

Tending to Our Souls, and to Our World
Sermon, 2nd day of Rosh haShanah 5777
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Shanah Tovah! Here we are in synagogue, participating once again in this season of soul-inventory, bringing ourselves back to basics, reminding ourselves about what really matters in life, trying to confront those demons and vague nagging voices that might be issuing from our conscience about...any number of things: it could be a conversation that we know we need to have with someone, it might be an apology that we know is long overdue, it could be a sense that it is finally time to make good on some promise that we have made to ourselves, or to a loved one, to admit that we were wrong about something, or that we have wronged someone, or even some *thing*...in saying some *thing*, I am thinking of the planet. For example, this past year Mark and I finally had solar panels installed on our home, something we had been thinking about doing for years, but finally made happen; and it turns out, not only is it good for the environment, but so far our National Grid bills since putting up the panels have been 0.00!

During these *Yamim Nora'im*, “days of awe,” we are called to be introspective both about the microcosm– the “small world” – of our personal lives, and about the macrocosm – the ongoing life of our community, our nation, indeed, our whole planet, both now and for future generations.

Future generations. The core story of the Pesach Haggadah begins, *Arami oved avi* - “My father was a wandering Aramean” – our people have been on the move, living as refugees, immigrants in lands where they were never wholly accepted as belonging for so long...so long that the Rabbinic interpretation of this verse from the Torah – *Arami oved avi* – “an Aramean *tried to destroy* my father” became the accepted understanding of the verse, even though Hebrew grammarians would not agree that it could truly mean that. Nevertheless, we have known for too many generations what it means to feel on edge, hypervigilant to threats against our existence as a people. Even though the modern state of Israel has reached the ripe old age of 68, it is still as if, having been founded as a nation of refugees, the whole nation of Israel is a refugee amongst the nations of the world, still not sure whether someday the rest of the world won’t gang up on it and try to “deport” it out of the family of nations. The Torah tells us “You know the heart of the stranger...”: we have been strangers in a strange land, and therefore...what? We must watch out for and fear strangers? No! We must *love* (yes, the Torah actually tells us that we must *love*) the stranger, the refugee, those who have had to flee their homes, as we did, we must show kindness to, and not oppress, the most vulnerable in our society. I worry about the increasing ethnic-nationalist tinge to so-called “patriotism” in America today: it seems as some Americans still believe in their heart of hearts that God created white Americans of European descent, those for whom English is their first (and frequently *only*) language, superior to everyone else – they feel justified somehow in putting up walls to keep others out – out of a land that their very ancestors

were also once immigrants in. They teach us not to love the stranger, but primarily to fear and to hate him.

This country has never been perfect, but it has had some of the highest ideals of any country in the history of civilization. Did we ever live up to them? We have had our great and beautiful moments; and we have had moments, and worse, long *eras*, of blindness and cruelty, with our toleration of slavery for almost 250 years, and with the outrages that have been perpetrated on America's indigenous peoples since the first Europeans settled here – not to mention the exploitation and devastation wreaked upon the natural environment here in so many ways.

I know it seems that I am rambling...perhaps I am acting out the part of the “wandering Aramean”! But at the turning of the year it makes sense both to look backward *and* forward, to take an inventory both of one's personal deeds and affairs, and also of the affairs of our society and of our world. This world that we are passing on to our children and grandchildren - will it be filled with fear, with hatred of the stranger, with intolerance towards those who are different from us, with stinginess towards the poor, carelessness towards the environment...in short, turning into a dystopia? Or do we still have the chance to do *teshuvah* – to *turn* from these ways which will lead not towards safety and happiness but towards darkness and destruction? I am afraid for the soul of our nation, for the soul of the human race, and yet I do not give up hope that, as Abraham Lincoln said during his own era of darkness, “the better angels of our nature” will prevail.

Why is this all so important to me? As many of you know, I am a convert to Judaism. I was not born into a Jewish family, but rather a Southern White Anglo-Saxon Protestant one. After my parents' marriage, they settled down less than a 30 minute drive from both of their sets of parents' homes, and so I saw a lot of my grandparents growing up. My father's parents, who were the “wealthy” side of the family, belonged to the James River Country Club, and sometimes when my parents went out of town they would leave my brothers and me with these grandparents. My brothers and I loved going up to the country club in the summer, mostly because we loved getting to swim at the pool there, and also the novelty of having lunch with our grandmother outdoors near where the golfers would tee off, ordering hamburgers that came in big sesame-seed covered buns with fancy toothpicks holding them together. I loved looking out over golf-course's hills of velvet-green, with the James River in the background, and the turquoise color of the swimming pool set in the middle like a jewel.

My father was the oldest of the six sons of the Brown family, and though not all of his brothers had stayed in the area, there were many occasions when the whole clan came together. Sometimes we gathered for a large family dinner at the country club. These dinners were inside, with no pool or green hills to distract me. One night as we were leaving after a family gathering, collecting our coats from the coat-check lady, waiting for the valet to deliver our car, it hit me: that every single person whom I had seen dining or being waited on in the country club was white; and that every single person who waited on us was black. I had not noticed that when I was younger (I was probably about 12 at this point). I felt sickened at this realization: of course this was a private club – they would never allow a black person to be a member! I felt sickened at the realization that my family and I were a part of that privileged, oppressive class, part of the

establishment invested in keeping things as they were, as they had traditionally been in the South, where the whites (some of them, at least) enjoyed the “good life,” and the blacks “knew their place.” I vowed never to eat at the country club again.

