

The 40th anniversary of Bet Mishpachah; the 40th anniversary of Pride; a momentous Supreme Court decision; nine people gunned down in an African-American church; the death of a dear friend in an American drone attack; six people stabbed, one fatally at a Pride event in Jerusalem; Jewish terrorists burning down the homes of two Palestinian families; the image of a three-year old Syrian boy washed up on a Turkish beach; and a missing Torah scroll and a dispute over the ownership of a set decorative *Rimonim* that ends up in court: all ideas that swirled in my head as I was trying to compose a *drasha* for Rosh Hashanah; all topics that lent themselves to moral lessons worthy of this sacred day; but where to begin? How to make them into a coherent whole? Even my good friend, the one with the beard and the earlocks and the black hat and caftan, the one you have called the Rebbe of Dupont Circle refused to help me. “Too much,” he said! “A *drasha*,” he added, is like walking a tightrope; people looking at you with rapt attention, holding their breath and just waiting to see if you’ll make it to the other side or, Heaven forbid, stumble and fall down to earth; not a time to burden yourself with excess baggage.”

But I am a bit of a daredevil, “seventy going on seventeen,” Joel says. So here it goes, ever so gently, one step, two steps. Forty --or should I say two score-- years ago a few gay men brought forth in this city a place of worship conceived in the Jewish tradition and dedicated to the proposition that all people are created in the image of their Maker. It’s a proposition that seems so elf-evident today, that it belies the long struggle and the many obstacles that we as gay, lesbian, trans and bisexual people have had to endure and overcome. We were flawed members of the human race, outcasts, unwanted, unwelcome, slaves left behind in the exodus from Egypt, excluded from our tribe and from the words of Sinai.

I wasn’t one of the courageous men --soon joined by a few courageous women-- who asserted their right as *B’nai Torah*, as sons and daughters of the Torah, as members of the covenant that binds us to the Almighty. I joined Bet Mishpachah a few years later, thirty-five years ago. And I have had the privilege of addressing the congregation almost every Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur since then. Perhaps because Washington is grooming herself for a papal visit I have been drawn to a *drasha* I gave at the time of another papal visit, the visit of Pope John Paul II to Baltimore about twenty years ago. I was drawn to an image that still haunts me. It was the story of a woman who had stood for hours in a throng of thousands waiting for an opportunity to see and perhaps touch the Pope’s hand. She was there, she said, because she had a child with leukemia and wanted desperately to receive the Pope’s blessing and perhaps the hope of a miracle that might save her child’s life. That desperate last hope contained in this woman’s wish is so much a part human nature and so much in the spirit of the liturgy of the *Yomim Noraim*, the Days of Awe. Who among even the most sophisticated among us hasn’t asked for divine intervention, for a miracle at a time of stress, as a way of averting fate? Seventy-five years ago the hope of a miracle that would stay the hand of the Nazi hordes was certainly on the mind of the millions of Jews living in Europe, my own family among them. And just four years ago my best friend from college, Warren Weinstein, was taken hostage by Al Qaida. And again, we, his family and friends, hoped for a miracle and prayed that somehow he might survive, that his captors might experience a change of heart. But that was not to be. Our supplications, like those of the millions of Jews during the Holocaust, were to no avail. And tragically Warren was killed in an American drone attack.

But miracles do happen; not miracles that go against nature, but miracles that restore nature, miracles that repair the world. And a change in the human heart may well be the greatest

and most challenging of all miracles. It does not come in a bold of lightening. As lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people living in the United States we have witnessed and been the beneficiaries of a painfully slow change in the human heart that has spanned forty years. Others on the *bimah* these Days of Awe will no doubt also seize on the significance of the number forty in the history of our people: forty years of wandering the desert, forty years to erase the mentality of being slaves, forty years of trials and tribulations, and forty years that forged us ultimately into a nation. Like the ancient Israelites our path to acceptance, our path to being a community was strewn with obstacles and challenges. The Pharaohs we faced at the outset of our journey were enthroned in in every legislature and supported by every police department in this country. It took an unlikely group of drag queens, marginalized even by the more mainstream gay community, just as Moses had been despised by the Israelites, to take a stand at Stonewall 46 years ago to set us on the path that culminated in this year's Supreme Court decision affirming our right to marry.

And like the Israelites wandering the desert who faced an epidemic of death caused by poisonous snakes, thirty-three years ago we faced the agony of seeing lovers and friends succumb to a heretofore unknown disease, AIDS. But somehow, within that terrible disease and in the face of increasing prejudice and hatred, our community found the seeds of healing, seeds of healing more miraculous than anti-retroviral drugs, more powerful than a still elusive vaccine against AIDS. Like the Israelites who created a brass serpent as a unifying symbol to fight death, we created a quilt made up of 46,000 panels bearing the names of 91,000 people who had died of AIDS. It was meant to be a memorial, but it became a powerful call to action. Just as the great rabbinic scholar and physician Maimonides had postulated 1300 years earlier, we found the source of healing within the disease itself. The disease, miraculously, became a source of self-sufficiency, a source of growth, a source of maturation and a source of empowerment for the gay community. And as the AIDS pandemic engulfed the globe, "*Even Maasu Habonim*", the stone that the builders rejected, the response of our community, "*Haita Lerosh Pena*" became the cornerstone, the model for a worldwide response.

