

Moral Agency

Yom Kippur 5777

By Eva Freund

This year the stakes are very high. The wall between “church and state” is crumbling. There is a chasm between that which is illegal and that which is immoral. Attacks on our community have become more frequent and more horrific. Hate is considered, by many, to be normal. The single group that has held power since the founding of this country sees their power slipping away. They are afraid and they are pushing back.

This year the stakes are very high. The tectonic plates known as the San Andreas fault have recently been described as “doing the wave” meaning there is vertical as well as horizontal movement. Houston TX, Great Sulphur Springs, WVA and Ellicott City, MD have suffered extreme rainfall and flooding. Tornado alley formerly covered only the southern central plains states. Now it has tripled in size. Perhaps the planet is pushing back.

This year the stakes are very high. More and more decisions are made based on soundbites and fear rather than on informed analysis. Politicians at all levels seem to run for office on lies and hypocrisy while claiming their actions are legal. I cannot recall a

single politician claiming their actions are moral. One candidate called for the people to push back.

The high stakes continue. Throughout history there have been those who firmly believe that their way of worshipping God was the only way. Throughout history there have been those who suffered because they neither worshipped nor looked like those who were in power.

Today it is no different. Our country is no different. Wearing a head covering has become suspicious. Refusing to shake hands with someone of the opposite sex, your language or the color of your skin have become suspicious. And one day you wake up to find that your state has passed a law making discrimination against you legal...as long as it is justified on claims of a religious or deeply held belief.

Yehuda Kurtzer, former president of The Shalom Hartman Institute of North America which focuses on the future of Jewish life in North America., raised two questions. The first question – **How often is the right thing to do completely clear?** The second question – **How obvious is the work of doing good?** He believes that, as seen in our political realm, "...we, as a society, are divided into two schools of thought not only about

specific policies but also about the core moral foundations that drive those policies.”

Immediately following this d'rash will be the reading the Torah portion, *Nitzavim*, that speaks to the relationship between moral clarity (the ability to make a moral distinction) and moral responsibility (the ability to act according to moral principles). Moses is speaking to the Israelites shortly before his death. Listen carefully! Hear the existential urgency in his pleading voice! This is the same existential urgency that we are intended to hear and feel throughout these High Holy Days. At the heart of the portion is a phrase about a mystery.

The hidden things – those are for the Adonai our God, but as for the revealed things, those are for us and our children, to enact all the words of this Torah. (Deut. 29:28)

The message of the verse is complicated by his adamant insistence that all these things are within reach, accessible and doable

Maybe this means that because the words of Torah, both written and oral, are not in heaven – that depending on miraculous intervention circumvents human responsibility – so that if you

have an opportunity to lead, you are meant to seize the opportunity – not to pray for an opportunity.

There are as many ways of leading as there are people in this room. Some of us lead by becoming chairs of committees at Bet Mishpachah or other synagogues. Others lead by being part of the leadership of community organizations. Yet others may lead by having a vision that others want to follow. And yes, there are those who lead by initiating good things.

Or maybe we are actually being told that the work of *doing good* is within reach AND we should focus on those issues that are obvious and accessible.

Doing good includes that which is good for the community and it includes that which is good for us as individuals. When you hear and respond to someone's cry for help you are doing good.

When you say "good morning" to the homeless you are doing good because you see their humanity. When you tell your friends or your staff that they are important you are doing good. And when we give honest "weight and measure" we are doing good. Yes, there are many ways of doing good.

Perhaps the hidden message is that when we engage in the process of taking hold of Torah we assert our responsibility for our role in the covenant and in making the world better. Maybe the

hidden message is that we also know the limits of what we can seize.

So maybe the verse means exactly what it says – **if it is mysterious leave it to Adonoi and if it is revealed then it is up to you-- and to me – to all of us --to take ownership of the obligation. Do what is doable and do not overreach!**

Moral behavior can be as murky as the time in which we live. We require both messages that are implicit in the text. Today with a national election coming up in just a few weeks we must see ourselves as perfectly capable moral actors, capable of seeing ethical and behavioral opportunity and seeing ourselves capable of making an impact. In the words of Ruth Messinger, past-president of American Jewish World Service **“We cannot allow ourselves the luxury of being overwhelmed... or pretending that the problems are so pervasive as to be out of reach.”**

Moral responsibility does not demand moral clarity. In the midst of the Civil War with all of its moral and political conflicts, President Lincoln, while writing his second inaugural address, noted that – “both parties read the same Bible and prayed to the same God.” Lincoln conceded that the totally clear sense of absolute right and wrong did not belong to him but rather was left to God. Yet this understanding did not stop Lincoln from pushing

forward, both in his address and in his presidency, to one side of what he felt was a political and a theological struggle. Lincoln was able to separate moral behavior from moral absolutism.