How things have changed since then! We are nearing the end of the 2nd term of our first African-American president, and it is possible that we will soon see our first female president. So there is reason to hope – things can change for the better. Rights for all kinds of groups that would have been shunned, humiliated in 1972 (when I was 12) have expanded and moved into the mainstream today: not only can same-sex couples legally marry, but even those who identify as “transgender” can be open in today’s society – at least in the more tolerant urban areas and college towns.

But change can be frightening to people, *difference* can feel threatening, confusing. If a woman wears a Muslim type of headscarf, a man a turban, we may feel uneasy. If we cannot instantly determine whether a person is male or female, we may recoil. We may wonder why the public schools have to spend so much money on giving access to the handicapped and special-needs students – they didn’t have to do that in our day! Watching the kids spill out of the Fall River public schools at the end of a school day, older Fall River residents may wonder at the diversity of the population – quite different, I gather, from the days when almost all of the students were white, though of Irish, French-Canadian, Portuguese and Jewish backgrounds. I am not certain, but I think that Lev may be the only Jewish student at Morton this year.

Change that allows more groups – groups that had previously been oppressed – to come out of the shadows, to share in the American promise of “equal opportunity for all,” is good. Good, that is, for these emerging groups. But for those who used to be on “top” it feels disorienting, threatening, and sad. And so they yearn for the “old” days – the stable days of “Ozzie and Harriet,” of “Father Knows Best,” where you knew where you stood and everyone knew their place – before high-profile assassinations, before protest marches and riots, before drugs and rock ‘n roll, before the women’s movement...before, dare I say, women cantors!

This is the world that some yearn to go back to, and I can sympathize with such yearning...but we all know there is no going back. As you might imagine, I am glad of this – but that does not mean that we have not lost something from the past, some gentility, some stability, a sense of modesty, a feeling of cohesiveness in our culture. When Mark and I first came to Temple Beth El, we felt a little sad that we had missed out on its “glory days,” but we hoped that, by creating an access-ramp to those who had never had one before to Jewish spirituality, we might light a spark, create a new spiritual fire here in Fall River’s Jewish community. This was my overwhelming concern for our first couple of years here.

That was my microcosm. But this year I have a more urgent concern for the *macrocosm* – for the wider Fall River community, indeed for our whole nation, and beyond that, for the planet. Today we celebrate the “birthday of the world” a strange phrase: does anyone know the “date” on which the world was created? And can anyone believe that the world is only 5,777 years old? (Current cosmology tells us that it is 4.5 billion years old.) But whether we tend to operate out of a scientific or a mythic framework, we know that the answer to the question of “how long has the

earth been here?” is *a long time* – so this celebration of Rosh haShanah as the “birthday of the world” an apt reminder to us that we are all have just tiny parts in this very long play. Nevertheless, we want to speak our lines with as much feeling as possible, to do the best job in our roles that we can. Right now, it seems to me, we are at the part of the play where we see whether those who would continue to exploit our water, air and natural resources until they are unable to sustain life for future generations, those who want to stay “on top” by keeping people who are “different” *down*, or in jail, or languishing in horrible conditions in their own countries or in refugee camps – whether these voices and attitudes will prevail. How will the story end – or at least, the part of the story that is still near enough for us to see? And how can a person of good will fight against the powers of fear, resentment, prejudice, short-sightedness and ignorance, which seem to be enjoying great sway in our country, and in our world, today?

This is where spiritual practice is so important to me. Without it I would despair. With it, even though I cannot be certain that love, justice and truth will win the day, my life has a purpose. As the 2nd century CE sage Rabbi Tarfon teaches in *Pirke Avot* (2:21):

Lo alekha hamlakhah ligmor, v'lo atah ven chorin li-batel mimenah.

“It is not dependent on you to finish the task – but neither are you free to ignore it.”

So we try to be kind, we remind ourselves to be grateful and to enjoy this fleeting life while also acting with responsibility and generosity towards the generations that will come after us. The Torah teaches us that *every human being we will ever encounter* bears the imprint of God, and that at creation God gave us a job: *to serve and to tend the earth that we were created out of.*

We are both our brothers’ keepers, and the earth’s keepers. It is a big task, one that is never finished. And we are only mortal; to quote Shakespeare,

We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep (end of “The Tempest”).

With both Lev and my daughter Mira, when they were little, I used to sing them to sleep. I would always end with a lilting version of *Adon Olam*, whose closing words bring me much comfort at the end of the day:

Sing Hebrew

A happy person is one who can say that they have tried with all their might to serve their God, their fellow man and woman, and the earth itself. And then all that is left is to trust the Almighty to take it from there:

*In God’s hand I place my spirit, at the time of sleep, and when I wake-
I entrust my spirit, together with my body – for Adonai is with me – I shall not fear.*