wrote a strong, eloquent response that all of you should read.)

And still on the subject of advice: for the rabbis of Los Angeles, every year, in the month of August, the Board of Rabbis of Southern California presents a sermon seminar. We always have a scholar in residence to deliver lectures on some significant Jewish themes. And then there are assorted study seminars on various subjects. I attended this year’s event; Ken and Rachel were also there. I attended a seminar led by our brilliant colleague, Rabbi Sharon Brouse. Thanks to a question and comment from me, our seminar was transformed for more than a moment into something juicy with sexual imagery, the raw stuff of the *yetzer harah*, the evil inclination, a celebrated ingredient of Yom Kippur.

While I was engaged there, some of our colleagues attended a workshop of a kind we had never had before. A group of Hollywood writers had been invited to help rabbis punch up their sermons. I don’t know what was behind this decision. It might have been some notion that for rabbis Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, as someone suggested, are a ratings period, that, after all, synagogues are crowded with people, and they come expecting to be impressed and entertained. So the planners of the seminar turned to writers of “Mad Men,” “Desperate Housewives,” “The Simpsons” and other shows. “The rabbis go Hollywood for sermon tips,” was the headline in one of the Jewish newspapers. Those rabbis who attended felt they had been greatly helped in framing their sermons. After all, one of the rabbis contended, a sermon can be like a story with a three act structure – a story is a story. “Human beings are narrative animals, (David Foster Wallace once wrote) every culture countenances itself as culture by means of a story, . . . we need narrative.” Although he insisted that “television strives not to change or enlighten or broaden – or not necessarily to entertain – but to engage, to appeal to. Its one end – openly acknowledged – is to ensure continued watching.”

I was troubled about the whole idea of having writers help us with our sermons, although at last, I was compelled to consider the question: in principle, is there anything different about using ideas drawn from the television writers of today and those drawn from those earlier writers, the writers of the Bible, Midrash or Talmud?

The Bible! Sitting there, waiting for me, without attending the workshop, is an absolutely great story – the finest sermon in the entire Bible. It's the book of Jonah, read in every synagogue on Yom Kippur. It's indeed a story, a book of fiction, just four chapters, and the author wrote it as an extended metaphor. He invented this Jonah to serve as a representation of the entire people of Israel who had been assigned a mission and ended up loafing on the job, as my teacher, Sheldon Blank, once wrote.

Loafing on the job. What could be more appropriate for Yom Kippur. Jonah's mission, you will remember, was to go to the great city of Nineveh, and warn the people there that if they didn't change their evil ways, they will be destroyed. But Jonah didn't want to get involved. Instead of Nineveh, he went to Jaffa and boarded the first ship sailing to Tarshish. And Tarshish, where is Tarshish? It's not a port on the Mediterranean. It is anywhere, anywhere but the right place; it's the opposite direction, the direction people take when they are trying to evade their responsibility. It's the direction a political party takes, or a religious group, or a nation, when it turns its back on the place where some human care is needed.

And what is Nineveh in this story? Is it the capital of the powerful Assyrian empire that destroyed the kingdom of Israel? No, it's just a remote place, a place where men and women were in trouble. It was not because the king and the people had failed to perform the proper rituals to their gods. It was not because they were not religious. It is not because they were not spiritual. It is not because they posed a danger to the security of Israel. No, the people of Nineveh are condemned because of crimes committed within the walls of the city, crimes against what is just and right. They were ruthless in their indifference to the least among them. And as soon as they listened to Jonah and turned from these evil ways, God forgave them. That's all it took. And pity is what moved the author of Jonah. Not resentment. It was a moral sense. But the author of this story would simply not permit Jonah to evade his responsibility.

So here we are again, brought together by the wonder and majesty of Yom Kippur, the day when we come to seek forgiveness for all those places in our behavior where we have been loafing on the job, where we have negated by word or by deed or by silence the ideals we claim to live by. This is the day that reminds us of the distance that separates our values from our conduct – in our personal lives, and as part of a community, a nation. And this is a day that will simply not provide the easy way, the way of evasion. Yom Kippur insists on calling us back – that's what repentance really means in Hebrew – *teshuvah*, to come back, to return. Many of us resist; we prefer going to Tarshish. And that's what is so difficult to live with – in our Jewish tradition. It keeps telling us: don't go there.

