

High Holy Day Sermons

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TEMPLE NER TAMID

Bloomfield, New Jersey

MY MOTHER'S LAST LESSON

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5765

In December of 1903 my uncle, Lorraine Edwards, died from “high fever.” He was 4 years old. Named after the “Lorraine Hotel” in Indianapolis, Indiana where he was born, Lorraine was my grandparents’ first child. I can only imagine how extraordinary painful and devastating his death must have been. All I have ever really known of him is the photo of a little boy dressed in a sailor suit standing aside the dirt street in his home of Buchanan, Michigan. He looks so sweet and happy that day, no doubt respectfully posing for his father to capture an image that would last for over a century. That oval-framed picture now hangs in my home.

About two weeks after my mother’s funeral this past June, after my brother and I had gone through her possessions deciding who would get what and what would be given away, Marilyn was flipping through a small book that was lying on our dining room table. “Look at this,” she said passing a little gray volume of poetry to me. On the inside cover was inscribed, “From my husband, 1904.” The page to which she had it opened was already earmarked by that cloth ribbon so many books used to have. It was a poem by Mary Mapes Dodge (author of “Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates”). Offering context for her poem, Dodge describes the great American poet Walt Whitman sitting in a room with the open casket of a child; another child, sitting on his lap, looks questioningly into Whitman’s face. Whitman responds, “You don’t understand, do you? Neither do I.” The poem is entitled “The Two Mysteries”; next to the poem’s title was the name “Lorraine” written in pen by my grandmother.

*We know not what it is, dear,
this sleep so deep and still,
The folded hands, the awful calm,
the cheek so pale and chill;
The lids that will not lift again,
though we may call and call,
The strange, white solitude of peace
that settles over all.*

*We know not what it means, dear,
this desolate heart-pain;
This dread to take our daily way,
and walk in it again;*

*We know not to what other sphere
the loved who leave us go,
Nor why we’re left to wonder still;
nor why we do not know.*

*But this we know: Our loved and dead,
if they should come this day—
Should come and ask us, “What is life?”
not one of us could say.
Life is a mystery
as deep as ever death can be;
Yet oh, how sweet it is to us,
this life we live and see!*

*Then might they say—these vanished ones
—and blessed is the thought!
”So death is sweet to us, beloved!
Though we may tell ye naught;
We may not tell it to the quick—
this mystery of death—
Ye may not tell us, if ye would,
the mystery of breath.”*

*The child who enters life
comes not with knowledge or intent;
So those who enter death
must go as little children sent.
Nothing is known. But I believe
that God is overhead;
And as life is to the living,
so death is to the dead.*

My mother died on the 27th anniversary of my ordination as a rabbi, and yet—for all the *funerals* at which I have officiated, for all the times I have helped families cope with the *ultimate* loss, for all my professional experience with death and dying—this was the first time I had ever witnessed, in the words of Torah, someone “breathing their last.” Perhaps it was appropriate, even meant to be. After all, this was the woman who had given me life.

The truth is, I do not know what the meaning of life is. Like Mary Mapes Dodge’s poem suggests, life and death are the ultimate mysteries. Nor, I think, are we ever to truly comprehend them. As we read in Torah this past Shabbat, there are some things that we are not supposed to understand. “The hidden things belong to God,” Torah teaches. The *nistarot*. Why we are here, what happens when we die, are *nistarot*. Hidden things. They will always be out of our reach. Yet in my mother’s death some things became clearer.

We moved Mother from Detroit five years ago. It was a hard decision. She was born in Detroit. Went to college in Detroit. Taught piano in Detroit. Got married in Detroit. Gave birth to her two sons in Detroit. Buried her parents in Detroit. Lived with her husband for 45 years in Detroit. Went to her Temple every Friday night—and in her later years every day—in Detroit. Detroit was her home. But her sons lived in Boston and New Jersey. Both my brother and I knew that when her health would decline we would not be able to care for her from such long distances. She knew that too. So in the summer of 1999 we moved Mom to New Jersey.

From the beginning I knew that this would be her last home. I knew that the next time she would return to Detroit it would be to be buried next to my father. I also knew that when that time came—when her life would begin to slip away—I would have to be the one. I would be the one to take her to the doctor. I would be the one to get her to the hospital. I would be the one who—God-forbid—would find her. This was my greatest fear: to find my mother.

It was much easier when my dad died. I got a call from Mom that he had had a heart attack. He was in the hospital. And even though it was incredibly painful not to be able to talk to him, to have to ask the nurse to “tell my father ‘I love him,’” when my cousin called the morning of December 4 and said “his pressure’s dropping” and then “he’s gone,” somehow I was relieved I wasn’t there. It was one of those things you just want someone to tell you when it’s over.

But I knew this would not be the case with Mother. I would have to deal with it. Most of you remember two years ago. When Mom collapsed right here during the Yom Kippur morning service. I thought that might have been it. As you were carrying her out of this room into my study the thought ran through my mind, “Is this it?” As children we all fear the deaths of our parents. We all know the inevitability. And albeit it was a false alarm—Mother had been fasting that day—I intuited that it was a trial run. Soon there would be a day when she wasn’t going to be alright.