I think about the need for moral separation as I listen to various presidential candidates fill the air with their versions of moral absolutism. I think about the need for moral separation as I read about state after state wrapping the right to discriminate in the cloak of religion.

I think that the message of Nitzavim, is that being a moral actor and a moral leader means bringing to our holy work an ever-present awareness that – We do not need to know if the good we do encompasses the totality of God’s morality. Rather, we do need to know that – ONLY when we hear the call to moral responsibility and when we know our own limits-- can we do all those things that are within reach, accessible and doable.

But what does it mean to hear the call... and what do we do when we hear it? There are those things we can do and, there are things we must do.

- When others attempt to build walls to keep “those people” out --we must remove those walls one brick at a time.
- When others attempt to rip our social safety net –we must mend it one stitch at a time.

- When some attempt to use the law to burden us with their religious beliefs – we must not accept that burden and we must fight for our religious beliefs and those of “the others.”
- When some attempt to degrade us because they are afraid of our race, our color, our gender, our religious customs, where we are from or who we are –we must stand united in our pride and we must stand united with all of those “others.”

And to those politicians attempting to push this country back to the 1950's or further – we must say NO WAY will we return to the days when Jews changed their names to be employable... NO WAY will we return to the days when law firms would refuse to hire female lawyers because their clients might not like it. NO WAY will we return to the days when adult Black men were called boys to remind them that they were subservient -- and adult females of any color were called girls for the same reason. And, there is NO WAY will we return to the closet because our very existence makes other people uncomfortable.

In the Haftorah accompanying Parshat Nitzavim, we are told that when Israel and the world rejoice in 'redemption', the Jewish End of Days, our people will be called with a new name chosen by Adonoi. The Midrash teaches that we are called by not one but by three names. The first name is given by our parents. The second name is the one used by our friends and family. The third

name is the one we acquire for ourselves. It is said that the best of all of these is the name we acquire for ourselves.

We acquire our name through our words and deeds. For it is through our words and deeds that we proclaim our qualities.

When asked – who goes there-- Adonoi replied to the watchman **“It is I, who speaks in righteousness, mighty to save.”**

The most powerful way to identify ourselves, as we see in God’s example, is not to simply declare our given name but to proclaim our qualities which serve to perfect the world.

In future days when your children, your nieces, or your nephews ask what YOU did during the scary days of the early 21st century will you tell them about the things you did as an individual or as a member of the community. Or will you admit that you did nothing and that you remained silent.

Today our community is faced with many threats. There are threats from enemies on the outside as well as within. Too many will remain silent. It is said we are to feel the pain of others as if it were our own. For the Midrash teaches us that all of us are responsible for one and other. We cannot be covered by a cloak of neutrality. For as Dante indicated “...the worst place in hell is reserved for those who are neutral in times of moral crisis.”

Will you be the one who prays for heavenly intervention or will you seize the opportunity to fix something that is broken? Will you be the one who waits for the other person to shine the light or will you light a candle in the darkness? Will you be the one who thinks only of your own welfare or will you do good things?

What will the watchman hear as you approach the Gate? Will you call yourself by the name given to you or will you be able to proclaim through words and deeds those qualities that serve to perfect the world? And to paraphrase a verse from “Each of Us Has a Name” (Zelda) -- will you be able to say that ... your name is given by your celebrations and given by your work.

This year the stakes are very high. We **will not be** overwhelmed. We **will not** pretend that the problems are out of reach. We **will seize every** opportunity to ensure that in the words of Amos (5:24) “... **justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.**” And in doing this we will be called by the best of all names – the one we have acquired for ourselves.

YACHOL NUCHAL!! (YES, WE CAN!)