

HEAVEN HELP US ALL

Rosh Hashanah Morning
5769

One of my favorite television commercials is a beer ad that takes place in a bar. Judging by the vernacular nuances of the customers, we can safely say that this bar is located geographically somewhere in the New York metropolitan area.

As each customer comes in, they acknowledge one another's presence by saying, "*Haya doin?*" and to which everyone else in the bar responds, "*Ha you doin?*" Until, that is, someone from—shall we just say—*outside* the New York area comes in and actually answers the question. Excessively. "Why I'm fine. I just got in from the airport. Boy what a flight..." Etcetera. Etcetera. Etcetera. Alas, by commercial's end, all the bar patrons endeavor—in vain—to stop the next guy who enters the bar from greeting the Out-of-Towner, "*Haya doin?*"

It's just a greeting. You don't really expect an answer. Not an honest one, anyway. After all, who has time for such pleasantries? It's just our way of acknowledging each other. A social convention.

I've been wondering, however, if I can really say *Shanah Tovah*—a *good* year—this year? I mean, it's not that I don't want us to have a *good* year; on the contrary, I pray for it. But what with the way things are, this normal pleasantry, this customary greeting has really got me wondering: What will it take to make the coming year a good year? Is it enough to just wish for it? Is it enough to ask God for it? Or by saying it, does it mean that I actually have to do something to make it come to pass?

I don't know how to judge the current state of America. I don't know how to evaluate our present condition. I don't know how to place it in context, to compare (or contrast) it with other times of concern. Of course, that really shouldn't matter. It doesn't matter if the fabric of our nation is as frayed today as it was in 1968 or 1929 or 1861. It doesn't matter if the economy is better or worse today than it was at the outset of the Great Depression. It doesn't matter if the so-called culture wars of the last ten years are more or less divisive than the generation gap of the 1960s or the geographic divide that rent our nation in half 150 years ago. What does matter, at least for me, is that I do not remember a time in my life when I have worried as much for the soul of our nation as I do today.

I am not coming to you as an alarmist. I'm not trying to stir the pot. I'm simply reflecting on what I see. I see you. I see you upset and worried. I see you burdened with a sense of urgency. I see you less able to find pleasures in simple distractions. I see you obsessed with the *news*. And I see not despair, but *fear* of despair.

We no longer have the luxury of rationalizing that "this too will pass." The stakes are far too high. From the demoralizing (and many would add *immoral*) wars in which this nation is mired; to the destabilizing and disintegrating economy that threatens us all; to the widening gap that divides America into sectors of red and blue, rich and poor; to the growing numbers of homeless and uninsured, we all have reason to worry.

I am not here to tell you how to vote in five weeks. (I will tell you that you *should* vote. I will tell you that, for all the things that are wrong with this nation—and there are many, the one

thing that is *right* is our opportunity to speak our mind through the exercise of the vote.) On the other hand, I *am* here to tell you what we should be carrying with us—and what should be driving us—when we *emerge* from those voting booths on that first Tuesday in November.

*Dirshu et shalom ha-ir asher higlayti etkhem shamah,
v'hit-pal'lu va-adah el Adonai...*

Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you,
and pray to God in its behalf...

So commends the prophet Jeremiah (29:7). Of course, his context was different from ours. He was addressing a community of soon-to-be transplanted Jerusalemites. He was confronting the inevitable destruction of Jerusalem. He was offering encouragement as well as prudent advice. But how might we apply Jeremiah's advice? How are we to *seek* the welfare of the city? To vote? To exercise our constitutional rights? To be sure. Of course even in a democracy *the vote* is not a guarantee. Many of us feel we've already learned that lesson (the hard way). The system is not immune from manipulation, neither politically nor criminally. And what is more, a democracy merely endeavors to reward the will of the majority. What I've been taught to believe is that our Constitution and Bill of Rights were created to protect the minority from that will of the majority. But if you ask those who are in the minority—however you define minority—I'm not so sure they would tell you that they feel so protected these days.

Jeremiah does, of course, tell us to pray:

*"...v'hit-pal'lu va-adah el Adonai...
And pray to God in its behalf..."*

The other day I'm listening to this terrific rendition by Ray Charles and Gladys Knight of the Stevie Wonder song, "Heaven Help Us All". (I asked the cantor if we could sing it here this morning, but we're not quite set up for gospel—not yet, anyway.) It's a great song. The choir surging in the background on the chorus lines, "Heaven help us all, help us all, hear our call when we call, Heaven help us all." Especially the song's last stanza:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
In a troubled world, I pray the Lord to keep,
Keep hatred from the mighty
And the mighty from the strong,
Heaven help us all...