My mother was blessed. Her demise was not gradual. She didn’t have the slow and steady decline that so often characterizes the end of life. The truth is the week before Mom died, when my niece and her husband and my mother’s two great-

granddaughters came in from San Francisco to visit, we spent an entire day together. We picked Mom up, we went to Blue Stone for lunch, we came back to my house and had ice cream in the backyard. We couldn’t have scripted it any better.

Then came Memorial Day weekend. Lots of stuff was going on. And on Sunday, as Marilyn and I were returning home from a get-together at a friend’s house in south Jersey, I called Mom to see if she would like to spend Memorial Day with us on Monday. No one answered. This was not surprising. She often would go outside with the other ladies at their building on Vose Avenue in South Orange. Especially on nice days. It was a particularly nice day. So when I got home I called again. No answer. About an hour later I called again. And again. Maybe she was playing cards, I thought. But by 11:00 p.m. and the phone still was ringing unanswered, I knew something was wrong. I said to Marilyn, “I’m going over to Mother’s.”

As we drove along Scotland Road I began to imagine what I would find, as hard as I tried not to think about it. Then, when we got there, the door to the building was locked. After 15-minutes of pounding on the door, I called the police. Five minutes later they showed up and punched in the security code to open the front door. “Will we have to break down her door?” they asked. “No. I have the key.” And after the incredibly slow elevator got to the 4th floor and the doors opened, I ran down the hallway, put the key in the door, turned it and saw my greatest fear realized: Mom’s legs were laid out on the floor next to her bed. That was all that I could see. I remember saying, “O God.”

She was alive. And conscious. Although it was clear she had suffered a stroke—her speech was severely impaired—she was able to get out a few words. In retrospect, it was as if she was waiting for me to arrive. After that, after I told her everything would be alright, she never said another word. An hour later we were at Saint Barnabas. Marilyn and I came home about 5:00 a.m. and were back by 9:00 a.m. Mom was all cleaned up, resting gently. Amazingly, virtually the entire family was nearby. My brother and sister-in-law, who moved to San Francisco two years ago, were in Boston for a wedding. My niece and her family were still in town. For the next day we were all together. Mom couldn’t talk, but with squeezes of the hand and the slightest of gestures, she let us know that she knew we were there.

But by Tuesday morning it was clear that her time had come. And for the next six hours we all took turns sitting at her side, holding her hand, stroking her forehead, saying loving things, assuring things. Near the end, when everyone else was out of the room, I held her hand and sang “Hush-a-bye.” I don’t know why. It just came to me. It was like our roles had reversed. Maybe an hour later Mom died. We were all standing around her bed. Touching her. Kissing her. Watching the monitor tell us what was going on inside. Then it stopped. Her eyes closed ever so slightly, but not all the way. I went to the head of the bed and fulfilled God’s promise to Jacob. I closed the eyes of my mother. The doctor came in and pronounced.

There is a passage in the Talmud that says death is like “plucking a strand of hair from a glass of milk.” I never really understood what that meant until the day my mother died.

I have struggled for some time these past few weeks with how I might address this powerful moment in my life. And I knew that talking about death is not exactly what I would be expecting to hear from the rabbi on this hopeful first day of the new year. And yet I also knew that death is precisely what we need to hear as we spiritually reboot. Because, as much as we treasure life, as much as we work to keep death at arm’s length, as much as we would prefer to have someone else tell us about it and do it for us, we all know that there is no avoiding it. Because we all intuitively know that death is what gives life its meaning. Or as Kafka put it, the meaning of life *is* death.

Why can we not see that endings are as important as beginnings? They don’t always happen the way we would like. They don’t always happen when we would like. Is it that lack of surety that troubles us the most? Not that we will die, but not knowing when or how? I have often thought that when Primo Levi, the Italian Jewish holocaust author, plunged his body down his apartment stairwell, his suicide—as a former concentration camp inmate where life and death were at someone else’s whim—was his way of asserting his control over life. *He* would decide when and how he died. Yet fear of the unknown need not be the bane of our existence. Rather it could be our blessing. For in its uncertainty and our conscious knowledge of that uncertainty we are left only to live our lives not with resignation but with urgency. So little time. So much

to do.

Yet how often our great failure is in mistaking the *doing* of our lives with accomplishment and material success. We are here for one reason only: to connect with other human beings. It’s not about the size of our house or the trendy clothes we wear. It’s not about the new car of our dreams or that vacation home in Maine. It’s about relationship. Nothing else.

Maybe you remember the made-for-TV movie “The Boy in the Plastic Bubble”? Based on Barry Reisman’s book *Jared’s Story*, it is the true story of a boy with a rare disease who had to live his entire life in a sterile plastic bubble, for a single germ, an unsterilized touch, could be fatal. Anyone reaching to him through the hermetically sealed opening in the bubble had to wear sterilized gloves, and everything that came to him—books, food, utensils, gifts—had to be decontaminated before passing through that opening. He was sealed off, isolated, in permanent quarantine. But even the airtight, sterile bubble couldn’t save him. When the boy understood that he was dying, he asked for only one thing—to reach outside the bubble and touch his father. Doomed, knowing that this encounter was death itself, the boy reached out and touched his father’s hand.

