



Founding Rabbi Leonard Beerman

Yom Kippur 5774 September 14, 2013

I had my existence. I was there.

Me in place and the place in me. — Seamus Heaney, *Human Chain*

What I have to say to you today will be another example of my use of bricolage. Bricolage, I learned a few years ago, is something made up of whatever happens to be lying around. Unfortunately, it often lacks the comfort of order and precision and clarity. So this is a sort of patchwork, *ungepatchked*.

I felt compelled to say something about Syria. But my prepared remarks on the President's decision to lead us into taking military action against Syria have happily had to be altered in the light of the bright however complicated possibilities of a new diplomatic approach. The prospect of military action had filled me with great disappointment, disapproval and dread, and I was sure it was a decision that would divide many of us in the congregation, as it has the entire nation. One thing we could surely agree on is that there are so many imponderables. How, for one would this action reduce the horrible suffering of the Syrian people, which was my chief concern? It was possible that Bashar al Assad would commit greater atrocities. As my Jerusalem friend Bernard Avishai said, "History has shown that when you have power and are fearful of being undone, you act with unimaginable cruelty." You can see that by reading our Bible, or Thucydides. The Egyptian military just killed 1500 people in an effort to thwart the Muslim Brothers, and four years ago Israel killed 1500 (400 of them children) in Gaza trying to bring an end to Hamas rocket strikes against southern Israel. Among the weapons they used in Gaza were white phosphorous bombs which burn themselves into flesh and bone, and can reignite. And we Americans had used napalm in World War II against the Japanese, and especially in Vietnam. The chemical weapon used in Syria, we are led to believe, is worse than phosphorous and napalm, but that may be just the view of those who are looking from afar.

And then there was that red line the President had drawn to mark out the border where America would take action in Syria. But I felt there was another red line right here, and it's one that cuts through every state of the nation. It's a line between those who possess and those who live in want; it is a line between Black and Hispanic and White; a line that separates East and South and West Los Angeles. It is a line that marks out the borders of injustice and inequality. A president has but one heart to give to his nation, and a president whose heart is

engaged in contemplating military action in Syria, or in determining which drones he is going to set forth on their mission to kill in Yemen or in Pakistan, or Somalia, will not have a heart to respond fully to what has crossed this red line, the border of injustice and inequality. In a way the President alluded to that in his Tuesday night address.

But my original intention was to begin, somewhat frivolously, by telling you of what may have been one of the most notable events in my life this past year. It occurred on the night of June 3, when my wife Joan and I were at Dodger Stadium, and when, for the first time, a young outfielder by the name of Yasiel Puig, stepped into the batter's box. It was like a divine intervention. Yasiel, that's a Hebrew name, pronounced Ya-asiel in Hebrew, and it comes from the next to last book in our bible, the first book of Chronicles. It can mean, "whom God made." Now this biblical Yasiel was a mighty warrior in King David's army. And that's what our Yasiel was about to become for the Dodgers. At the very lowest moment, sitting as they were at the bottom of the Western division, it seemed that God had indeed intervened. This Yasiel was about to demonstrate, for all to see, what a divine power — and a 42 million dollar seven year contract can achieve.

And then I was going to say something about what happened last year at this service. Those of you who were here will remember what occurred just before I rose to deliver the sermon. After carrying the Torah through the sanctuary, unknown to you, the pain in my legs began to cascade, and a little unsteady I approached the three small steps that lead upward to this bima. But I didn't make it up the steps. Holding the Torah, I fell backward, perhaps clumsily, to the floor. An embarrassing time for me, an upsetting time for those who were able to see what had happened. One sure thing to be learned from this event is that if you must have a fall on Yom Kippur morning, (and I certainly hope you do not) this is the very best place to do it. There will always be the finest of physicians to rush to your rescue.

But upsetting, disturbing the congregation at Yom Kippur is not something confined to what happened last year. It is a part of the very substance of this Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur itself is here to upset us. First of all, it's so long and demanding, and then there is its vocabulary. We modern Jews are hardly accustomed to all this talk about sin, we have sinned, we have transgressed, we have done perversely, for the sin which we have sinned... Those words do not come trippingly from our tongues, and not always with fervor. Looking at you, in all of your sophistication, one understands. We are wrong, we make mistakes, errors, we are given to foolishness; we can indeed be cruel, unthinking, unfeeling, insensitive. We have all offended the dignity, the integrity, of someone, somewhere. We have been cold, harsh; we have coerced, lied, betrayed; we have not always used our capacity for compassion, for empathy, or our talents for generosity and kindness. Or as the poet Robert Creeley put it: "When I think again of all those I treated so poorly, names, places, their waiting uselessly for me in the rain, and I never came, was never really there at all, was moving so fast, so driven, like a car along some empty highway, passing other cars..."

Yes, indeed, all of these failings, imperfections, are part of the human condition of the very human men and women and children, all of us who sit here. But rarely would we grant that we have sinned, we have transgressed, we have done perversely. Those words, like so many others in this modernized service of ours do not always reverberate well in this air conditioned sanctuary, against the blue ceiling and the green upholstered, Appalachian cherry wood Sam Maloof designed pews. (For those of you fortunate enough to be seated in them.)