But as stirring and evocative a song as it is—and I'm perfectly comfortable with the idea of reaching out to God when in distress—there's still something about its sentiment that doesn't quite sit so well with me as a Jew. There's a reason, I think, why Jeremiah precedes his "pray to God on its behalf" with "seek the welfare of the city". Because prayer can never replace direct action. Indeed, *dirshu* means not merely to "seek" but actually to "demand". "Demand the welfare of the city..." Like the maxim from our tradition (which I confess I have no idea where it actually comes from), "Pray as if everything depends upon God but *act* as if everything depends upon you."

In fact, what initially caught my attention in the song was a sequence of phrases in its second stanza. Notwithstanding the song's overwhelming sentiment that the solution is to reach out to God, it was these words in particular that resonated with me (which led me to continually play this one section over and over again):

Heaven help the black man if he struggles one more day
 Heaven help the white man if he turns his back away
 Heaven help the man who kicks the man who has to crawl
 Heaven help us all

Implicit in these words is our theology of social justice. We turn to God for help, but God help us if we fail to respond to the needs of others. To invoke the title of Abraham Joshua Heschel's *magnum opus*, for Jews it isn't Man in search of God but rather "God in Search of Man."

Robert Cover, a professor of law and legal history at Yale (who died far too young at the age of 42 in 1986), wrote an extraordinary essay on the nature of the Jewish perspective of the "social order". (It is, in fact, the opening chapter in this year's *Lunch With the Rabbi* text, "Law, Politics and Morality in Judaism"—copies are on sale in the Temple office.) Cover's opening thesis is simple: The preeminent value of the Western nation-state is the securing of *human rights*.

In his words:

"The story behind the term 'rights' is the story of social contract. The myth [that is, the underlying notion of *human rights*] postulates free and independent if highly vulnerable beings who voluntarily trade a portion of their autonomy for a measure of collective security...Rights are traded for collective security. But some rights are retained, and, in some theories, some rights are inalienable. In any event the first and fundamental *unit* [sic] is the individual, and 'rights' locate him as an individual separate and apart from every other individual."

Cover wrote the essay to explore the Jewish foundations of this concept, to reveal our tradition's sources for this seemingly sacrosanct pillar of Western civilization. But what he reveals is that the idea let alone the word never appears in the Torah. On the contrary, Torah is not concerned so much with the *rights* of the individual, but rather the *obligations*. For Jews it's not about the individual but the community, it's less about our rights than our obligations, the *sacred* obligations imposed on us—and accepted by us—at Sinai. For Jews *coming-of-age* is not a child's transition to a state-of-being with increased rights (like being able to vote or drive a car) but rather increased obligations. Becoming *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* implies the acceptance of responsibilities, not privileges.

Cover thus concludes his essay:

"...as I scan my own—our own—privileged position in the world social order and the national social order, as I attend the spiritual and material blessings of my life and the rather obvious connection that some of these have with the suffering of others, it seems to me that the rhetoric of *obligation* speaks more sharply to me than that of *rights*. Of course, I believe that every child has the right to decent education and shelter, food and medical care; of course, I believe that refugees from political oppression have a right to a haven in a free land; of course, I believe that every person has a right to work in dignity and for a decent wage. I do believe and affirm the social contract that grounds these rights. But more to the point, I also believe that I am commanded—that we are obligated—to *realize* those rights."

And this, I believe, is our challenge as well. Especially today.

In chapter 5 of *Pirkei Avot* is a text that addresses the challenges of material wealth—or lack thereof. It teaches:

People come in four basic types: One says, ‘What’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours’ – this is the *beinoni* or the average person. Then there’s the person who says, ‘what’s mine is yours and what’s yours is mine’ – this is the simple-minded person. The highest kind of person is one who says, ‘What’s mine is yours and what’s yours is yours.’ Finally, the worst kind of person is one who says, ‘What’s mine is mine and what’s yours is mine.’

I’ll leave it to you to figure out where you think you fit in (or where you think those who have gotten us into this economic debacle should be placed). But what I found to be the most interesting part of this text was something I intentionally left out. Actually the full text reads, in reference to the first type, the average person who says, ‘What’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours,’ but then the text goes on ‘...some say this kind of person is the way of Sodom.’

Sodom. You remember Sodom. It’s the Torah’s version of the paradigm of evil. And yet its characteristic is not defined by the *worst* kind of person but rather by the *average* individual—the person who is neither generous nor greedy; the person who lives of, by and for himself.

Perhaps then the lesson with which we all need to be struggling—especially come Election Day—is less about how we can find someone else to solve the problems of our country, but rather what we can do to make our nation, even more to the point our *society* into the community it has the potential to be. Or as President Kennedy put it so memorably: “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

On some level here I wonder if we have allowed ourselves to lose sight of the meaning of citizenship? Have we become so preoccupied with “The Vote” that we have forgotten that voting is but the entry-level privilege of democracy?