To live is to grapple with death. But like the boy in the bubble, the alternative would be not to live at all. Life is indeed a gift. Yet what we so often fail to appreciate is that that gift is not for us but for someone else. The true measure of our life is the extent to which we are a gift to someone else. The true measure of our life is the extent to which we are prepared to extend our hand out of our self-imposed bubble and risk the vulnerability of our soul by touching another.

I know this must sound like a telephone commercial: Reach out and touch someone. Yet well we know it is so much harder than picking up a piece of plastic and pushing buttons. And we know this because most of the time we fail. Because we’re human. Like the Garden of Eden story tells us from the very beginning, to be human is to fall prey to the wrong things in life. But the good news, the message of Judaism and the optimism of Torah, is that as long as we have breath there is still hope that we will get it right. As Torah will remind us on Yom Kippur, the choice is ours. It’s not in heaven or across the sea; it’s in our mouths and

our hearts. All we need to do is open them up.

I would like to tell you that I got it right most of the time with my mom but it isn't true. We never really figured out how to do it right together. You know, we were too much alike. Classic stuff for therapy. But we loved each other. We both knew that.

When I took her home after our all-day outing with my niece and her kids, Mom and I were both pretty tired. I had to be at the Glen Ridge Congregational Church for a community forum that lasted well into the evening; I wasn't able to get Mom home until after the meeting and her energy was spent. The truth is she wasn't too happy that I was taking her home so late. So the drive back to her apartment building in South Orange was pretty quiet. Still we went through our regular ritual. I parked the car in the 15-minute spot outside her building. I walked her into the lobby and onto the elevator. When we got inside her apartment I turned on the light, put her keys on the little hook attached to her refrigerator door, leaned over and kissed her "Goodnight". As I walked back to the elevator she stood outside her door to wave me "Good-bye". She would always do that. And usually I would wave back, say "Bye Mom" and get onto the elevator. But this time—and I remember it clearly because it wasn't part of my regular ritual—

I said "I love you Mom".

One week later, as she lay dying in the hospital, I whispered into her ear asking her to forgive me for all the things I didn't do right. I wished I had had the courage to make my peace while she was well, while she could respond. Still, I know exactly what she would have said. What she always said when confronted with the challenges of life. "It's alright, dear." For all the things that went wrong in this world, my mother—without fail—always saw the glass as half full. It would always be alright. Especially when it came to the *narrischkeit* we impose on each other. Of all the things my mother ever taught me about living, her greatest legacy is the lesson that forgiveness is the salve to the human condition. And this, if not the meaning of life, is certainly the elixir to living. *Teshuvah*. Our ability to turn away from ourselves and toward each other. In love and forgiveness.

Thus, if—as Mary Mapes Dodge suggests—the meaning of death is being with God, then would it not stand to reason that the meaning of life is being with each other? Maybe we could all take a little time this week and turn to the people we love, break out of our bubbles, tell them "I love you" and ask for their forgiveness for all the selfish and insensitive things we do so often. Chances are they'll tell us "It's alright". Because, don't we know, life is just too short.

LIVING STRONG

Kol Nidre 5765

Most of you don't know who Harold Ziman was. He died long before many of you had even heard of Temple Ner Tamid. And the truth is, by the time our congregation was formally established 24 years ago, Hal had already "paid his dues" with our predecessor Temple Menorah. But for me he was—and remains—a central figure in my rabbinate.

In April of 1980, when I was looking for a job and Ner Tamid was searching for a rabbi, he was my first. On permission of my placement director, I initiated a call to Hal to see if Ner Tamid would be willing to interview me. I already had an interview scheduled in the New York metropolitan area; if Bloomfield was willing to meet with me it would cost the congregation nothing (since my transportation from Milwaukee was already paid for). Hal and I immediately hit it off. We discovered that his son Steven was a college friend of my hometown friend Rabbi Danny Syme. The Michigan connection had been established. We talked football and Judaism. It was the beginning of a very special friendship.

But what I want to talk about today is not my relationship with Harold Ziman, nor my roots here at Ner Tamid, but what Hal taught me—years later—on his deathbed. It was a conversation that will remain with me for the rest of my life. He didn't have much time left. The cancer was taking its toll, and he knew it. After about a half hour, just as I was about to take my leave, he grabbed my hand and squeezed. "Listen," he said to me. "Be strong. Even when you're weak. Especially when you're weak. Be strong." Like a father to a son, he was bequeathing to me a principle he had tried to embody his entire life. He was not afraid to die. But maybe he saw the fear in my eyes. "Be strong," he said. "Even when you are weak."

It was indeed something my father would have said. It's funny how whenever I watch a John Wayne movie I see my dad. And I've always found that odd because they bore absolutely no resemblance to each other, at least not in body-type. My dad stood no more than 5' 7" tall and when he graduated high school he weighed under 100 lbs ("soaking wet" as he would say). Yet John Wayne seemed to have my father's eyes. Steeled and true.

And his mouth. Thin, straight lips. The epitome of manhood, Harold Ziman and my father were of a generation of men who aspired to strength. They never cried. They laughed at fear. They took pain like men. They fought for their country and never hired contractors to do household chores. They were the antithesis of the Arnold Schwarzenegger "girlie-man".