Yet that is what Yom Kippur is all about. As I have said, perhaps too many times before, we are here as a guilty community, a part of a universal Jewish fellowship of those who have come to celebrate their moral failure.

Yet we must not forget that that does not mean that this day is given to us to brood over our guilt, to wallow in it. That might produce the very opposite effect that the Day of Atonement is meant to achieve. One of Hasidic rebbes, Isaac Meir of Ger, who lived in Poland in the late 19th century, once warned against that when he said, "Whoever talks about and reflects upon an evil thing he has done, is thinking of the vileness he has perpetrated, and what one thinks, therein is one caught — with one's soul one is caught utterly in what one thinks, and so he is still caught in vileness. And he will surely not be able to turn, for his spirit will coarsen, and his heart will begin to rot. And a very sad mood may come upon him. Stir filth, this way or that, and it is still filth. To have sinned or not to have sinned, what does it profit us in heaven? I could be stringing pearls for the joy of heaven. That is why it is written, "Depart from evil, and do good," turn wholly from evil, do not brood in its way, and do good. You have done wrong? Then balance it by doing right."

But to get back to the issue of upsetting, disturbing the congregation, on Yom Kippur, but not just on Yom Kippur, and not just by rabbis falling, or losing their voice, or by examining the content of the prayers, agitating those who come here, is that not part of the history of Leo Baeck Temple, as older members of the congregation can attest? Or as Sandy, Rabbi Ragins once said, "Assiduous cultivation of the ability to bring irritation, is what is required of every synagogue worthy of its name."

Bringing irritation — the first thought that came to my mind was what happened on Yom Kippur morning, 41 years ago in 1972. 1972, that was such a terrible year. It brought the horrendous event at the Munich Olympics, the killing of the Israeli athletes and their coaches. It was the year that the cruel, tragic, mindless war in Vietnam was raging, well on its way to its ultimate accomplishment, the charred and mangled bodies of 55,000 American soldiers, and close to a million Vietnamese, men women and children.

On Rosh Hashanah I had read a statement to the congregation inviting them to participate in a two day fast between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as an expression of our extreme anguish over the massacre at Munich

and the continued bombing of Vietnam, and as a way of strengthening our affirmation of the sacredness life. We would hold services at Leo Baeck Temple at the noon hour.

But I did something more. I invited Daniel Ellsberg to speak on Yom Kippur in that time period after the conclusion of the morning service, and before the children's service. Daniel Ellsberg, you may remember, was a Harvard graduate, had attended Cambridge, served in the U.S. Marine Corps, had been assistant to Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense, had gone to work as a defense analyst at Rand Corporation here in Santa Monica, and had gained access to classified documents, 7000 pages of classified documents, which later became known as the Pentagon Papers. Those papers revealed that our government had knowledge, at a very early time, that the war most likely could not be won, and that continuing the war would lead to many times more casualties than ever admitted publicly. As the editor of the New York Times would write: "The Johnson administration had systematically lied, not only to the public but also to Congress, about a subject of transcendent national interest and significance.

Ellsberg attempted to persuade a few sympathetic U.S. Senators — among them Sen. Fulbright, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Sen. George McGovern, a leading opponent of the war, to release the papers on the floor of the Senate. When he failed at that, he shared the documents with a reporter from the NY Times, and The Times in 1971 published the first of nine excerpts. The Nixon administration moved swiftly to get a court order preventing further publication, an order which was later revoked by a decision of the Supreme Court. Meanwhile, Ellsberg gave the papers to the Washington Post, and others.

Ellsberg publicly surrendered to the U.S. Attorney in Boston. In admitting to giving the documents to the press, he said: "I felt that as an American citizen, as a responsible citizen, I could no longer cooperate in concealing this information from the American public. I did this clearly at my own jeopardy and I am prepared to answer to all the consequences of this decision."

He was then indicted under the Espionage Act of 1917, on charges of theft and conspiracy carrying a maximum sentence of 115 years. He was allowed out on bail. [*The Espionage act was first employed against the socialist Eugene Debs, because of his opposition to World War I and because he had encouraged young men not to serve in the American armed forces. The Supreme Court unanimously upheld his conviction on those charges. The Espionage Act was to be used three times before the presidency of Barack Obama under whose administration it has been used six times.*]

In September of 1972, here he was in Los Angeles, awaiting the beginning of his trial (it would actually begin four months later) when I extended the invitation to him. You can imagine that this stirred something of a — how

shall I call it — a discussion, words spoken, feelings expressed, upset, agitation, — an indicted traitor to speak on Yom Kippur? The day came. Sandy gave the sermon that morning. He had just arrived to take up his work as very our first associate rabbi. What a situation I had put him in.

