

Seeking Our Salvation

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We find ourselves in an uneasy time, this Rosh Hashanah. With the collapse of the financial markets, with talk of recession or even economic depression in the air, with home foreclosures and unemployment on the rise, it is certainly reasonable to feel worried, anxious, even afraid. An uneasy and difficult time.

Yet in this crisis I see some seeds of hope. Certain contradictions and truths are coming to light. I have been intrigued, over the past few years, with the sudden popularity of playing poker—online poker, television shows and movies about playing poker, the rise of casino culture. This celebration of poker has mirrored something happening in the economy: the notion that real wealth is gained not through the production of goods and services that people need, but through a vast gambling scheme—making bets with other people’s money, other people’s homes, ultimately, other people’s lives. With the collapse of the financial sector, this travesty has been revealed for what it is, if it wasn’t clear before. And with the recent government bailouts, the myth of an unfettered “free market” that can somehow function on its own has perhaps finally been laid to rest. I find hope in that.

I also find hope because in the past few years I have started to hear candidates for political office—including our own governor, Deval Patrick—speak about government and public service in tones other than sarcasm and cynicism. It became fashionable, beginning in the early 1980s, for both Republicans and Democrats who run for public office—especially the presidency—to malign the very institutions in which they serve. The received wisdom became, “the only good government is less government.”

This undermining of the notion of government as an essential component of the common good has been part of a larger ideological assault over the past 30 years: an assault on the very idea of a public ‘commons’ to which we all belong and for which we are all responsible. The undermining of government has had very real effects, from the disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina to the failure to adequately regulate Wall Street. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy, as inadequate public institutions fail to serve the citizens who pay for them, who then further lose faith in those institutions.

My own perspective on government and the public sector is a bit different. My father, *alav hashalom*, spent almost his entire adult life in public service—from serving in the Navy in the early 1960s through over 25 years as a bureaucrat in the Department of the Interior. I grew up knowing that people in government, while much maligned outside Washington, were generally hard-working people serving the public good—in my father’s case, using people’s tax dollars to support the creation of community gardens in urban neighborhoods, to turn old railway lines into hiking and biking trails, to preserve rivers and historical sites across the country. I grew up understanding that our government, when functioning properly, is an expression of and a servant to the public good. So I find hope in the thought that perhaps there is a shift going on in

our public discourse, that the worship of the “market” is lessening and a return to the notion of shared civic commitment is on the rise.

So. Why am I talking about this on Rosh Hashanah? Because this is a day when we think about where we have been, and where we need to be going—and how we’re going to get there. This is a time of thinking about change—personal change, communal change. The question that I am thinking about, for myself and for our nation as this election season unfolds, is this: **how do we make real change?** It is one thing for change to be in the air and in the campaign slogans; it is another thing for real change to be made. On an individual level, it is one thing for me to know that I’m not fully living my life the way I’d like to, and another thing for me to actually transform my life, my self.

A prominent image on Rosh Hashanah is that of Kingship—the notion that today we declare God to be the ultimate “Ruler.” For obvious reasons, that imagery has become alien and difficult for many of us. But there is an important message beneath the metaphor. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, understood the metaphor of the “Kingdom of God” to imply that “the status quo of human life constitutes an imperfect manifestation of Godhood.” Kaplan continues, “We are asked to affirm the sovereignty of God precisely because the authority of the divine aspect of life has not been universally recognized or fully established” (*The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, p. 107).

What is this “divine aspect of life” that Kaplan was talking about? Kaplan often referred to God as “The Power that Makes for Salvation.” One important part of this formulation is the notion of God as a “Power” or a “Process,” rather than as a supernatural Being. But equally important was Kaplan’s notion of “salvation.” When Kaplan spoke about “salvation,” he didn’t mean it in either its Christian or its traditional Jewish sense. He didn’t mean being saved from sin, and he rejected the notion that we will be rewarded for our good deeds in this life with eternal blessings in “the world to come.”

When Kaplan talked about “salvation,” he meant the capacity of every human being to come into his or her fullness as a person—in his words, “the complete and harmonious fulfillment of all the physical, mental and moral powers with which the human self as a social being is endowed” (*MOG* p. 41). To put it another way: we are each created *b’tzelem elohim*, in the image of the divine, which means each of us has profound gifts of mind and heart and soul. To fully allow those gifts to flourish is the meaning of individual “salvation.”