We shouldn't be surprised then how the theme of strength seems to dominate the current political atmosphere. From John Kerry's "Reporting for duty" to George Bush's "Bring it on," the aspiring leaders of our democracy are desperately trying to sell us *their* "strength". And for good reason. From the scourge of international terrorism to the plague of AIDS to the constant threats of cancer and heart disease of our modern, fast-food, environmentally poisoned world, to live today is to be a student of fear. Even Roosevelt's admonition that "...the only thing we have to fear is fear itself" no longer seems to ring as true as it did 70 years ago. Ours is a precarious age. Yet by the same token, there is only so much one can do to combat these ever-present realities. Even heightened security precautions, safe sex, a good diet and vigorous exercise cannot completely immunize us from the human condition. So that when all is said and done Harold Ziman's charge to "Be strong" resonates even louder today. At least for me.

But you know there is "strength" and then there is "*strength*". It was Jonathan Alter who helped me distinguish between the machismo rhetoric of politicians and the more spiritual articulation as demonstrated by Lance Armstrong and his "Living Strong" campaign. Lance Armstrong—whose name even a Hollywood screenwriter would have been embarrassed to create—is the world-class endurance bicyclist who has won six Tour de France competitions while defeating a very aggressive form of testicular cancer. Yet for this veritable *marathon man*, strength transcends its narrow physical manifestation. For Armstrong, the man whose athletic exploits are already of legendary status, "strength" is about attitude. To quote Jonathan's essay in *Newsweek*, "...it's not about the bike but the head: staying positive and resourceful—living strong in a dangerous time..." Armstrong is this generation's Norman Cousins, that editor of the *Saturday Review* who once wrote in response to his own miraculous recovery from a near-fatal disease, "...the life force may be the least understood force on earth."

To “live strong”, not merely despite life’s greatest challenges but “in-spite” of them, is our charge. It’s not a manly thing; it’s about being human. It’s not about competition with others but rather the struggle within. It’s not about winning; it’s about transformation. It’s not about surviving; it’s about living. It’s not American. It’s not just us. Strength, as essential to being as the life-force that pulses through our bodies—indeed, perhaps it *is* the life-force that pulses through our bodies—is of universal value. Everybody wants it. Everybody treasures it. But we don’t all approach it the same way. So I began to wonder: How does Judaism understand *strength*? Does our tradition have anything specific to teach us about how to understand it, how to get it, and how best to use it?

I must tell you that I was amazed when I opened up my English-Hebrew dictionary to see what words in Hebrew correspond to the English “strength”. Of course, I already knew the common ones. *Koach* (or as your Lithuanian grandparent would say, *Kayach*). And of course *Oz* (as in *Maoz Tzur*—literally, “Rock of strength” which we sing at Hanukkah-time). And *Gevurah* (as in the *Gevurot* or God-strength prayer of the *Amidah*). It shares the same root as the one Israeli TV commercial I remember: *Ten l’gever Goldstar*—Give to the *Gever* (to the He-Man) a ‘Goldstar’ beer. In fact, however, the *Alcalay* dictionary, considered by many to be the most authoritative dictionary of contemporary colloquial Hebrew, lists 15 different nouns from 12 unique roots, all somehow reflecting the value of strength. And what does this mean? Does Judaism discern more than a dozen different kinds of strength? Do they represent different levels or intensities? The answer is: I have no idea. For the most part they seem to be interchangeable. But what this does tell me is that strength is so valued that our sacred and ancient language allows any number of ways to express it.

The Bible, which of course is our primary source for all Jewish values, is hardly at a loss for images of strength. Yet in virtually every instance, strength comes from God. How often do the Psalms beckon God for strength? How often do we ask God for strength? Well we know the inner-strength we need to persevere is of a deeper source than the brute strength needed to *schlep* the air conditioners down to the basement every October and back up again in May. We Jews have never been so good

when it comes to muscle-beach prowess, but by the same token the trials and travails of Jewish political and military powerlessness have forged the need to develop an extraordinary dimension of spiritual strength. And the contrast between these two dimensions of strength—the physical and the meta-physical—is nowhere better seen than in the story of Samson and Delilah.

This is truly one of the great stories. Samson, the *nazirite*, one dedicated from birth to be “consecrated, abstinent, separate from others,” the one who is forbidden to cut his hair, is the Superman, the Rambo of his day. Yet as Phillip Lopate notes in his wonderful essay on this story, “there is nothing in the Bible that says Samson had a brawny, muscular person. Since his strength came from God’s spirit inhabiting him, the theological point might have been better made [in the 1950s’ movie *Samson and Delilah*] by casting Mickey Rooney or Arnold Stang [instead of the muscular Victor Mature].” And then there is Delilah, the *femme fatale* of the *TaNakh*, the seductress. We all know the story. How Delilah got him to fall asleep in her lap while she had his hair—the apparent source of his strength—cut off. Shaven and then blinded, Samson was figuratively emasculated. His power gone. But with one last thrust, with the help of God, Samson brought the house down. With the Philistines dancing in the court, the blinded Samson pushed apart the stone columns and killed the enemies of Israel as well as himself. Samson, the tragic hero.