So Yom Kippur flings a challenge at us. And you can tell when it works; it makes us feel uncomfortable. (Old *New Yorker* cartoon, with a rector standing at the door of the church, greeting two elderly women as they are leaving, with the caption: "If you enjoyed the sermon Mrs. Johnson, you missed the point entirely.")

About being made to feel uncomfortable, I remembered that in Melville's *Moby Dick*, there is a powerful, extraordinary sermon on Jonah delivered by the preacher, Father Mapple, in the whaler's chapel in New Bedford on the eve of the whalers going to sea, which he concludes with these words: "Woe to him who seeks to pour oil upon the waters when God has brewed them into a gale. Woe to him who seeks to please rather than to appall. Woe to him whose good name is more to him than goodness. Woe to him who courts not dishonor."

This whole approach may not provide a spiritual experience for all of us, but it can be an ennobling one. It surely can teach us a great deal about this Jewish religious civilization of ours: that it has a function in serving us, but not always in the way we like or imagine. Judaism serves best when it teaches and challenges, when it takes moral positions. And we know it is concerned not only with us, but with every one of God's children. The people of Nineveh Jonah was called to warn and save, were not Jews, remember.

So, rabbi, what has all of this got to do with you and me – today. "As we look out on the human condition," Abba Eban once said, "our consciences cannot be clean. If they are clean, then it is because we do not use them enough."

In the wake of the horrific event ten years ago on September 11, our nation sent forth its armies into Afghanistan and Iraq and now its armed predator drones, and by doing that established a memorial for the 3000 who died that day, a memorial for the infinite and agonizing eruptions that took place in the lives of the families and friends and lovers of the dead. And what is the memorial? *Al heyt shehatanu*, for the sin which we have sinned...for the more than 6000 of our young dead soldiers; 1264 coalition forces. And *al heyt shehatanu*, for those unremembered in our prayers – the millions of Iraqis, Afghans and Pakistanis killed, wounded and sent into exile. *Al Het...* for the constitutional principles we have trampled upon through torture, extraordinary rendition, prolonged detention without charges or trial, and secret imprisonment; through the unreviewable right to kill American citizens far from any battlefield based on evidence that will never see the light of day.

"We have fed the heart on fantasies," Yeats said. "The heart's grown brutal from the fare/ More substance in our enmities/ Than in our love." And all of this rooted in the conviction that nothing must stand in the way of the demonstration of our power. "Power to coerce," Norman Cousins once wrote, "power to harm, power that intimidates intelligence, power that conquers language and renders other forms of communication incoherent and irrelevant, power becoming a theology, admitting no other gods before it..." And what has this brought us in addition to the steady erosion of America's position in the world?

Surely we know that these policies to which we have been so slavishly obedient end up, as always, constituting a form of violence against the poor – the ever growing kingdom of the poor, that will grow

still more since Congress has agreed to cut \$1 trillion from Federal spending, and with the so-called super committee seeking an additional \$1.5 trillion.

And the children. *Al heyt shehatanu...* If indeed the test of a moral society is the kind of world it creates for its children, what shall we say about a society that is willing to make miserable the lives of so many children? I don't know any Jews who would be party to that.

Where shall we stand? "A Jew is not just supposed to be, but to stand for," Abraham Heschel once taught us. How good it is that Leo Baeck Temple is about to begin an impressive community organization project that will take us out beyond these sheltered walls to announce for all to see, that we want to take Judaism out of our hearts and minds and put it into our hands.