What is critically important is that Kaplan understood that each individual could only achieve this “salvation” in a communal context. For Kaplan, this was both a sociological and an existential reality.

On the sociological side, Kaplan understood that we can only come into our full selves in the context of group life. That is, our values, our moral commitments, are formed in the context of the communities and traditions in which we are raised and in which we live. We do not become full human beings in a vacuum or alone on a mountaintop. Community is essential not just because it feels nice or because it helps us meet our basic needs, but because without a social context, we cannot develop the higher values that make us human.

Existentially, Kaplan understood that all beings in the universe are in some profound and very real way connected to one another. As long as anyone is hungry in this world, as long as anyone is oppressed, I am not entirely free. Human salvation is ultimately a collective endeavor. Kaplan wrote:

“There can be no personal salvation so long as injustice and strife exist in the social order; there can be no social salvation so long as the greed for gain and the lust for domination are permitted to inhibit the hunger for human fellowship and sympathy in the hearts of [humanity].” (*MOG*, p. 54)

“Salvation,” then, for Kaplan, meant both individual and communal transformation—the achievement of a fullness of self and the perfection of human society. And if we understand God as the Power that works within and through us to achieve that “salvation,” then on Rosh Hashanah we are dedicating ourselves to the sovereignty, the rule, of that greater Power. We dedicate ourselves to the work of salvation—for ourselves, our community, and our world.

We are challenged, on Rosh Hashanah, with this question:

What is the life that I, that we, are meant to live? And how do I, how do we, achieve this “salvation,” our fullness as human beings?

40 years ago, in addressing the foreign policy and domestic problems facing American society, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that it was time for a “revolution of values.” He wrote:

“The stability of the large world house which is ours will involve a revolution of values to accompany the scientific and freedom revolutions engulfing the earth. We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing”-oriented society to a “person”-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered. A civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral and spiritual bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy.” (*Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*)

A “revolution of values” is an interesting way to think about the task facing us this Rosh Hashanah. Dr. King was calling for a shift in values on a society-wide level—but it is also a challenge to us as individuals, as a community. What would be our own “revolution of values?”

My guess is that the professed values of the people in this room and in this community are generally quite positive—we would say we value family and personal connections, we value doing for others as well as taking care of ourselves, we value spiritual goods as much as or even more than material goods, we deeply care about the environment. We have pretty good values. The “revolution,” then, would be about making our lives fully reflect the values we profess.

If we were fully living our values, then our basic resources—our time, our money, and our psychic energy—would be apportioned according to those values. We would live in a

sustainable way. We would spend the most time and energy doing those things that we value most—being with family, friends and community; serving others; taking care of our own bodies and souls. But do we?

Over the past couple of years, everyone in my household except for me has gotten a cell phone. I have watched with fascination as, for each of them, getting a cell phone seems to soon translate into feeling that it's unthinkable to leave the house without it. Taking a walk down the street, going out for a two-minute errand—all are preceded by making sure the cell phone is in the pocket, in the purse. This seemingly existential need for a cell phone has made me think, what are the things that I really shouldn't be leaving the house without? Okay, my house keys. But what else? Patience, perhaps. I can't leave the house unless I'm sure I have patience. Or maybe an intention to be kind to everyone I meet. Or, do I have enough time to get where I'm going without rushing? That would be a good thing to always have. Or maybe, do I have some money that I'm ready to give away to someone else? What would it be like to think I couldn't possibly leave the house without these things?

That's one example of what it would be like to be fully living my life according to my values. I have to admit I'm nowhere near doing that.

This is a huge challenge, this salvation business. It's hard to fully live in accord with our highest values. Sometimes this is a result of our own choices, conscious or not. We choose to spend time on the computer that we could be spending doing spiritual practice, or time at work that we could be at home with our kids. We choose to spend money on ourselves that could be used for someone in need; to expend our energy on distractions instead of on activities or disciplines that actually nourish our bodies and our souls. We buy things we don't need, act on impulses that we know are not healthy, fall prey to doubt, to laziness, to unnecessary anxiety and worry. We do all this because we're human, we're not perfect, and that's why we gather here every year to try to get back on track and do a little better in the year to come.

There are also external obstacles to achieving salvation. Our society and economy are not really set up to help us live our highest values. We may need to work endless hours to earn enough money for the essentials, because our society expects individual households to take care of almost everything on our own—housing, child and elder care, health care, transportation costs, and on and on, and because real wages have been declining for over 30 years. We may be dealing with stresses in our family that are just too much for one or two people to handle without help and support. We may be having trouble figuring out if the measures we are using to gauge our lives are our own measures of value, or come from somewhere else.