Yet the tragic nature of this story is not that Samson surrenders his life in his destruction of the Philistines. Rather, Samson’s undoing was his weakness; not his lack of physical strength—that was just a metaphor for what led him to that state—but rather his weakness of will. Delilah doesn’t vanquish him. He falls to his own inner passion for women. For all his external strength, his inner weakness will be, in a similar context, his *Achilles heel*.

The lesson of this story is central to Judaism’s understanding of the human condition. Like Adam and Eve who fall prey to temptation, like Moses who shatters the Ten Commandments in a violent burst of temper, like Miriam and Aaron whose jealousy leads them to slander their brother, like David whose lust for Batsheva drives him to send her husband into harm’s way—Samson’s virtue is neutralized by the forces within himself. The

strongman of the Bible is a weak human being.

This then is the primary teaching of Judaism and strength: *Eizeh hu gibor? Ha-koveish et yitzro*. Who is strong? He who controls his inner passions.

One of my favorite films is William Wyler's *The Big Country*. While considered by many to be one of the best westerns ever made, what truly sets this film apart is its anti-violence attitude. Gregory Peck, the film's protagonist, is ridiculed throughout the film as "weak" for his refusal to engage in physical competition. Finally, near the movie's end, Peck challenges his antagonist, Charlton Heston, to a fight in the early morning hours (when no one else will see them). After what is an extraordinarily long fight sequence in which neither man emerges victorious, after Peck "earns" the respect of Heston for his pugilistic prowess, does Peck say to Heston, "So? What did we prove?" For a film of the 1950s it is a pretty dramatic scene. And yet, Hollywood can't resist its own inner weakness. When all is said and done, Wyler still had to have the proverbial "fight scene." What Peck's character could resist, Hollywood couldn't.

But for Judaism the ultimate expression of strength goes beyond simple self-control. For Judaism this inner-strength is about the actualization of the God-stuff within. It's more than just a suppression of our animal urges; strength is our ability to tap into the holiness planted in our souls. And to do that we have to be able to not merely control our human instincts, we have to be able to deny them. As my brother has taught me, the first of the Ten Commandments should really be translated as *I'm God and you're not*. That always gets a few laughs (especially for those of us who remember the early days of Chevy Chase and *Saturday Night Live*), but in truth it's terribly important. To realize the holy within, we have to be prepared to diminish the self. It's called *Bittul Yesh*.

In the Hasidic tradition, the highest form of strength is the ability to admit weakness, even the ability to *be* weak. Hasidism often speaks of the tension between *yesh* (something) and *ayin* (nothing), between the form of finiteness and the nothingness of the infinite. The classic articulation is "He who thinks he's Nothing is Something; he who thinks he's something is nothing." Or at Men-

achem Mendel of Kotzk taught about the *tzaddik nistar* (the "hidden" righteous man), "You would think this is one who—[in his deep humility]—hides his righteousness from others, but to Kotzk a true *tzaddik nistar* is one whose righteousness is hidden even from himself, one who has no idea he is righteous." He just is who he is.

To be strong is to be yourself. It's not wanting to be something you're not. It's not trying to be more than who you are. It's not believing you are great, but neither is it believing you are less than great. To paraphrase from the philosophy of today ("It is what it is"), *You are who you are*. And that is good. To live this way takes extraordinary strength. We call it "authenticity". It's about believing in yourself without thinking about yourself.

For Judaism the essence of strength is rooted in spiritual awareness, not physical performance. Strength is not displayed on the field but in prayer. Not in conflict but in the fulfillment of *mitzvot*. What is it that we Jews say when someone has just read from the Torah? *Yishar kochekha*—May your strength lead you on straight paths. And when comforting a mourner? *Chazak ve-ematz*—Be strong and of good courage. And at a *simcha* or a significant life milestone? *Mei chayil l'chayil*—May you go from strength to strength. Implicit in each is the fundamental concept of Judaism's understanding of what it means to be human: You are created in the image of God. Strength is having the faith that you are a sacred being by behaving as if you are a sacred vessel.

The great undoing of humankind is our inability to understand this truth. The tragic flaw of human existence is our propensity to confuse strength with power. Our great sin is our desire to control others by our failure to control ourselves.

In the book of Zechariah there is a prophecy to Zerubavel, the secular leader of the recently returned exiles to Jerusalem. This is God's word to Zerubavel, that leader:

*Not by might
and not by power
but by My spirit.*

And that spirit is within each and every human being. The potential is always present. "The soul You have planted within me is pure," we pray every morning. The strength we seek can be found only within our soul. It cannot be used to over-

power our enemies but rather to overpower our own destructive forces. It cannot help us flex our muscles but it will heal the heart. This is the strength we pray for when faced with illness. This is the strength we reach for when confronting the deepest challenges of our lives. This is the strength God has placed within us to repair the world. This

is the strength that allows us to climb. And it is already there.

To *Live Strong* is to be who you are—as Harold Ziman taught me, “...even when you are weak, especially when you are weak.”

Be strong.

