

Rabbi Leonard I. Beerman

September 18, 2010 / Yom Kippur 5771

Histakel bishlosa dvarim v'ee ata ba l'averah - Avot 2.1

Consider three things and you will not fall into error: know what is above you, a seeing eye and a listening ear, and your deeds written on a scroll.

And I would add: and don't forget your silences, for God hears all of our silences, as well.

I am sure you are aware that it is not uncommon for elderly people to have problems with their balance. This sermon I have prepared for you sort of bobs and weaves, and although these may be qualities that work well for Kobe Bryant and LeBron James, and maybe even Reggie Bush in his halcyon days, they may not be the best way to serve the needs of a rabbi and a congregation on Yom Kippur morning in the year 5771.

Well, here we are again, so wonderfully drawn together by the seductive power of this extraordinary holiday of ours. How blessed we are to be here in this good company. How blessed we are to have a day set aside to reflect on the way we have been living our lives, to reflect on all the places in them that need mending. And, borrowing the words of my friends Alan and Marilyn Bergman, "to think about the words we said or should have said, the smiles we never answered, the doors we should have opened."

But some things remain the same: The same old bewildering world, the murderousness of it, the fear in it, the fear that expresses itself in meanness and anger, and cynicism. And the same old predatory pursuit of material self interest, the same old core values and standard operating procedures, now wounded and somewhat chastened, yet fundamentally unchanged.

"Capitalism," John Maynard Keynes once said, "is the extraordinary idea that the nastiest of men for the nastiest of reasons will work for the benefit of all." And what also abides, as if to the

confirm the familiar words written by Oliver Goldsmith 300 years ago “Ill fares the land, to hastening ill a prey, where wealth accumulates and men decay.”

300 years. That is old, isn't it? Sometimes, and not so strangely, I feel like a relic from another age. In 1949, when I first came to be the rabbi of the twenty-seven families who had formed this congregation, I was filled with the optimism of those years immediately following World War II. I had left rabbinical school, the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, with a conviction that a humane society was just around the corner; that the wrongs and injustices of history would be corrected, or could be corrected, and, drawing inspiration from the great ethical ideals of the Jewish tradition, that we Jews could be instruments in the creation of such a world. Moreover, I was convinced that the central facet of being a Jew was to have compassion for all people in their vulnerability, and to be among those who would strive to extend the domain of love and justice and peace.

But the defeat of the Nazis and Japanese did not usher in the messianic era. I now had to reckon with the persistent betrayals of the human possibility. A new war quickly came, a cold war in which our government acted on the assumption that Communism was on the march for the conquest of the world and that it was the manifest destiny of the United States to save the world from suffering this fate. In the pursuit of this conviction we engaged in international adventurism. In the process, our civil liberties would be under attack, our hands would be covered with blood, our ideals corrupted by expediency; the best and the brightest would be seduced by the lure to power. And we would become as brutalized as our enemies, torturing, killing, burning, combatant and non-combatants alike, developing ever more sophisticated nuclear weapons, piling them up wantonly, all the while sacrificing upon the altar of war and its preparation the greatest gifts of this nation, the gifts of mind and technique, and billions upon billions upon billions upon billions — summoning our laboratories, our universities, our research centers, dedicating them to this pursuit.

So, I was compelled to see what could not be hidden, the terror and the madness and the violence, more cruel than ever. And to face questions I had never fully confronted before: How could the Holocaust of European Jewry be unleashed by the armed children of Bach, Beethoven, and Goethe? How could the marvelous dream of socialist liberation end in the Gulag of Stalin, Stalin's murder of millions of Russians and the suffering of Soviet Jews? How could the democracy of Thomas Jefferson and the Franklin Delano Roosevelt I learned to revere in the long

years of the depression, exterminate whole Vietnamese villages and its own fighting men with Agent Orange and Napalm? How could the Israel which had risen so bravely and dramatically out of the ashes of our people's history, the Israel I had once loved and served, stand idly by as Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, having suffered under Ottoman, Egyptian and Jordanian rule, would, after 1967, under Israeli rule, be denied their rights and their liberties? How could Jews, of all people, permit their souls to be annexed by lands they confiscated, by the territories they occupied?

Yes, have compassion for all people in their vulnerability. Extend the domain of love, justice and peace. So, I ask you, if you really want to be serious about that, if you want to do something more than engage in pious rhetoric, if you want to be a thinking, feeling, knowing, believing Jew, how do you teach that, how do you do that? Those were the questions that agitated me, as each succeeding decade brought its own moral monstrosities, not the least of which is the one that came with the horror of 9/11, that crime against humanity that brought the death of almost 3000 innocents. And what is the sacred memorial we have created for them? Two long, deadly wars, our young dead or traumatized soldiers, two million Iraqis driven into exile, more than 100,000 Iraqis dead, and thousands in Afghanistan, (why can we not remove ourselves from this stupidity and cruelty?) and always that ever growing kingdom of dead children, that kingdom where there is no clash of civilizations, where there is true equality, true multiculturalism.