How do I know if I am successful—as a parent, a child, a worker, a person? How do I know what is enough—enough money, enough accomplishment, enough stature in the eyes of others? We are bombarded with images of what success in all these realms “should” look like, and it can be truly difficult to discern whether the measures of success we hold really reflect our own highest values, or something else entirely.

In our struggle with both internal and external obstacles to “salvation,” to living our lives as they are meant to be lived, Kaplan's insight that we can only achieve our “salvation” in the context of

community is urgently important. True community is a place for us to be supported, nurtured, and strengthened in our attempt to live the lives we are meant to live. Community is the place where we shape our values and have them reflected back to us. It is the place that helps us hand those values on to the next generation. In true community we can come together with other citizens in order to agitate for the creation of public policies that reflect the common good, and that help us achieve our own and our collective salvation.

Much has been written about the decline of community, of what some call “social capital,” over the past 50 years in America. We live in a time of unprecedented change, from our basic economic structures to how we receive and process information. One of the few constants in this time of change has been the steady decrease of real social connections among people, and the weakening of civic institutions that have been fundamental to promoting the public good. In the first half of the 20th century, it was the power and the “civic capital” that resided in local-level membership organizations—from labor unions to Black churches—which propelled the large-scale, progressive changes in American society, from the New Deal through the civil rights movement. Not heroic individuals, not even great presidents, but the energy, power, and shared vision of networks of communities made these great changes possible.

Where once we were citizens, today we are primarily consumers. And however community-minded we might be, none of us is impervious to this profound shift. It is very very difficult for us not to primarily experience ourselves as consumers. Ultimately, the consumer is one individual, alone, making his or her choice. In a culture of what one social critic calls “OmniMarketing” (see Dick Meyer, *Why We Hate Us: American Discontent in the New Millenium*), we approach everything as consumers—not just as we consider what kind of food to eat or clothes to buy, but as we think about choosing a congregation, electing a president, finding a mate. It is difficult not to approach all aspects of our lives today as consumers with choices, choosing our preferences from an array of “products.”

In her book *Diminished Democracy*, the sociologist Theda Skocpol writes about the decline of volunteer, membership-based organizations—everything from the AFL-CIO to the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, the PTA—through which citizens took action on every sort of local and national issue. She notes that in their place have arisen professionally-run advocacy groups which people join by paying money. Skocpol writes, “Where once cross-class voluntary federations held sway, national public life is now dominated by professionally managed advocacy groups without chapters or members” (quoted in *Why We Hate us*, page 158).

So even in the realm of dealing with critical issues from the environment to ending poverty to dealing with genocide in Darfur, we are essentially consumers—paying others to “make change” for us, rather than actively engaging with others to make change. Thinking about this has forced me to admit that—with every good intention—I am essentially purchasing a sense of “doing something” when I make contributions to advocacy groups that I believe in. In those situations I am a consumer, not a producer, of social change. That doesn’t mean it’s bad, or that I should stop contributing, but if that is the extent of my civic engagement—that and casting a vote every few years—then there’s a problem.

Now, of course we need to be consumers some times—we need to purchase things to live, and it’s okay to spend some amount of our time and energy thinking about meeting both our needs and our wants. The problem comes when we end up walking through life primarily as a consumer. Being a consumer means having as our principal consideration this question: “What do I want, and how do I get it?” It’s a question that can be asked in any realm—material, spiritual, political—but it remains a consumer question. “What do I want, and how do I get it?”

The question asked of us on Rosh Hashanah is quite different. That question is this: “What am I on this planet to do, what is of the highest value, and how do I best serve that?” And that is what Mordecai Kaplan meant by acknowledging the “kingship” of the Power that Makes for Salvation: it means choosing to place ourselves—our hearts and souls, our material and spiritual riches, our minds and our hearts—in service of building a world in which every person can live a life of value, can live the life they are meant to lead. This is impossible while people are hungry, are living in fear, are oppressed and abused. And in this historical moment, this service includes saving the planet itself, and all its creatures, not only the human inhabitants.

To achieve this we do, indeed, need a “revolution of values”—a revolution in how we think of ourselves. We need to transform ourselves from being primarily “consumers” to being citizens, covenantal partners—even, you might say, servants of the divine. And to achieve this revolution, we need one another—we need the support of our community.