The real issue facing America today, the real question that needs to be answered on November 4th, is not whether or not there will be a community organizer in the White House. The real question is whether we will become community organizers? The real question is what will we do when our next door neighbor loses her job? The real question is how will we react when the less affluent of our towns are forced to sell their houses because they can’t afford to pay the property taxes anymore? The real question is how will we respond—as a synagogue—to these challenges that confront our nation in the coming year? Will we shrug our shoulders? Will we assume that somebody else will take care of that?

A few weeks back, at one of our *b’nai mitzvah* discussions, we got onto the topic of justice. It was *Parshat Shoftim*—a Torah portion that begins with what is arguably the mission statement of the Jewish people: *Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof*—Justice, Justice you shall pursue. So in our discussion I asked the congregation what, in fact, does “justice” mean? Think about it for a second. We use the word all the time. But do we know what it really means? There were a number of suggestions that morning. “Doing the right thing.” “Retribution.” “Reward.” “Being fair.” And they were all correct. All of these are aspects of justice. But if you’re looking for one, all-encompassing word that captures the essence of justice, I suggested that we ought to think of justice as “balance.”

What, after all, is the symbol of justice but the scales. Justice is when the two sides of the scales are in balance. When the two sides are on an equal footing. And the pursuit of justice is

what we do to address the imbalances of the world. Sometimes they are little things, like visiting the sick. Like giving someone a hug. Sometimes they are bigger. Like increasing our giving in times of financial need. Like taking a day off work to march in protest for those who have lost their rights. However we do it, the acts of *tzedakah*—both large and small—are what we do to keep the world in a state of balance.

This year's Temple-theme is justice. *Tzedek*. But I confess, I'm a bit embarrassed by this. I mean, has the act of *tzedakah* fallen into such a state of irrelevance that we have to declare it a *theme*? Have we so distanced ourselves from the mandates of our tradition that we need to declare *tzedek* a programmatic agenda? Even worse, how is it that we have allowed ourselves to reduce *tzedakah* to a "project" that we have to ask our kids to perform in order for them to become *bar* and *bat mitzvah*?

Tzedek is not a "project". It's not something we do once and then write an essay about it. We are supposed to live lives of *tzedek*. It's the putting of a coin in a *pushke*—religiously. It's the questioning of the kind of food you put into your body and your children's bodies. It's the helping of your neighbor putting that air conditioner into his window. It's the telling the cashier that she gave you too much change—even if it's just a few cents. It's the picking up of the trash on the curb on Bloomfield Avenue. It's how we interact with each other. It's how we live. It's about living with *integrity*—when all things about us are of a whole. Not fragmented, but of a single piece. And whether we realize it or not, whether we can see the difference or not, the *balance* of the universe depends on our ability to act with that same integrity. In fact, it is only with this sense of *tzedek* as "balance" that *teshuvah* makes any sense. *Teshuvah*—ordinarily translated as "repentance", literally meaning "turning" or "returning"—in actuality is nothing more and nothing less than a "restoring of balance".

Joel Osteen, senior pastor of one of America's largest congregations tells the story of premature twins, one of whom was born with a serious heart defect and wasn't expected to live. A few days went by. No progress. The prognosis was decidedly grim. Then one of the hospital nurses asked if the two babies could be placed together. Although it was outside hospital policy, the doctor consented to allow the twins to be placed side-by-side in the incubator, just as they had been in their mother's womb. Somehow, the healthy baby managed to reach over and put his arm around his sick sister. Before long, and for no apparent reason, her heart began to stabilize and to heal. Her blood pressure came up to normal. Her body temperature normalized as well. Little by little she got better, and today they are both perfectly healthy children. A newspaper soon caught wind of the story and photographed the twins while still in the incubator, embraced in a hug. They ran the story with the caption: "The Rescuing Hug."

This is what our country needs to day. More than just a president who will allay our fears and enact our hopes, we need to figure out a way to embrace each other. We need to see that the problems of our nation cannot be solved by any one individual. We need to feel that the problems of our neighbors are our problems. We need to understand and embrace the *mitzvah* of *tzedek* as something that is commanded—of *me*.

Perhaps then we will truly be able to not merely say *Shanah Tovah*—perhaps we will be able to make it come true.

And hopefully we will elect a man who will honor us as more than just *votes* but as partners, just as we are partners—*shitufei Elohim*—with God, charged with the mission of restoring the

order, the balance of creation's first day. Perhaps then we will all be able to say, as did God on that day—*ki tov*—it is good.

Shanah Tovah. I hope so. I hope we can make it so.

Heaven help us if we don't.