

Rabbi Leonard Beerman

Yom Kippur Morning 5773

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From the Sephardic Machzor, (slightly emended in the spoken version): *Master of the world! Behold, I pardon and forgive every single Israelite, man or woman, child or adult – who has ever wronged me. [I forgive them] whether they sinned against me under duress or willfully, whether inadvertently or deliberately, whether by word or by deed, whether in this lifetime or in any other incarnation; whether [they injured] my body or caused me monetary loss, whether [they offended] my honor or inflicted me with any pain or anguish; whether whatever they did is known to me or not; whether I have forgotten or not. For all, I pardon and forgive every single person, completely, with a willing heart and soul.*

One might imagine that a rabbi, having delivered sermons for at least 63 years, would be an old hand at this sort of thing. And yet I feel that this year's difficulty seemed to be qualitatively different. Surely it is something that goes with the territory of being old. Or maybe it is simply that I was blocked because I am troubled and disappointed and agitated, or just simply crotchety about so many things, some of them quite controversial.

To begin with, I am really upset about the Dodgers. It bothers me that a team, that not too many months ago spent more than 200 million dollars to strengthen itself should end up in such an embarrassing situation. My wife Joan, who is a psychologist, has a more therapeutic approach to this. She has nothing but pity for the poor Dodgers. Pity? — poor Ethier, poor Matt Kemp the brave, poor Gonzales, poor Ramirez, poor Kershaw, poor Billingsley, and all the rest of those poor, poor multi-millionaires.

And I am troubled about the presidential election. Yes, I know we should glory in seeing our democracy at work, but it seems to me that there is something utterly obscene in being so slavishly willing to spend billions of dollars to elect a president, given the urgent needs of those millions of our fellow citizens who are suffering because of the collapse of the vaunted free market economy. Well, for one thing, the election has indeed propelled into public consciousness the fact checkers. But I think the fact checkers may be wasting their time because I know that believers are not influenced by facts. Ideological conviction has no respect for facts. A few weeks ago I was invited to fill in for a women's doubles game. (a big mistake) My partner turned out to be a rather well-to-do Beverly Hills Iranian Jewish woman who assured me, with passionate intensity, (I can't remember how it came up) that Obama is a Kenyan Muslim and a socialist, and nothing I could say could move her. "For such believers, for all those who have been lured away by ideology, the more flagrant the violation of truth, the greater its thrill," as Jonathan Schell has written.

And I am appalled and I am ashamed for our country, our so-called exceptional country, for the recent wars we have fought in Iraq and the war we are still fighting in the quagmire of Afghanistan, and the escalation of the drone attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Yemen. For the sanctions being employed against the people of Iran, the needless suffering we have been willing to visit upon others and upon ourselves. I can see the human detritus of our wars whenever I go to the VA, and there are the men shuffling along or being wheeled through the hallways of the hospital. And if that were not enough to contemplate, there is that other war still to come, that “all options are on the table” war, that “red lines” war that some fevered minds contemplate. Red lines, of course, is the particular contribution to the lexicon of belligerency and war by Israel’s arrogant Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, who, like a loose cannon, may well be Israel’s real existential threat. After his first meeting with Netanyahu in July 1996, President Clinton told his aides, “He thinks he is the superpower and we are here to do whatever he requires.”

Age related? Is that what it is, these mumblings of mine? Some things—I must compel myself to remember—some things age cannot wither. This holy day of Yom Kippur. The wonder of it. How it has been able, over the centuries, to awaken Jews, throughout the planet, to rise nimbly, and return to the synagogue, the synagogue, so often the orphan of their neglect. Yom Kippur: the blessing for me to be able to stand here again, in your good company, to see all of you; and, sitting together, to see the beloved members of my own family, and my friend, Ed Bacon, Rector of All Saints, once again using his well-worn visa for the privilege of entering Bel Air, having traveled from Pasadena by way of the 134, the 101, and the infamous 405. As for the word “infamous,” I’ll come back to that later.

Yes, Yom Kippur, in all of its mystery and majesty, has brought us together again, and it has come to bring us the same old message, to reduce it to a simple sentence: that to be a Jew, to be a human being, is a deeply serious matter, for which all of us are finally accountable.

And so, most dramatically, Yom Kippur comes to confront us with a painful truth about ourselves, puts it right there in front of our faces so there can be no hiding from it, for it compels us to say again and again: *al hey! shechatanu lifanecha* — for the sin which we have sinned. Yes, we have failed. Yes, everyone in this sanctuary has failed; we are all united here, therefore, in a great fellowship of moral failure.

