

Musings on the Eve of the Days of Awe

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It's always a challenge to address a congregation on the High Holy Days. But to do so on Erev Rosh Hashanah carries with it an especially heavy burden. How to set a tone for the *Yomim Noraim*, the Days of Awe that culminate with Yom Kippur? Think back to the biblical account of the elaborate preparations of the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest, --the multiple ritual baths, the unworn pure white linen tunic and turban-- as he readied himself to enter all alone and only on Yom Kippur, the *Kodesh Hakedoshim*, the *Holy of Holies*. How do we prepare ourselves to leave the hassles of our daily lives to confront the innermost part of our being, to enter our own personal Holy of Holies? And if, Heaven forbid, I say the wrong thing, will people forego all the other services? And worse will I be left holding the bag with all their sins? But fortunately, as many of you know, I have a friend I can always count on to steer me in the right direction and provide me with some new insight that I can share with the congregation.

So this year I did not open any of the books I had inherited from my father-in-law, Rabbi Leon Wind or look at any of the more than two million Google citations for Rosh Hashanah. I just got a good night's sleep and on a bright sunny Sunday morning took the Red Line --I took it as a good omen that it wasn't single tracking--to Dupont Circle. I cautiously crossed the street from Metro --I had been hit by a car crossing that same street last October, not a very good start to 5776--and looked for the familiar kindly face with a beard and sidelocks and wearing a black caftan and hat, the one many of you have come to call the Rebbe of Dupont Circle. Now, this early on a Sunday morning, when most Dupont regulars were still sleeping off their Saturday night binges, there weren't many people around. But as much as I looked and searched every bench around the circle, my friend, the Rebbe, was nowhere to be found.

I had gotten used to seeing him feed the pigeons or engaged in a conversation with some passers-by, and always eagerly bidding me *Sholom Aleichem* even before I had had a chance to do so. I grew worried; after all he wasn't a youngster even when I delivered my first Rosh Hashanah *drasha* thirty years ago. I could not fathom a Rosh Hashanah or a Yom Kippur without him. Finally I sat down and tried to collect my thoughts. Where do I go from here? Where do I start? How to make sense of a year that, to borrow Queen Elizabeth's words, might truly be called *annus horribilis*. How to convey hope, how to speak of *Tikun Olam* when

the world seems to be collapsing into chaos? How to speak of love your neighbor or love the stranger, when hate and murder and words that belie “it could never happen here” are all around us? As many of you know I am a child survivor of the Holocaust, but I was determined not to invoke the Holocaust any longer when speaking to the congregation. I was prepared to join those who advocated that the Holocaust ought not be a defining characteristic of what it means to be a Jew. Seventy years ago, after all, the world said “never again!” Sixty-eight years ago the world adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, affirming every human being’s right to freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from fear and freedom from want. Do the renewal of anti-Semitism, the re-emergence of xenophobia, the continuing persecution of people because of whom they love, and the spread of war and crimes against humanity spell an end to “never again?” Do the images of children burnt and maimed by bombs in Syria mean that the deaths of my sisters killed in Auschwitz when they were six and eight were in vain after all? Is there any purpose in continuing to share the story of my family with young people visiting the US Holocaust Memorial Museum? And when the Jewish family itself seems to be splintering into host of different factions, is there any purpose in addressing a congregation on Rosh Hashanah?

I closed my eyes and sat there in utter despair. But then I felt a tap on my shoulder and heard the familiar *Sholom Aleichem*. There he was, my old friend, the Rebbe of Dupont Circle. We did not shake hands as we usually did, but hugged and kissed. I told him how worried I had been about him and how terrible I felt about having to face the congregation without his help. “Why”, I asked him, “did you allow me to suffer, to descend into the depths of depression and anger?” He smiled and put his arm around me, and said, “That is what Erev Rosh Hashanah is all about. It is to begin the *Yomim Noraim* with a sense of dread and despair, dread about the world around us and despair about our own helplessness.” “And then what?” I asked. “Then,” he replied, “You approach the Almighty; that is what our prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are all about.” “But why pray?” I protested, “Wasn’t it the Almighty who said in the words from the Torah that we at Bet Mishpachah read on Yom Kippur, ‘it’s not in heaven, it’s not beyond the sea, it’s near, it’s in your own heart?’” “True,” my friend replied, “It’s like the story I told you long ago of the man who looked for a treasure far away from home, under the bridge in Prague.”

I remembered the story. It was part of one of my first drashot at Bet Mishpachah. It’s about poor Reb Isaac ben Yakl of Krakow. One night, he dreamt that there

was a treasure buried under the bridge in Prague. At first, he ignored the dream, but when it repeated itself night after night after night, he gave in and set off to Prague, only to discover that the bridge where the treasure supposedly lay hidden was heavily guarded at all hours. Digging under the bridge was clearly out of the question.