That, to my mind, is what membership in Dorshei Tzedek is really about—to enable us individually and collectively to envision and then enact the lives we are meant to live, to do the service we are asked to do. Everything we do as a community should in some way serve that goal. Why do we celebrate Shabbat together? To gain perspective on our lives; to create a space where we take a break from consuming, from shopping and working; to greet one another in shul and share a meal; to turn away from the screen and towards the human faces around us.

We worship and meditate and learn together to nourish our souls and reflect on the deeper meaning of our lives. We educate our children to pass on our most cherished traditions and values. We do acts of chesed, play softball, watch movies together, to nurture personal connections. We join others in the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization to act on our shared values in the public realm. We encourage one another to be more patient, less greedy, kinder and more compassionate. We are examples for one another, we inspire our children to see themselves as agents for change, we lift each other up in the sweet harmony of our singing.

The question that this community is here to help you answer is not “What do I want, and how do I get it?” but rather, “How do I best lead the life I am meant to live? How do I do the service that is my own gift to give?”

The work of salvation is a spiritual task, a community-building task. It’s also a political task, although it’s not ultimately about who occupies the White House, however important that may be. It’s about creating a different kind of society where we can experience ourselves as empowered citizens, as members of a broader covenantal community whose members care for one another, are responsible for one another.

In a modest way, we are undertaking a few initiatives at Dorshei Tzedek this year that are related to this work of salvation, and I'd like to take a moment to describe them here.

Most immediately, we are joining with other members of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization to defeat a profoundly cynical and reckless ballot initiative, Question 1 on the November ballot, which would abolish the state income tax. This would be a disaster for vital public services, diminishing state revenues by 40%. It would affect our schools, our health services, our public safety. Even more profoundly, the success of this initiative would undermine the very notion that we are members of a commonwealth, that as citizens we are responsible to and for one another. On a table in the hall, you will see pledge cards and information sheets. As part of this campaign, we are asking that you take a pledge card to fill out—and feel free to take more than one, to get others to fill it out—so that those running the “Vote No” campaign will be able to make sure there are sufficient votes to defeat this initiatives. Towards that end, we are asking that you bring the filled-out cards back here—during the holiday, if you are comfortable writing during the holiday, or bring it back next week, during Yom Kippur, if you prefer to fill it out after Rosh Hashanah is over.

In February, we are co-sponsoring, along with Temple Hillel Bnai Torah, a service-learning trip to New Orleans. We will be participating in a rebuilding project in a neighborhood affected by Hurricane Katrina, and learning about some of the bigger issues facing not only New Orleans but also facing low-income and communities of color around the country. This will be a unique opportunity to be of service to others while also making deeper connections within our own community, through a week of living together and laboring with our hands and our hearts. Information about the trip will be coming via email soon.

And finally, we will be kicking off this year an education and action campaign that we are calling “Food Matters.” Modeled on the wonderful “Behind the Labels” initiative organized by Barbara Shatkin a few years ago, we—both kids and adults—will be learning about social and economic justice issues that lie behind the food that we eat. Judaism teaches that eating is a sacred act, and we want to look into what it means to honor both the earth and the human labor that goes into producing our food, and why it is that some of us have so much to eat, and others so little. We'll be kicking this off in November, both in the school and in an adult education class that I'll be teaching—you can see information about that on the adult ed flyer out in the lobby.

I'd like to close by returning to what I mentioned at the beginning of this talk—the uncertain state of our economy, and the dis-ease and anxiety many of us are feeling in this moment. Some of us are already struggling financially, others are not but may be soon, others of us are sheltered from this particular storm, at least for now. On a very basic level, I hope we can take comfort in knowing that we are a part of this community, that we are here for one another, and will do what we can to support one another through whatever hard times may come. But I also hope we can help one another in a less tangible way: by supporting one another in this work of salvation. The irony is that it is actually a great release to be freed from the question, “What do I want, and how do I get it”, because our wants are endless, and we will never fulfill them. The consumerist stance is, ultimately, a recipe for suffering, a path of never-ending dissatisfaction. Yet no matter if we have much or have little, the question, “How do I serve?” can always be answered in a

positive way—because each of us has gifts that we bring to this life. There is always someone we can help, always a wholesome quality that we can cultivate, always some way to contribute to the healing of ourselves and the world around us. May we each, in this new year, do our own, unique part to help realize the “kingdom of God”; may we each be blessed to come one step closer to living the life we are meant to live. *L’shanah tovah.*