THE NINE THINGS I THINK I THINK ABOUT JEWS AND AMERICA

Yom Kippur Morning 5765

It was exactly thirty years ago this month. I was twenty-four years old, about to commence my first foray into the rabbinate as the student-rabbi of Temple Israel of Paducah, Kentucky. Like every new rabbi, you get “The Tour”. They drive you around town, showing you the local sights. The country club. The historic section. Where the Jews live. (I think he pointed out every home of every congregant.) The cemetery. Yet what I recall most about that day in September of 1974 was lunch and where we went afterwards. Lunch was ribs and *Dr. Pepper*. I don’t think it ever occurred to my host that maybe I might find the prospect of eating ribs—which I assure you were not from a cow—somewhat distasteful. (Actually my recollection is that they were pretty good.) But the *Dr. Pepper* was amazing. You see, I was a sheltered Detroit-boy. *Vernor’s* ginger-ale, *Rock and Rye Faygo* pop, *Stroh’s* beer—now these were the drinks of Detroiters. But *Dr. Pepper*? My horizons were expanding by the minute.

As we got back in the car I got the history lesson: how during the great Ohio River flood of 1937 all the lights of the town went out, except the *Ner Tamid* of Paducah’s downtown Temple; how, during the Civil War, the Jews of Paducah were interned in a prison camp by Ulysses S. Grant (because he felt Jews were Southern sympathizers), only to have his order rescinded by President Lincoln. But my strongest memory of that day comes from when we drove into the old industrial district.

It was a tanning factory, where they take the hides of cows and make them into the things we carry and wear. The smell was particularly pungent. My host introduced me to another congregant. (I confess, I don’t remember any of their names.) “Hello Rabbi,” he said with that classic Kentucky drawl. He took me into his office, pulled out a box, and revealed a stack of old Jewish books. “These have been here for years. I really don’t know what they are. I just know they’re *Jewish* books. You can have them if you want.”

Let me tell you, this was not your average cache of old Jewish books. Oh yes, there were *haggadahs* in there, but they weren’t the paperback *Maxwell House* versions we synagogues so frequently get in

anonymous shopping bags when people clean out their parents’ homes. These were *Haggadahs*. Eighteenth and nineteenth century *haggadahs*. Printed in London in 1778 and Rodelheim in 1861 and New York in 1867. There was even a handmade Hebrew-English dictionary—*Sefer L’devarim, A Book of Words*—with an inscription on the first inside page: “Presented to A. G. Levy by L. Hyne-man, Esq. April 1878.”

And then there was a *machzor*, a High Holy Day prayerbook. But this was no ordinary prayerbook. It was leather-bound, with the gold-leaf still adorning the pages’ edges. The covers were embossed, a bird with a leaf in its beak, surrounded by a floral motif—also in a stately gold-leaf finish. This was the *machzor* of a wealthy Jew, printed in one of Europe’s most prestigious publishing houses in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Even more, it was a gift edition—published by *Ya’akov da Silva Mendes*, based on an earlier edition of his father, *Shmuel Rodriguez Mendes*. And on the last page of the book, written in classic penmanship, was the signature: *Jacob da Silva Mendes*.

Ya’akov da Silva Mendes? Shmuel Rodriguez Mendes? In Paducah, Kentucky?

This year—2004—marks the 350th anniversary of the first Jewish settlement in what we now know as the United States of America. In September of 1654, 23 Dutch Jews (who were, in fact, Spanish and Portuguese Jews who had fled from those lands in the wake of Ferdinand and Isabella’s notorious *Inquisition*), were now fleeing their home of Recife, Brazil following the Portuguese capture of that Dutch colony. Not surprisingly, they sought the nearest safe harbor to a Dutch Jew: New Amsterdam. Records say that they landed on September 12, 1654. It was *Rosh Hashanah*. We know that these were not the first Jews to set foot in America. Indeed, while it is only a myth that Christopher Columbus was a closet Jew, there is little doubt that his ship which discovered the New World in 1492 had Jews aboard: the ship’s doctor, Maestre Bernal was a Jew; it is even possible that the first crew member to set foot on land—Luis de Torres—was a *Marrano* (or Jewish forced convert). But it is 1654,

when those 23 refugees found a home in New Amsterdam, that can truly be established as the point of embarkation of what is arguably the most extraordinary and glorious chapter in the two and a half millennia history of the Jewish diaspora. Of course, as many of us know, its beginning was something less than auspicious.

Peter Stuyvesant—whose name would centuries later adorn one of New York’s most *Jewish* housing projects—was less-than-thrilled to welcome the wayfaring Jews. He wrote a letter to the parent trading company:

“The Jews who have arrived would nearly all like to remain here, but learning that they (with their customary usury and deceitful trading with the Christians) were very repugnant...we have, for the benefit of this weak and newly developing place...deemed it useful to require them in a friendly way to depart; praying...that the deceitful race—such hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ—be not allowed further to infect and trouble this new colony...”

The *Dutch West India Company*, recipient of Governor Stuyvesant’s letter, denied his request. The Jews would remain (albeit required to practice their faith in private). Now 350 years later, the civil authorities—as evidenced by the Bloomfield Police Department cars in our driveway—do everything in their power to ensure our safety and well-being. Thus do we bear witness to the American Jewish experience: we enjoy an unprecedented level of civil liberties; we are Americans. And yet even here, even in this *Goldene Medina*—this “Golden Land” of our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents dreams, even here we know the precariousness of Jewish survival.