But Reb Isaac wasn't ready to give up and returned to the bridge day after day until the guard approached him and asked, "Why do you come to the bridge every day? Are you waiting for someone?" And so, Reb Isaac sheepishly told him about his dream. The guard listened, and broke out in laughter. "You came all this way because of a silly dream? You fool! I had a dream that a certain Jew, Reb Isaac Ben Yakl, has buried treasure under his stove, but do you see me going on a wild good chase? Of course not!" Reb Isaac then turned around and hurried back to Krakow. Now he knew where to look. When he came home he shoved the iron stove out of the way and began digging. And, to his great joy, after some effort he uncovered a chest of gold coins! With the treasure, it is said, he built the Great Synagogue of Krakow.

"You see," my friend said, "there are treasures hidden in every human being, treasures waiting to be discovered even while we are frustrated by a futile search for answers under a bridge in Prague, treasures to enrich our soul and the souls of those around us. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur aren't just about agonizing about the world's problems; they are about the path that we, each one of us, choose to take to assure our spiritual survival. No, prayers aren't directed to the heavens above, but to that little bit of the Almighty that resides in each one of us. The little bit that allows us to heed 'I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your kin.' The key premise of our religion, the key premise that these days seems so much beyond our grasp, the key premise of the *Yomim Noraim* is that healing the world begins with each one of us."

I nodded in agreement, and told him it was now my turn to share a story. This year we mourned the passing of Elie Wiesel, the man who reminded us at every turn to remember, to allow memory to be a guide to the future. This is a story I heard him tell five years ago. It's a story, Elie Wiesel said, set about two thousand years ago and told by an Israeli author, Uri Zvi Greenberg, in a poem called *Sipur al Na'ar Yerushalmi*, A Story about a Jerusalemite Boy. One day the boy turns to his mother and says, "Mother I want to go to Rome." And the mother replies, "What? You are in Jerusalem, why do you want to go to Rome?" "Mother I want

to learn something about Roman culture.” At first the mother refuses to go along, but after a while, she gives in, but says, “Look, my son, you go to Rome, do you know anybody there?” “No.” “What will you do in the evening?” “I don’t know, I will go into the field and lie down and sleep.” And she said, “OK, but one thing I want you take from me is a pillow, and when you lie down to sleep, you will at least have a pillow under your head.” The boy agreed and went to Rome; and every day he’d leave Rome and sleep in the fields, a pillow under his head. Then, one night, the pillow caught fire. That night the Temple in Jerusalem went up in flames.

Elie Wiesel reminded us that a fire, events thousands of miles away, can --and should-- set ablaze, our own pillow, our own comfort, our own soul. “Is it possible,” I asked my friend, “to reconcile withdrawing from the world and tending to our own soul on Rosh Hashanah with Elie Wiesel’s imperative to feel the fire even if it burns thousands of miles away?” “It’s not just about feeling the fire,” the Rebbe of Dupont Circle replied, “but it is also about fighting the fire, dousing the flames of prejudice and hate, and that must begin by digging deep within our being, confessing our own shortcomings, our own prejudices, our own petty hatreds and allowing the treasure of our God-given ability to tell right from wrong to emerge; that is how we prepare ourselves on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to face the world and have the strength to do what is right even in a sea of hate.”

“To do what is right in a sea of hate,” I reminded my friend, “is how a Dutch-Indonesian family and their Muslim nanny, came to save my life during the Holocaust and permit me to stand before a congregation on Erev Rosh Hashanah.” “Yes,” he said, “the Shoah did not spell an end to hate, one year it is the Cambodian people persecuted by the Khmer Rouge, another it’s the Muslims in Bosnia or the Tutsis in Rwanda, and this year it’s the Rohingya in Burma and Yazidi in Iraq.” “But then,” he added, “think of the Jewish Community of Winnipeg, a community one tenth the size of DC’s Jewish Community, being the first and only community in the world, to open its doors to Yazidi families fleeing persecution. Or think of Chaim and Kyra Jellinek, a Jewish family in Berlin taking in Kinan, a Syrian Muslim refugee, even as fear of radical Islamism was growing in their community. You see, even in the darkest hour, it is possible, it is necessary to think of, to imagine the light.” “Yes,” I replied, “that is a lesson I learned from my mother, the power of imagination, imagination that kept her alive during the Holocaust, imagination that allowed her to peek through the cracks of a cattle car

as she went from one concentration camp to another, and admire the emergence of spring and get a glimpse of world at peace, a world where people did not hate, a world where people loved one another.” “Yes,” said the Rebbe, “imagination is what allowed the founders of Israel to envision a homeland for the dispossessed of our people. Imagination is what allowed Shimon Peres to see a day when Arab and Jew could live side by side in the land bequeathed to them by a common ancestor. Imagination is the language of our soul, our soul appealing to reason.” And then he gently put his arm around me, and added “and a little imagination is all you needed to write a drasha for Erev Rosh Hashanah.” And with that, we bid each other *LeShana Tova*. And that’s all that is left for me to add, *LeShana Tova*.