

Yom Kippur 2016

Laugh at all my dreams my darling
Laugh but I repeat anew
That I still believe in man
And I still believe in you

My noble soul cannot be led
To the golden calf of scorn
For I still believe in man
As every child is human born.

This poem, entitled Credo, was written by Saul
Tschernikovsky, a Russian Jew who lived to see programs and
the Holocaust. Yet in spite of everything he could still write a
Credo to hope and to optimism. In spite of everything.

Hope. It is a simple word. Hope. This summer, on one of those
crystal clear mountain days, the sun reflecting off Adirondack
Lakes, an occasional deer standing by the side of the road, I
drove thru the North Country. I was at peace, and the world
was whole. I am familiar with the Adirondack towns: : Schroon
Lake, Keene Valley, Jay. But on this day I came to a town I had

never heard of, the town of Hope, New York. A sign greeted me." You are entering Hope." Once this section of route 30 was populated by sawmills, tanneries, tourist cabins. Now the town of Hope consisted of three homes hugging the highway. And immediately after passing the sign "You are entering Hope," I noticed a second sign," You are leaving Hope." That was it, I only saw three homes and I was out. Not much Hope!

Then, on that beautiful Adirondack day. I turned on CNN and the blue sky was suddenly darkened by clouds as I listened to news of the election, and realized that in the words of Abraham Lincoln our nation is divided against itself. Hope often seems to be blotted out, replaced by anxiety, cynicism, pessimism and fear--- especially fear. America has been recast into a country where violence and hatred have been unleashed. We are a country where ideals are diminished by xenophobia, racial, ethnic, religious and gender bigotry--- confirmed by an alarming number of our electorate who believe that any type of change is preferable to our higher values.

Hope. You are entering . You are leaving.

So how do we begin to heal America, America, that in spite of challenges remains a great country, a flaming beacon to the world.

What can broaden the boundaries of a little town called Hope in the Adirondack Mountains, and the spirit of hope in the human heart?

It might begin with the words of Elie Wiesel, who died this year. In 1986 when awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, his words, framed by the Holocaust, were a remembrance of when he was a child.

He wrote:

” I remember it happened yesterday or eternities ago. A young Jewish boy discovered the kingdom of night. I remember his bewilderment. I remember his anguish It all happened so fast. The ghetto, the deportation.

And now the boy is turning to me: 'Tell me' he asks. What have you done with my future?

"And then I explained to him how naïve we were, that the world did know and remained silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. Silence encourages the tormentor."

Today many are silent. Many who understand what this election means refused to take a stand. And those who speak up? Are they voices crying in the wilderness?

A Story: He was an elderly man, burdened under by the weight of the years. His head was pressed against the giant stones of the Western Wall in Jerusalem, where morning dew was interpreted as God crying for his people.

Each morning this man folded a slip of paper, a supplication to God and inserted it into the crack between the stones of the Western Wall, as Jews have done for centuries.

Day after day the elderly Jew would repeat this ritual. Insert a prayer. Leave. Return. Leave. Return. Now It happened that there was an observer who constantly watched him.. And one morning the observer approached the man as he inserted his message in the Western Wall. The observer spoke: "Sir, for weeks I have been watching you insert a note in the crack between the stones. Would you tell me, what is your supplication? What are you praying for?"

And the old man responded: "I am praying for men and women to reach out to one another , to accept each other as members of the kingdom of God."

And the observer queried: "Have your prayers been answered?"

The gray bearded supplicant, his eyes cast down, sighed , shook his head and then, his voice barely a whisper, replied:

"No, my friend. No. My prayers have not been answered." Tears ran down his wrinkled face. "In fact, sometimes I feel that I am

talking to a wall.”

When I listen to the coverage of the 2016 presidential campaign I listen in amazement. Are we talking to a wall? How can this be happening? How can so many succumb to the degrading of humanity, making a mockery of our ideals, casting reason and respect aside.

So how do we begin to heal?

It was the 14th day of March, in the year 1956, and my father had received a prognosis that his disease was terminal. The time had come to draft his last will and testament. It would not be the normal will. Oh no, not the normal will. My father’s will would be what is known as an ethical will, once common among Jews.

As the day arrived to put his thoughts on paper he pondered. “what will be my final message? What values do I wish to leave for posterity? What embued my life with meaning?” And then he wrote a will, a will with which some of you are familiar but I am convinced speaks to these times.

Yes, it was the 14th day of March 1956, and my father sat at his desk in Albany---and this is the legacy he bequeathed to the generations still to come.

This is his legacy.

” (My) worldly goods are of small material value” he began. “I am in possession of a far richer store. It is a way of life transmitted to me, through thousands of years, by prophet , sage and martyr of my people. It embodies a counsel for life which if taken diligently to heart and practiced by all men, would lead to larger understanding, less bloodshed, and more brotherhood, it is a council which thinks of man as a little lower than the angels rather than as kin to beasts. That council I gladly bequeath to all mankind, without regard to family ties or color or creed. It is a rich heritage which, without distinction, I will to friend and foe alike”

For over half a century I have reflected on that will hanging on the wall in my study. Each year I discuss it with my class at School of the Holy Child. The message is not complicated. It is

not hard to decipher or even to enact. From the depths of his heart my father believed :

We are little lower than the angels when we are concerned about others and not only about ourselves.

We are little lower than the angels when we act with humility.

We are little lower than the angels when we treat with decency, friend or foe alike. Those we agree with. Those we disagree with. Those who may be different from us.

We are little lower than the angels when we exalt man and woman rather than relegating them to the realm of beasts.

Earlier this year President Obama mused: "As we get older, we learn that we don't always have control of things—not even a president does. But we do have control over how we respond to the world. We do have control over how we treat one another."

How we treat one another: As little lower than the angels. As kin to the beasts. Two choices. And this year? And this year?

Again the wisdom of Elie Wiesel: “Some one who hates one group will end up hating everyone— —and ultimately hating himself or herself.”

Rabbi Leo Baeck was a German rabbi who led the Liberal Jewish community in Germany when the tentacles of the Nazis strangled the land. Because of Rabbi Baeck's exalted position, the Nazi's informed him that he would not be sent to the concentration camp. However, he insisted that if his people were sent he would go with them. Rabbi Baeck was deported to Theresienstadt. In subsequent months he was assigned the macabre task of transporting the dead, in a wheelbarrow, to the crematorium.

He gripped one handle of the wheelbarrow. A second prisoner held the other handle. As they reached an especially rough patch of earth Rabbi Baeck cautioned his partner: “Be careful, Don't jostle the bodies. Don't shake them. “

His partner was puzzled and asked”, Rabbi Baeck why are you concerned , these people are dead.”

Rabbi Baeck paused before answering.” Because at this moment I finally understand the meaning of the words, do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”

Even in death Dr. Baeck treated the essence of man with respect, acknowledging the divine image in which we are created. Even in death. How much more then should we treat the living with reverence, for each one of us is special. Each one of us can be---but little lower than the angels.

Our country is at a pivotal point in our history. Where will we go? What destiny will we shape? What will we be in the future? And, for one final moment, I hear the echo of Elie Wiesel speaking out of the depths of the kingdom of night, yet still raising his voice in affirmation.

” Just as man cannot live without dreams” he said”, Just as man cannot live without dreams, he cannot live without hope. If dreams reflect the past, hope is the future.--- And, in the final analysis, I believe in man in spite of men.”

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May we strive to fulfill this dream.