By the way, how many children are we permitted to kill in behalf of a cause that we consider to be just? You may remember that in 1990, the United States led the UN in calling for sanctions against Iraq with its tyrant, Saddam Hussein. Over the next six years, 500,000 Iraqi children died as a result of those sanctions. When Madeline Albright, then the US Ambassador to the UN, was interviewed on 60 Minutes, Leslie Stahl put this question to her: "We have heard that a half million children have died. I mean, that's more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?"

Ambassador Albright responded, "I think this is a very hard choice, but the price — we think the price is worth it."

A year later she was named Secretary of State, and was still promoting the importance of sanctions. But in 2003, when she published her memoir, *Madam Secretary*, it contained these words: “I must have been crazy; I should have answered the question by reframing it and pointing out the inherent flaws in the premise behind it. Saddam Hussein could have prevented any child from suffering simply by meeting his obligations.... As soon as I had spoken, I wished for the power to freeze time and take back those words. My reply had been a terrible mistake, hasty, clumsy and wrong. Nothing matters more than the lives of innocent people. I had fallen into the trap and said something I simply did not mean. That was no one’s fault but my own.” (p. 275)

O yes indeed, that is our policy, and the policy of the civilized West — unlike the insurgents and the fanatical Muslim suicide bombers — for us, nothing matters more than the lives of innocent people. As for me, borrowing the words of the poet Marge Piercy, “I believe that no one should be torn out of the fabric of friends and family, ... killed anonymously, carelessly, because of nothing they ever did, because of hatred they never knew, because of nobody they ever touched or left untouched.”

(I was surely never alone in holding these views. George Regas, Steven Jacobs, Ed Bacon, who happily are with us this morning, and we would be joined by our brilliant and deeply spiritual Muslim brothers, Dr. Hassan Hathout, may his memory be for a blessing, and Dr. Maher Hathout, and all of us eventually to become a part of the Abrahamic Faith Peace Initiative.)

I reached this point in preparing this sermon, and didn’t quite know where to go with it. I wanted to lift myself from this morass of sorrow and disappointment. And still thinking of children, I remembered, wonder of wonders, some good news; the good news that came out of Gaza, of all places, blockaded, destitute Gaza. Yes, beginning on June 2, 250,000 children were taking part in the Gaza Summer Games organized by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees in more than a thousand locations, providing them with sports and recreational and cultural activities. On July 22, over 7,200 children bounced, dribbled basketballs simultaneously for five minutes, doubling their previous Guinness world record.

And a week later on July 29, a total of 6,302 kites, made by the children themselves, were hoisted in the air on Gaza’s destroyed airport in a spectacular public display, easily beating last year’s

record. And then you could see on the monitor, a young girl, 12 or 13, with a lovely smile and with a crooked front tooth, wearing her hijab, and saying in Arabic, with subtitles for me to read: “I am so happy, because we broke two new records in one week, and we have raised the slogan: Creativity is not impossible, and we are children like other children around the world, we want to be happy and to learn, and for that we decided to challenge the world by breaking new records in bouncing and flying kites. I hope that we will win, because we have a strong spirit and we don’t know anything called impossible despite the difficulties we faced, and a new generation will raise the Palestinian flag and always we will have a strong spirit.”

I cried when I saw this, at the sweet, almost embarrassing innocence of their endeavor, and at the inescapable symbolism: Thousands of children, in this battered, desperate, demeaning, dehumanized place, grouping together, with one single ambition in mind, smiling and laughing, in an act of celebration and achievement.

And there was a footnote: The games are made possible with contributions from the Finnish Government, the European Commission and UNRWA’s largest donor, the United States. How beautiful, how ennobling, how good it was to see the good that America was doing.

That is indeed something to celebrate. So too, in being here we are celebrating who it is that we are, and have been and can be. But we know — our prayers for the day hardly permit us to forget — Yom Kippur is meant to be, primarily, a day for another kind of celebration, the celebration of our moral failure, as individuals, as part of the community, as members of the Jewish people, as citizens of a guilty nation. When we recite the *al heyt*, “for the sin which we have sinned,” — 44 sins, two for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet in the traditional prayer book for Yom Kippur — no one could possibly commit all of those sins — what we are acknowledging is that everyone is responsible to everyone else for the moral status of the whole society. The purpose can be to cleanse us, to free our spirits from being so morally nimble. To see with greater clarity all those places in us and about us that need to be mended. Capital punishment is surely one of them. Ours is the only democracy in the world that insists upon state murder. That makes us companions of Iran, China and Hamas. And then there are our dirty wars and the impoverishment of 44 million Americans; The gross inequalities of wealth and opportunity; the

corruption of money and privilege that “occlude the arteries of democracy,” to use the words of Tony Judt, *olav hashalom*.