In the fall of 1965, with the war in Vietnam growing in intensity, and the American public silent, a professor at the University of California in Santa Barbara, a Quaker, came down to have a talk with Sandy and me about a silent vigil of protest against the war, which they had been conducting on the campus there. An hour each week. Would we be willing to do that at UCLA? And with whatever uncertainty, we said yes. So, every Wednesday, then, from noon to one, the two of us stood, just a few with us the first time, on the walkway that led from the Powell Library to the Student Union, in silent vigil against the war. I felt uncomfortable at first – exposed – as the young students strode by, pausing, mystified, irritated. But at the end of the first day, we had been joined by a few others. Each week the taunts diminished, the numbers slowly grew. Months later, on March 25, 1966, 8000 students would attend a Vietnam teach-in at UCLA.

But we failed, didn't we? We did not bring an end to the war. That would not come for another seven years. By then, 55,000 American soldiers had died, a million and a half Vietnamese.

Yesterday was the tenth anniversary of the invasion of Afghanistan, the longest war in the history of our nation. I stood, and spoke, in protest, with George Regas, Ed Bacon, Ralph Fertig, and a hundred others, in front of the Federal Building. "Fund jobs and human needs, not war, war is not the answer," we said.

When would the Arab spring come to America, my wife Joan and I had been wondering? When would the Arab spring that began in Tunisia, and moved to Egypt, and then to Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, Syria, even Tel Aviv where 450,000 Israelis (an equivalent of 19 million if it had been held in the United States) when would it come here? Well it has come here, as in Israel, where the unbridled enrichment of the few had been gained at the expense of the many, the middle class and the poor – the 99 per cent, as those Occupy Wall Street placards declare? It's an exciting time, is it not?

We have no idea where the revolts will go in Tunisia, Egypt, and all the others, including those in the streets of America, until the mired political forces are animated by the call immortalized for me by the

drill instructor of my Marine Corps platoon who awakened us much too early, every morning, with the same words: “off your ass and on your feet.”

I cannot leave this day without saying something about Israel. A most significant event occurred this week, which crystallizes a fundamental contradiction in Israel. Another Israeli received a Nobel Prize. The Nobel Prize for Chemistry was awarded to Daniel Shechtman, a professor of materials science at Technion-Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa. Shechtman, who also teaches in Iowa, my friend Bernie Avishai writes from Jerusalem, personifies the old Zionist dream of a Jewish modernity, taking in what is best in the larger world, and breathing out a creative newness – in this case, an ingenious proof that nature, the natural crystal, is capable of imitating, of all things, classical Islamic art, which might have also been Maimonides’ art, since its genius was delighting without “graven images.”

Contrast that wonderful achievement, as though it were some confirmation of what is incorrectly thought to be an inborn agility of the Jewish intelligence, contrast that with the shameful stupidity of Israel: the continued occupation of lands rightfully belonging to Palestinians, the relentless insistence on expanding settlements; its blockheaded response to the harmless creaking ships of the Gaza flotillas; and the mindless insistence on sending its emissaries to the ends of the earth, in an attempt to abort the effort of the Palestinians to have UN recognition of their right to be a state. Why not have surprised everybody, and embraced them. Welcome, we welcome you; we welcome the possibility of having one more democracy in our region. We welcome the opportunity to become equals and partners in each other’s lives, independent and interdependent; that is what will bring security and peace to Israel and Palestine, if there is ever to be security and peace.

But let’s return to us and see if I can end this sermon. Judaism was not born on South Crenshaw Boulevard, nor was it born in the elegant suburbs, with air conditioned sanctuaries. It first developed in the rough, rude hills of Judea. And it implanted within the people a seed of endless discontent. It keeps calling us, calling us to the highest, and yet we are never able to reach it. It asks us to believe in ourselves, and yet we are not fully able to do so. It says that we are all children of God, and yet this is both a natural endowment and, at the same time, a potentiality within us, still waiting to be fully realized.

It is calling to us today. Once more, this time in all of the words of Abba Eban: “As we look out on the human condition, our consciences cannot be clean. If they are clean, then it is because we do not use them enough. It is not inevitable that we march in hostile and separate hosts into the common abyss. There is another possibility – of an ordered world, illuminated by reason, governed by law. If we cannot touch it with our hands, let us at least, grasp it with our vision.”