Like the ancient Israelites gathered at the Jordan at the end of their forty-year trek, we too now have a view of the Promised Land, a Promised Land where all people are truly held equal and treated with dignity, love and compassion. But we are not there yet, not by a long shot. Last Shavuot Joel and I attended services at Adas Israel. A highlight of that day is the reading of the Ten Commandments as part of the Torah service. So there was a palpable sense of joy as the ark was opened to the singing of *Vayhi Binesoah Ha Araron*. But then there was an audible gasp as we saw that one of the Torah scrolls was missing. All that was left were the *Rimonim*, the silver finials that adorn the two rollers of the scroll. But the scroll itself was gone. The rabbi was taken aback and looked embarrassedly at the cantor who, equally surprised, shrugged her shoulders and shook her head in disbelief. The Torah scroll, it turned out, had been removed as a "show-and-tell" for the visit of President Obama to the congregation a few days earlier. But just about the same time I read the story of a dispute about the ownership of a set of *Rimonim* the finials that adorned a Torah scroll at the historic Touro Synagogue in Newport, RI, a dispute that had gone on for years and was about to go to trial in Federal Court. How strange, I thought, that no one at Adas Israel even envisioned the possibility that the Torah scroll might have been stolen. How strange, I thought, that we worry about the ownership of the *Rimonim*, the adornment of the Torah, more than about the Torah itself. But it's the words of the Torah and the words for that matter of the Christian

bible, the Holy Koran and even Buddha's Discourses that have so often been misappropriated, stolen, and brandished like weapons to sow hate when their intent clearly is love.

LGBT people from Russia to Uganda, Yazidis in Iraq, Rohingya in Burma, Coptic Christians in Egypt and fellow Jews in Europe feeling the sting of renewed anti-Semitism, are but a few of the victims of hatred slain in the name of religion. It was the fate of my friend Warren Weinstein captured by Al Qaida. It was the fate of Shira Banki murdered by an ultra-Orthodox man in a Pride parade in Jerusalem. It was the fate of 18 month old Ali Saad Dawabshe, killed in the deadly firebombing of a Palestinian home in the West Bank village of Duma by Jewish militants that ultimately also claimed the lives of Ali's parents Saad and Riham Dawabshe, leaving behind one 4 year-old orphan. There has been great and perhaps justified concern by the Israeli government and the global Jewish community about Iranian nukes, but the attacks in Jerusalem and Duma are a much more immediate and graver threat. They truly are an existential threat that goes to the very soul of Israel and by implication to the soul of the Jewish people. The headline in the Washington Post did not read "Israeli Extremists," but "Jewish Extremists Torch 2 Palestinian Homes." "Jewish," that means us. Hatred, the Talmud says, was at the root of the destruction of the Second Temple. Groundless hatred, *sinat chinam*, equals, we are told, the sum total of idolatry, immorality and bloodshed.

Marriage equality does not spell an end to *sinat chinam* even in the United States. The venomous dissenting opinions of the Supreme Court and the grudging compliance with the decision in many states make it clear that the flames of hatred have not been extinguished. But it does mean that there is hope; hope that a change of the human heart, however slow and tentative, is possible. Yes, this Rosh Hashanah we should rejoice in having come to an important milestone in the life of our community. But in the spirit of Rosh Hashanah, in the spirit of looking to the future and in the spirit of the Israelites who took on new challenges and new responsibilities as they ended their forty year-long trek and crossed into the Promised Land, marriage equality should spur us on to further milestones on the path to the vision of our founders, that all people are created in the image of our Maker. The command "You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt" and the injunction "Do not stand idly by when your neighbor's life is threatened" took on an entirely new meaning as the Israelites crossed the Jordan. As LGBT people we know what it means to have been strangers in the land of Egypt. And as the successor generation of the Holocaust we know the terrible end-result of people standing idly by. So this Rosh Hashanah let us take on the mantle of responsibility, responsibility for that little boy washed up on a beach in Turkey, responsibility for all those who are labeled as unwelcome strangers, responsibility for all those who are oppressed, and responsibility for all those who, like we have been, are vilified for being different. An impossible task? Listen up, over 1800 years ago, Rabbi Tarfon taught: "The day is short, the work is great...it is not your task to finish the work but neither are you free to exempt yourself from it."

"*Le shana tova tika temu,*" may we all be inscribed for a good year!

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Rosh Hashanah 5776