It’s complicated. There is so much to be agitated about. We are clearly living in an age of insecurity, economic, political, physical insecurity. Insecurity breeds fear. And fear — fear of decline, fear of change, fear of strangers and fear of the fearful, fear of something happening we cannot understand — is corroding the sense of interdependence on which any kind of a decent society rests.

That reminds me of a controversy that took place in our temple, thirty or more years ago. One day, while the members of our office staff were eating, and then playing their usual game of bridge, someone entered the Temple, got into all of their purses, which they had left near their desks, and stole their money. The Board of Trustees immediately appointed a committee on security, which met and was about to present its recommendations. That was when I wrote the following letter:

To: The Board of Trustees

FROM: Leonard I. Beerman

SUBJECT: Security

You have received the recommendations of the Committee on Security. Members of the Temple Staff have met to discuss these proposals and we have made additional recommendations directly to the Committee. We and the Committee are in agreement in all but one item: “Keep all doors locked at all times, with the exception of the rear lobby doors, during office hours.” The Staff was divided on this issue, but I have very strong feelings about the matter, which I presented to the Committee on Wednesday, April 18, and which, at their suggestion, I now express to you in anticipation of our meeting, April 22.

SOME BASIC IDEAS, OR HORRAY, FOR PERSPECTIVE!

1. Our security lies in the acceptance of the truth that there is no security, no absolute security, for our selves, our families, our property. We all must live with fear and with the knowledge that the bad can happen no matter what we do to secure against it. Wisdom and maturity ask us to live with fear without becoming prisoners of our fear.
2. Prudence requires that we take reasonable precautions. That’s the rub. What is prudent? What is reasonable?

3. *Sechel* [common sense] is the best security, and it is free. 99%% of our security will come from *sechel*: Alertness, caution, walking with someone to your car (at night), not leaving personal belongings, bar mitzvah gifts and like, exposed, unattended, and therefore inviting; good lighting, locking the doors at night, etc. But the quest for absolute security is not reasonable or prudent. It puts fear and irrationality in the saddle.

A PROPOSAL

1. A synagogue is an institution that must stand open to the world, declaring in all that it is and does, that faith and learning and human decency are the most powerful forces on this earth, and that their unleashed power can overcome every adversary. Nothing should be permitted to deter us from the obligation to demonstrate in all that we do the spiritual values for which the synagogue stands. It is not our fear about ourselves or our property that we wish to present to those who come here, but rather that we exist to care for others, and that this is a place where all are welcome.
2. Therefore, it is essential that in the daytime hours we work here, the doors, the front doors, of Leo Baeck Temple be open. The front doors are the last bastion of openness.

I no longer remember what the Board decided, what they did with my recommendation.

But this I do remember: This synagogue is the place to come for prayer, for learning, for the comfort of one another, and to do good works, (to engage in the project that Rabbi Chasen set before us, for example.) May it also be place where we never lock the doors of our hearts, where our hearts would be so open that we would never be among those who would want the nation to compromise its liberties for security. That it also be a place to be emboldened to take a stand against human suffering, even the suffering of those declared to be our enemies.

About a month ago, I was invited to speak at Temple Shomrei Torah in Santa Rosa. It was really an opportunity that had been lateraled to me by Rabbi Ragins, who had spoken there the year before. It was an annual memorial talk established for Rabbi Michael Robinson, a colleague and friend of ours. When I learned that he had been born in Asheville, North Carolina, that reminded me of another native of Asheville, Thomas Wolfe, who had achieved literary greatness in his own brief lifetime, 1900-1938. This is what Wolfe wrote in the last pages of his final book, *You Can't Go Home Again*:

“I believe that we are lost here in America, [Yes, I do, indeed, believe that we are lost] but I believe we shall be found. And this belief...is for me — and I think for all of us — not only our own hope, but America’s everlasting, living dream. I think the life which we have fashioned in America, and which has fashioned us — the forms we made, the cells that grew — was self-destructive in its nature...I think these forms are dying and must die, just as I know that America and the people in it, are deathless, undiscovered, and must live.”

“I think the true discovery of America is before us...the true fulfillment of our spirit, our people, of our mighty and immortal land, is yet to come. I think the true discovery of our own democracy is still before us. And I think that all these things are certain as the morning, as inevitable as noon.”