But it’s a lot more complex than that. So, on this anniversary of American Jewry, as we commence our 350th year of residence in the New World, I felt it important to reflect on what being Jewish in America really means. And with apologies to one of Montclair’s local celebrities—Sports Illustrated’s Peter King—who writes each week in his column a section entitled, *The Ten Things I Think I Think*, I thought it might be interesting to apply that format for my sermon this morning, except in this case I could only think of nine.

These, then, are *The Nine Things I Think I Think About Jews, Judaism and America*. As you might

expect, it is a mixture of good news and bad news.

FIRST: THE GOOD NEWS IS—AMERICA IS THE BEST PLACE JEWS HAVE EVER LIVED IN DIASPORA. From the destruction of the first Temple in 586 B.C.E. and the subsequent captivity in Babylon, the diaspora (or dispersion) of the Jewish people has never known a level of security and freedom like the one we enjoy today in America. To be sure, it did not happen overnight; the American Jewish experience has evolved. Still, from the beginnings of our nation and the establishment of our rights in the Constitution and its amendments, we have had bestowed upon us privileges unprecedented in our history. From the nearly 1000 year long period of Jewish creativity in Babylon which produced the Talmud to the proverbial Golden Age of Spain, the American Jewish experience stands uniquely apart and alone as a time of unparalleled freedom and opportunity.

SECOND: THE BAD NEWS IS—IF JEWISH HISTORY HAS ANYTHING TO TEACH US, IT IS THAT THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A PLACE IN DIASPORA WHERE JEWS HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY SECURE. Put another way, we ought not to presume that what happened there could not happen here. I am not suggesting that this land will witness a second Holocaust or Inquisition; what I am saying is that as long as there are those who begrudge us our existence, even in places like America the Jew is potentially at risk. The fact is, while we are celebrating 350 years of settlement here, for most of us the American Jewish experience is only a century old. To put that into perspective, 100 years ago the Jews of Germany thought *their* citizenship was the most enlightened and privileged. It doesn’t take much for hard times and fear to bring out the old hatreds.

THIRD: THE GOOD NEWS IS—WHAT MAKES AMERICA DIFFERENT IS NOT SIMPLY THAT THIS IS A DEMOCRACY BUT THAT IT IS A CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACY WHERE THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE STANDS AS ONE OF OUR NATION’S MOST CHERISHED PRINCIPLES. For all the things we love about the United States, nothing to my mind is as sacred as this country’s history of moderate secularism. Yes religion is at the foundation of American values. (All you need to do is remember is that in America *In God We Trust*.) Women and men of the cloth are still called upon to offer the invocation over sessions of Congress. But the framers of our Constitution went to great lengths to protect minorities from the will of the majority; they understood how

religious fervor could obscure. So if this pursuit of happiness we now enjoy is to last for our great-great-grandchildren, we must do everything in our power to, pardon the expression, “man” the ram-parts of the wall separating faith and state.

FOURTH: THE BAD NEWS IS—THE GREATEST DANGER TO JEWS IN AMERICA WILL COME FROM WITHIN. Freedom is a double-edged sword. It cuts both ways. It gives us opportunities heretofore unknown to our ancestors. There is virtually nothing standing in the way of our children and grandchildren realizing their personal dreams. There are no colleges or professions to which they cannot aspire. There are (virtually) no country clubs to which we cannot belong or homes we cannot buy. In America the Jew is free to be. And that includes being not Jewish. The figures do not lie: There are less Jews in America than there were 30 years ago. And even more, the Jews of America know and observe less than their ancestors who came to these shores. So if we are concerned about the fate of our great-great-grandchildren, that concern would be best served if it included the health of their Judaism as well—if, that is, we place any value on their being Jewish.

FIFTH: THE GOOD NEWS IS—THE LEVEL OF VITALITY WITHIN AMERICAN JEWRY IS EXPANDING EXPONENTIALLY. It has been noted that ours is the first generation of American Jews to be able to embrace Judaism on its own merits. Unlike the immigrants who held onto their Judaism while trying to survive, their children did not fear for survival but rather success. Yet now with survival and success no longer obstacles, the contemporary American Jew is free to transform Judaism in ways not seen since the days of the Pharisees. In the 1970s it was the *havurah* movement. In the 1980s and 1990s it was *Jewish Renewal*. In the past thirty years we have seen the full inclusion of women into American Jewish life, the transformation of the American synagogue, and the re-enchantment of alienated Jews with their tradition. From the throngs who crowd into *BJ* (B’nai Jeshurun) on Manhattan’s West Side to Conservative Jewish day-school kids who sing Reform composer Debbie Freidman’s *Mi Sheberakh* to Orthodox women who are just a step away from ordination, the cross-fertilization of American Judaism is in the midst of a revolution. Look at this room. Consider the 300-plus who are overflowing our new expansion in their creative-worship *B’yachad* service. The adults who will learn Hebrew for the first time this year. Those

who will come with me tomorrow to buy *lulav* and *etrog* for the first time. Our *klezmer* band. Our Purim *spiel*. American Jews are reclaiming their heritage in force.