I asked Sandy if he still had a copy of that sermon, and he did — being the well-organized rabbi that he is. And this is what he said on September 18, 1972: “It was with my Yom Kippur sermon already outlined in my head, that I learned for the first time a short while ago, that Daniel Ellsberg would be speaking in this place only a few minutes after I finished my remarks to you. And as I listened to some of the debate over the appropriateness of such a man coming to a synagogue on the holiest day of the Jewish year, I realized that there was a direct connection between my sermon as planned and his appearance. I understood that my intention of using these moments with you this morning in an attempt to distill the essential theological meaning of Yom Kippur might be a fitting prelude to his words, an explanation of why his visit here could be not an outrageous distortion of Yom Kippur with “political” matters, but an expression of the deepest and the most fundamental ideas of this day.”

And he would conclude that sermon, saying: “God does not exist, not yet, fully, but he is waiting anxiously and patiently for man to bring Him into reality. And that is our task. How do we do that? Not through idle acquiescence to the world as it is. But by submitting ourselves and our lives to judgment; by showing in speech and deed our conviction that this weary planet does not have to be as it is, and that we, pitiful creatures of failure and weakness and confusion need not be as we are; by being brought to our senses, and learning from ANY man who can teach us about opportunities betrayed and atrocities unchecked...”

At the Ellsberg trial it was revealed that White House operatives G. Gordon Liddy and Howard Hunt, had burglarized the office of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist, and further, that the FBI had secretly and illegally taped Ellsberg’s telephone conversations. And what is more, that another White House operative, John Ehrlichman, met with the judge and offered him the promise of being the next director of the FBI. This gross governmental misconduct led the judge to throw out the case saying, “The totality of the circumstances of this case which I have only briefly sketched offend a sense of justice. The bizarre events have incurably infected the prosecution of this case.”

Now you know very well where this is bringing me. Thinking about the leaking of the Pentagon Papers leads me inevitably to think of others who in our time had revealed information that was meant to be classified. Bradley (Chelsea) Manning, more recently Edward Snowden. Throughout history, those who have ruled have always held certain powers hidden from their subjects. But the disclosures of these past months concerning the surveillance practices of our National Security Agency have made it clear that today’s freedom of expression comes at the price of a new power: the state’s ability to burrow ever deeper into the private language of ordinary citizens. Not only has our government concealed this power, and lied about it, but it intends to prosecute those who have the courage to reveal it.

Edward Snowden was not raised to be a radical, a leftist, like me. His parents were both in the military and Snowden had been educated to revere the United States. He joined the military to go serve in Iraq because he thought we were over there to “liberate oppressed people.” He was subsequently hired by the CIA, and once he learned the lengths to which the NSA goes to explore and record all of our conversations, and monitor our email and mail, he decided this sensitive information needed to be brought to public attention. He risked everything to expose this secret program. And now he has been formally charged with violating the Espionage Act, the very same law used against Ellsberg.

When asked why he would do something that would knowingly throw his life away. He answered saying, “Life is not just about material comfort or a nice career, it’s not even about what you think or say, it’s about what you do to make the world a better place to live.”

And now, if Snowden is ever brought back to the United States, we need to ensure that he is treated fairly and legally, and that the massive abuse of government power that he risked his safety to expose finally comes to an end.

Look, no one can deny, we do have to be concerned about our security. There are indeed, incalculable dangers that confront this nation of ours. I don’t know that anyone, or any combination of wise men and women, has the wisdom to guide us safely through this time. That’s precisely why, as Lewis Lapham said, our country at this moment stands in need of as many questions as anybody can think to ask. Societies die from the fear of thought and the paralysis that accompanies it. What is also needed is the courage to breathe moral and spiritual motivation into our deliberation, to seek the human dimension in all things.

Leonard, it’s time to wrap this up, time to bring this sermon to an end. This is a congregation of educated people. You warned them that this was made up of whatever was lying around. They have either gotten your message, or they haven’t. And you have already trespassed on that old saw you learned in rabbinical school: “If you haven’t struck oil in 20 minutes, stop boring.”

Why not bring the sermon to a close by directing it to the individual. Don’t forget: This holy day season is a time of reflection, forgiveness and repentance. But it has also been seen as a creative moment. An entire life could be restructured, transformed, begun anew, if only we could awaken from the slumber of unexamined living. Yes, we can write a new story of our lives. Remember that poem by Michael Blumenthal.

“Say you finally invented a new story of your life. It is not the story of your defeat or of your impotence and powerlessness before the large forces of wind and accident. It is not the sad story of your mother’s death or of your abandoned childhood. It is not, even, a story that will win you the deep initial sympathies of the benevolent goddesses or the care of the generous, but is a story that requires of you a large thrust into the difficult life, a sense of plenitude entirely your own. Whatever the story is, it goes as it goes, and there are vicissitudes in it, gardens that need to be planted, skills sown, the long hard labors of prose and enduring love. Deep down in some long-encumbered self, it is the story you have been writing all of your life, ... where you can rise from the bleak island of your old story and tread your way home.”

Yes, life can be a time when we throw off our helplessness and allow ourselves to be bearers of love and forgiveness, of compassion and hope. We Jews, meeting in our synagogues throughout the world today, are living witnesses against despair. For although we come from a people that has walked through hell, and we have learned that the unthinkable can happen, we also know that it is possible to move beyond the boundary of our present visions into realms of faith and hope.

Why, we can even string some pearls for the joy of heaven.