Well, that’s a cheerful way for a rabbi to begin a sermon for this holiday, is it not? But, then again, I have always believed that rabbis (to borrow the words attributed to Mark Rothko in *Red*, John Logan’s play) rabbis are not here to make pretty pictures.

So how serious do we really wish to be about this day? Our friend, Rabbi Richard Levy, Director of Spiritual Growth at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, (46 years ago he was one of our rabbis here at Leo Baeck Temple) describes what he does the last month of the old year, the month of Elul, just before the one we have just entered. Very much like making a marketing list, he takes out his pocket calendar, looking through every day of the year that is coming to an end, and he reflects: where did I fall short, what was missing in my actions. What new actions would add some holiness to my life. And he brings his list to the services, and

compares its items to specific sins read there: *Al chet*, each mark I missed. *Avon*, each time I twisted the path God set before me. *Pesha*, each time I rebelled against what I knew was right.

Yes, we might do that list checking, and by doing it confirm that we are all frail and vulnerable and disobedient human beings, even given to excesses of arrogance and indifference and moral failure. And having done that, we then come to the hopeful side to all of this, for Yom Kippur also tells us, that if we acknowledge our failings, and affirm our sorrow for them, and take action against them, God doesn't turn away. We can move on to the possibilities of new life. We can transcend the meanest parts of our own nature.

Well, that's all well and good. And, with a few additional flourishes, I could leave you there. But I know there are some here who, having checked their calendars for last year, may have found some wiggle room for themselves, like those loop holes in the IRS tax code, and now insist that none of the sins applies to them. It is for them, our tradition insists, that they too must recite the confession, for each Jew, with the rest of us, is responsible for the sins of the community.

It was only a few weeks ago that the Torah portion read in the synagogue, from book of Deuteronomy, told us that if a person is found slain in an open field and the murderer is unknown, the elders of the community nearest to where the tragedy occurred are required to bring a sacrifice of expiation. Offering the sacrifice, the elders are to testify as follows: "Our hands did not shed this blood."

In commenting on this verse, the ancient rabbis in the Midrash ask in horror, "Why this testimony? Would it occur to us that elders of the community would be spillers of blood?" Would the leaders, the teachers of the community be murderers? No, this was not the meaning of their testimony. What they are called upon to say in this formula, said the rabbis, is this: "This man did not come to us hungry, and we did not feed him. He did not come to us friendless, and we failed to be his friends."

Those ancient teachers understood that not just the most respected members of the community, but all society is involved in the fate of the humblest of its members, that where there is poverty, hunger, injustice, there is an inescapable guilt that rests upon all. *Tzadikim nitpasim bavon hador*, "Even the most saintly are tainted with the sins of their age."

I think we Jews of America have learned that lesson, and placed it close to our hearts, that all society must be involved in the fate of the humblest of its members. Look at the record, and you will see that we Jews have always carried that conviction with us whenever we have gone to cast our ballot. And we will surely bring it with us this time on November 6 when we help to elect the next President of the United States.

As an aside, we might also bring with us the thought raised by George Will in 2008, when he said, "the threshold question, not usually asked, but it's in everyone's mind in a presidential election [is] should we give this person nuclear weapons."

Well, I haven't forgotten that I did want to get back to the word "infamous." And this may begin sounding a little bit like some of those speeches in Tampa and Charlotte. In 1938, I graduated from high school, worked for a year selling women's shoes, attended night school and even studied bookkeeping, beginning preparations for what I thought would be a future as an accountant, when my parents (my father was a traveling salesman) calculated that if we moved to a college town, rented a house and took in student roomers to help pay the rent, I could go to college, and my sister and brother would then be able to attend after me. So we moved to State College, PA, having rented the house, we got the four students to live with us, and I enrolled at Penn State, what has now become the infamous Penn State.

I am sure many of you remember, that confronted with the guilt of a pedophile, the Board of Trustees of the University undertook an independent investigation of the sorry event, employing the former director of the FBI, Louis Freeh, to lead it. These are some of the words from that report: "Our most saddening and sobering finding is the total disregard for the safety and welfare of Sandusky's child victims by the most senior leaders at Penn State. The most powerful men at Penn State failed to take any steps for 14 years to protect the children who Sandusky victimized. Messrs. Spanier, Schultz, Paterno and Curley never demonstrated, through actions or words, any concern for ... Sandusky's victims until after [his] arrest." And that's what I saw in the initial communications to alumni, no concern expressed for the victims until after the arrest.

