

Kol Nidre 5777

We the people... are responsible

Rabbi Hal Rudin-Luria

Shimon Peres, zichrono livracha, of blessed memory, stated, "There are no hopeless situations, only hopeless people."

The year was 1944 and it was a bitter cold night in a Nazi concentration camp. Rabbi Hugo Gryn relates a story from his time in Auschwitz as a young teen- "My father took me and some friends to a corner in the barracks. He announced that it was the first night of Chanukah and produced a small clay bowl. Then my father began to light a wick immersed in his precious, now melted ration of margarine. Before he could recite the blessing over the primitive menorah, I protested that it was a waste of food and tried my best to stop him. He looked at me, and then the lamp, and said, "You and I have seen that it is possible to live up to three weeks without food. We once lived almost three days without water. But you cannot live a proper life even for three minutes without hope."

There is so much despair in the world, disappointment about human nature and our future. More than seventy years after the Shoah, our world once again seems to be running out of control with problems that are too great to solve and hatreds too deep to cure. Racial injustice, Police brutality, Incendiary Presidential Politics, Increased hate, anti-Semitism, BDS on Campus and Terrorist attacks at home and abroad- each of these adds to our fear, to our anger, to our dissension, to our indifference- and we feel a deep sense of powerless to an inevitable outcome. For many, our natural response is to withdraw and resign ourselves to an inescapable pessimistic future. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks cautions us that the greatest danger in the world today is living with a sense of hopelessness and accepting despair as our fate. Even in the darkest times, the wisest among us understood that one cannot do without the essential ingredient of life- hope; like father and son lighting

the Chanukah candle in Auschwitz- one can only live a proper life with hope.

“There are no hopeless situations, only hopeless people.”

In the middle of the Great Depression, New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia sought to live amongst the people. It was not unusual for him to ride New York City fire trucks with the firefighters, raid speakeasies with the police department, take entire orphanages to baseball games, and whenever the New York newspapers were on strike, he would go on the radio and read the Sunday funnies to the kids.

One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, an elderly woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter’s husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges.

“It’s a real bad neighborhood, your Honor,” the man told the mayor. “She’s got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson.”

LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, “I’ve got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions—ten dollars or ten days in jail- you decide.” She was penniless and had no way to pay the fine. She dropped her head awaiting the penalty, jail time- not knowing how to care for her family. As he pronounced the sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his hat saying: “Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant.”

The following day, New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, fifty cents of that amount being contributed by the aggrieved grocery store owner, while some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation.

At a time, when our nation must exercise one of its most important rights to choose its next leader- this 80 year old story of New York City's Mayor LaGuardia rings true.

We are reminded that leaders must shine as exemplars in the darkest days to bring light to our world, to take responsibility and care for all those in need. Responsibility means doing the right thing, taking a moral stance with a healthy dose of chutzpah. The story distinguishes LaGuardia as an inspiring leader able to balance justice and mercy, a leader who holds everyone accountable and is not afraid to roll up his sleeves and be one of the people. In a month, we will choose our next leader but this Yom Kippur, this Day of Atonement, serves as the time to choose our best self.

In Pirkei Avot, Ethics of our Sages, the great scholar Hillel teaches two lessons one after the other:

“Al Tifrosh min HaTzibur- Do not separate oneself from the community.

B'makom she'ein anashim, hishtadel lehiyot Ish- In a place where there are no human beings, strive to be one.”

It is important both to live in community and to be an active part of the community. Furthermore, Hillel adds the imperative if you find yourself in a community where others are not stepping up to take responsibility

to respond to the needs of the community, then you must do it- you have an obligation to “be the man or woman,” or better be a mensch.

Tonight, we have entered our own courtroom drama like that of Mayor LaGuardia- when we began our service with the Kol Nidre prayer. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “To understand Kol Nidre, we need to go back to a unique feature of the Bible. We find that dialogue with G-d takes the form of a legal challenge. Even though we believe that G-d is infinite and we are infinitesimal, G-d is eternal and we are mortal, we are G-d’s partners in the work of creation. We are G-d’s stake in the world. The synagogue is turned into a court of law. Kol Nidre is not a prayer but a legal process signaling that for the next 25 hours what is about to happen is something more than conventional prayer.” For the next 25 hours, we will have confessions and pleas of guilt. We present evidence and beg for mercy. With regret and remorse, we ask G-d to release us from our vows, our mistakes, our promises and our hurts.

With the entire community present this day, with all the Torahs removed from the Ark for Kol Nidre we begin our legal proceedings. As services continue, we will beat our chest and recite the 44 verses of confessions in the Al Chet prayer. The confessional prayers are all written in first person plural, Al Chet Shechatanu- For the sin that we have committed...” Why are all 44 sins written in the “we” form? Could it be that we made so many mistakes and committed all 44 sins? Like me, you can pinpoint a smaller number of misdeeds for which you must seek forgiveness. Yet, we still stand and beat our chest over and over again for that full comprehensive list of 44 transgressions. Why? Perhaps, if I have only three sins to repent and stand and beat my chest three times but the person next to me has 10 or 12, could it embarrass them publicly to be standing beating their chest so much longer than me?

The new Machzor Lev Shalem explains, “Amidst a community of imperfect humans, we gain the courage to confess our sins to G-d.... We

are called upon to contemplate those sins which are especially prevalent in our world today.” There are many wrongs in our community and our world. Judaism teaches that we are all guilty for not preventing these wrongs- the burden is on all of us for not stopping these problems. Even though we may not be performing the specific transgression, we have a collective responsibility to prevent them from harming our neighbors, our children and our world.

Elie Wiesel, zichrono livracha, of blessed memory, wrote how the world used to be. In those days, no beggars went hungry and those with lives of misery were always met with warmth and generosity. “Our world today is filled with ugliness. Man walks the moon but his soul remains riveted to the earth.” It does not have to be this way for “there are no hopeless situations, only hopeless people.” (Shimon Peres)

G’mar Chatima Tova- May your fast be meaningful and may we all be inscribed for a year filled with inspiration, passion and hope.