SIXTH: THE BAD NEWS IS—THE SYNAGOGUE IN AMERICA HAS REPLACED THE HOME AS THE CENTRAL INSTITUTION OF JEWISH LIFE. When pointing out the unique characteristics of Judaism, I have often emphasized that for the Jew the central locale of worship takes place in the home. It is in the home where we welcome Shabbat. It is in the home where we hold a Passover *seder*. It is in the home where we celebrate Hanukkah. It is in the home where build a *sukkah*. Yet—and let’s be honest with ourselves—where *do* we go to be Jewish? Do our children realize their identities as Jews when sitting down for dinner at the kitchen table on a Thursday night or when sitting in the sanctuary at a Friday night service? All of which is saying, if the transformation is to bear fruit, we must find ways to bring the Judaism we do here into our homes. You can’t teach values in a classroom.

SEVENTH: THE GOOD NEWS IS—THE AMERICAN JEWISH EXPERIENCE IS SYMBIOTIC. We Jews are as good for America as America has been for us. It doesn’t take a lot of research to appreciate the impact Jews have had on American culture and life. As good as America has been for Jews and Judaism—not only in terms of our standard of living but the way in which the primal American value of independence has sparked and nurtured the creative instinct with American Judaism, the influence Jews and their values have had on America is probably seen better by nations abroad than it is here at home. The Jewishness of America is so normative that it has become—for Jew and non-Jew alike—unremarkable. From *Seinfeld* to the *Marx Brothers* to *Philip Roth* and *Louis Brandies*, from the mass media to the university classroom to the political arena, the Jew has been a major player in the transformation of America.

EIGHTH: THE BAD NEWS IS—OUR EXTRAORDINARY COMFORT LEVEL IN AMERICA HAS CREATED IN US A STATE OF HOMELAND CONFUSION. What, in fact, do we identify as our homeland? Is it the *shtetls* of Europe? For some of us it still is. We can often be heard speaking of the ancestral home of *Minsk* or *Pinsk*. The romance of those villages—in which we lived for at least five times longer than most of us can claim America as a home—still resonates within our soul. And yet, the loyalty we feel for this

nation has complicated for many the way in which we view the State of Israel, as if patriotism for one and love for the other cannot abide side by side. It is not my intent to analyze the complex relationship American Jews have with Israel; nevertheless, it would be fair to say that the relationship of Jews of one land to another should never be complex. As Jews we have known many homes, but if our history is to teach us anything it must be that for the Jew the *homeland* is where Jews are.

NINTH: THE GOOD NEWS IS—THE STATE OF ISRAEL HAS BEEN THE BEST THING TO EVER HAPPEN TO THE JEWS OF AMERICA. For all the rights and privileges we enjoy here, for all the good things to celebrate in our 350-year residence on American soil, nothing can compare to the benefit we have enjoyed as a consequence of the creation and existence of the State of Israel. Israel has allowed us to feel pride in our history, pride in our resilience as a people. Israel has moved us to reclaim Hebrew as our language, it has been the primal force in our return to sacred texts. Israel has moved us to reconnect to the land of our people's origins, it has stirred our spirit and our sense of destiny. Yet perhaps above all, Israel stands as a symbol to Americans of the uniqueness of the Jewish experience. The existence of Israel has served witness that, in the words of Leo Baeck, "Every people can be chosen for a history, for a share in the history of humanity...but more history has been assigned to this people than any other people." Israel, more than anything else, has strengthened the will of the Jew, especially here in America.

I am proud to be an American Jew. I am grateful to be an American Jew. In our nation today are Jews who have survived Nazi Germany, Jews who have been redeemed from Soviet Russia, Jews who have found refuge from Arab persecution. They have come here for the

same reason so many of our ancestors came here—to live freely as Jews. Yet the question remains: Will we avail ourselves of this remarkable opportunity? Indeed, in America we live freely; but do we live freely *as Jews*?

There is a difference between "freedom *from*" and "freedom *to*". It is one thing to be free from oppression, but nowhere have we known the freedom "to be" like we do here in America. And while we can celebrate 350 years of such freedom in this extraordinary land, the real measure of that freedom remains to be weighed. What will become of us as Jews and the Judaism we have inherited 350 years from now? Will our descendants celebrate or bemoan the choices afforded by our freedom? To be a Jew in America today is to be offered a gift. The only question is whether we will choose to unwrap this gift?

I treasure this *machzor* that I rescued from that box in Paducah, Kentucky thirty years ago. It symbolizes the richness of our tradition, the value we have placed in sacred texts, and the places we took those sacred texts—from Amsterdam to Paducah and now to Bloomfield. So too that extraordinary hand-made dictionary testifies to the resourcefulness our predecessors relied upon to preserve a tradition they held sacred. But by the same token, it is the way in which I found these books that is equally symbolic—discarded and forgotten, stored away in a box, a bewilderment to a future generation.

What shall we do? How shall we celebrate 350 years of Jews in America? Shall we study our history? Shall we visit the historic sites? No doubt. But don't you think the best way we could affirm the gift of Judaism in America would be to reclaim our heritage, strengthen it and bequeath it to those we love yet will never meet?

As trite as it sounds, the choice is ours.