Now why do I bring this up now? You may be aware that every year, as the High Holy Days approach, we rabbis begin to get a lot of advice about what we might include, should include, in our sermons. The advice comes from a host of Jewish organizations, too many to enumerate. So it was that a considerable document called "Sermon Resources for the High Holy Days" came to me from ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists, the Reform Israel Fund. It bore the imprimatur of the Israel Action Network of the Jewish Federations of North America and the Union of Reform Congregations was on the letterhead. I must say I gave that one too much of my attention.

It focused on what it described as the danger posed by the relentless effort being made to delegitimize Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, and that the High Holy Days are an ideal opportunity for rabbis to engage their communities around this issue.

There is surely no question that Israel has its enemies, that some of them are anti-Semites, and some of them wish Israel to disappear. These documents state that delegitimization, unlike mere criticism, demonizes Israel, questioning the legitimacy of its founding, equating its policies with apartheid, racism, promoting a one-state solution. The situation on the West Bank, it declares, is in no way comparable to South Africa; "it must be viewed within the context of the ongoing conflict. Check points, security roads, identification cards, and security barriers separate Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza from Israel's citizens, providing physical security from the threat of attacks."

This is a rather sanitized version of what I see as the reality on the ground, but what I want to focus on here today, is what is totally missing from this lengthy document, and what is missing from virtually anything about the situation in Israel-Palestine emanating from Israeli authorities and from almost every one of our major

American Jewish organizations. And that is precisely what was missing from the concerns of senior leaders at Penn State—a concern for the victims, but in this case not the poor children of State College, Pennsylvania, but for the 2 million six hundred thousand Palestinians, the men and women and children of the West Bank, who for 45 years have been suffering the humiliation of living under Israeli occupation, living under a separate system of laws dictated by Israel’s military authority. Oh, there has indeed been some loosening of restrictions. A few weeks ago thousands of West Bank Palestinians for the first time in 45 years were permitted to swim in the Mediterranean. Some chose to go shopping. And there have been some significant advances in the economic situation. But the oppressive restrictions remain in almost every aspect of life. The last time the word humiliation touched the lips of an American leader, or a prominent figure in our own Jewish organizations, or an Israeli government authority, was on June 9, 2009, when President Obama spoke in Cairo and, after a ringing affirmation of American support of Israel, expressed sympathy for the Palestinians and what he called the “daily humiliations, large and small, that come with occupation.”

In November 1977, I attended a meeting in Tel Aviv of the International Committee for Peace in the Middle East. There were about 200 of us, about a dozen Palestinian academics, as well. We were addressed by the late Yitzhak Rabin and Abba Eban among others, and we were thrilled to receive a message from President Anwar Sadat, announcing that he would be coming to Jerusalem. Next day, the day of Sadat’s arrival, our conference moved to Jerusalem for a luncheon at the Ambassador, an Arab hotel in East Jerusalem. To my great surprise—on the day that the President of Egypt, would be arriving— the then mayor of Jerusalem, the remarkable Teddy Kollek, came to welcome us. And the welcome he gave is one that he must have given a thousand times before: “Jerusalem,” he said “is a city holy to the three great religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and here all live in freedom; and here even our Arab citizens live in better economic circumstances than in any country in the Middle East. One of the Palestinians rose to interrupt the Mayor, and he said: “it is not true that we all live here in freedom. It is true that we do live better here than in any Arab country. But,” he screamed: “WE DO NOT WISH TO LIVE IN A PALACE UNDER ISRAELI OCCUPATION.

Those feelings are as alive today as they were when I first heard them. And surely there are Israelis, many of them—unfortunately with no political power—aware and even ashamed of the daily humiliations, large and small, that come with the occupation. Indeed there are Israelis who acknowledge, especially at this season, that Israel has sinned, has not lived up to its Jewish and democratic ideals. Witness, a magazine prepared by the International Committee of the New Israel Fund, distributed in Israel last week, having been inserted into the daily newspaper Haaretz. It was entitled “Atonement.”

Now, enough of that raucous stuff. Time to bring this sermon to an end. Yom Kippur inevitably brings us back to ourselves. It is the time we consider all the harm we have caused, as individuals, and as members of a guilty community, and it’s a time to seek liberation from all the stubborn sins in our diary of woe. It’s a time to remember and time to forgive. And it’s a time to put the highest concerns of human beings at the center of our hearts and our minds, and pray that we can put them into our hands. It’s a time to unite the scattered fragments of our imagination, and to hold high the possibilities of nurture and love, so we can be at home with our deeper selves and our larger world.