

There's Always Something You Can Do

Yom Kippur 5779

Rabbi Robert N. Levine

The people had every right to wonder if the first Yom Kippur would ever happen. Aaron, the high priest, was to don his Ecclesiastical robes and offer up a bullock as a sin offering, setting another into the wilderness as a scapegoat, making it possible for the people to atone and start over. But would Aaron even show up? His heart was still broken. His two sons, Nadav and Abihu, who had spent seven days training to offer sacrifices in a precise, prescribed manner, then they ascended the stairs on the eighth day and proceeded to offer what the Torah calls *Aish Zara*, a strange fire, for which they paid with their lives.

Aaron was stunned into silence. So were the people of Israel. What had happened? The Torah jumps to the conclusion that they might have been committing purposeful idolatry. Really? The sons of Aaron? The nephews of Moses and Miriam? Perhaps they were intoxicated, the Torah intimates.

But what if neither is true? What if Aaron's sons, like many of our own children, were simply yearning to live their own lives, wanting a chance to dream their own dreams, to be holy, but not in a narrowly, ritualistic sense of offering the right animals in the right manner at the right time. Nadav and Abihu stood at Sinai too, they answered as did the entire people, as did we, to a whole series of precepts in partnership with God.

Was the sacrificial rite important? Absolutely. But they well knew already what the prophet Isaiah was to tell us hundreds of years later: that sacrifice was not the ultimate spiritual act, but a means to an important end. They understood that ritual had to inspire us *to deal your bread to the hungry, to bring the poor into your own house, to loosen the chains of the oppressed and never to hide thyself from thine own flesh and blood.*

They heard nothing of this in their seven days of preparation. Their work was rote listless, maybe meaningless. Perhaps Nadav and Abihu felt trapped, in a scenario not of their own making. Perhaps they sought a life that mattered, a life that really made a difference.

Their father *did* show up for Yom Kippur, perhaps not only as a sense of priestly duty, but an act of atonement—for being blinded by his own ambition and desire to please God at the expense of his own children. Perhaps he was now taking responsibility for his own actions, for his failure to look into the pleading eyes of his children, and to say to them, *Hineni*, I am here, I am here for you.

Aaron took responsibility. Today, on this holiest of days we are called upon to do the same. To be sure, these are not easy times. We feel whipsawed by people and events all around us. So much seems out of our control. Some of us are filled with heartbreak and outrage. This is not the country I have always taken pride in, we may feel, these are not the values I preach and live. Many of us feel this, say this to each other, and wring our hands. The question is: do we too say *Hineni*, I am here, I will not be silent. I will respond with courage and resolve.

This frenetic, noisy year is reminiscent of fifty years ago, 1968, which historian Mark Kurlansky called, 'the year that rocked the world.' Thousands would die in Viet Nam, our campuses became hotbeds of political action as Selective Service terrorized many of us with the specter of being drafted to fight a war many could not support and did not want to die for.

Dr. Martin Luther King, battling depression and the premonition that his days were numbered, travelled to Memphis, Tennessee, to support the strike of sanitation workers on April 3rd, 1968. With real premonition, Dr. King preached at the Mason Temple, "I just want to do God's will. He's allowed me to go up the mountain, I've looked over and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people, we will get to the Promised Land." He did not. Nor did Robert Kennedy who spoke in Indianapolis that night and pleaded with his nation to "tame the savageness of man and to make gentle the life of this world."

And of course, he too was gunned down, in that incredibly divisive, violent year.

Yet, many people remember 1968 with pride.

Pride.

Because people came to realize then, that they were not powerless; they could speak out and march against an insane war. They could help to bring about civil rights, and women's rights. That youthful generation had the temerity to believe that they could right wrongs with their heads, hearts, souls and their aching feet.

And bring about change.

Some years later in 1995, we at Rodeph Sholom hired only the second lesbian rabbi who had the courage to come out to her congregation. A few years later we rose as a full sanctuary to offer Rabbi Angel and her bride a standing ovation. We were clapping for ourselves, for the very real journey we had taken to understand that every human being, whatever the color, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identification, is created in the image of God and deserves to be treated as such. We who were treated as non-persons in Egypt, know what it means to have their identity totally taken away from them, their basic freedoms stripped, understood that Egyptian bondage was the bondage of a people to the arbitrary power of the state.

We think we left Egypt long ago, but did we? I am afraid that we are in danger of returning to Egypt and giving up personal freedoms which have been the hallmark of this great democracy. Women, we know, are in great danger of living under an oppressive patriarchy in which mostly white men, congressman, senators and certainly the majority of the Supreme Court attempt to deny the most basic controls women have over the direction of their lives.

Do not fixate on the fate of a single Supreme Court decision, Roe v. Wade. Because, in fact, if you have no providers for hundreds of miles, if there is no coverage, if a frightened young woman is bullied or preached to in order to get the care she deserves, there simply is no right.

You know and I know that this would not happen in a million years if men were blessed with the same reproductive organs. No one would tell them what they could or could not do. No way would congressional men imperiously peer down from their glasses and continue to send women to the back of the bus.

We will remember that Anita Hill got a full dose of this. Let's see what happens next Monday in powerful Senate testimony 2018.

So, in this context, what does it mean to be in bondage? What did it mean before *Roe v. Wade*? Whoopi Goldberg talked about using a coat hanger because she was so desperate. Hundreds, thousands *died* from illegal abortions. Connie Bryson tells of her experience in 1953,

Though he was a medical doctor, the surgery itself was sadistic and barbaric. He scraped out the contents of my uterus with a razor on a stick. He gave me no anesthesia of any kind. He wanted me to suffer. He wanted to humiliate me. When he finished he forced me to look at the product of the procedure and he warned me to stay away from boys. He told me I had a beautiful body then he sexually molested me.

Yes, I meant to be graphic. These stories have to be told. One in three women will have an abortion. They rarely do so cavalierly; they do so because their compelling life circumstances, often desperate life circumstances, sometimes impoverished life circumstances, make it necessary. In 2018 we must do everything possible not to deny women that basic right, their basic healthcare. We cannot *ever* go back to Egypt.

This is no time to stay dormant. We must do all we can no matter our age and stage. We should even tell this to three elderly Jews sitting on a traffic island on Broadway one day. Not talking about world affairs but more immediate concerns, the ability to void.

So Max says, "It's so hard being 85 years old. I get up at 7 o'clock, I go to the bathroom and nothing happens. It takes me absolutely forever.

Morris says, "I know what you mean. Every morning I try to move my bowels and it's so painful."

Irving says, "I know. Getting old is not for sissies."

Max says, "What's your problem Irving?"

"Well, every morning I wake up at 7 o'clock and I have no problems going number one. I am like a fountain. 8 o'clock when it's time to go number two, easy peazy."

"So everything seems fine, Irving. What's your problem?"

Irving says, "I don't get out of the bed until 9."

Well, even for Irving it is important to get up and important to move forward.

We can never return to Egypt. We are still in the wilderness and we must always try to reach the Promised Land. This means both striving to live up to our potential and helping others reach the Promised Land.

Let me say this:

I love this country.

I am a proud American.

I am grateful to this land which, at times, has opened its arms to the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to be free.

Opened its arms to my bubbe who had no one, no English, but simply a will and a gumption, who underwent the arduous journey, thus avoiding the fate of her parents and most of her siblings.

Hopefully, you feel my love and gratitude. So if persona or policies threatens the ideals of our Declaration of Independence, if persona or policies undermine our democracy, if persona or policies sanction the bigotry that once produced unprecedented suffering to our people, if they sanction or shrug off neo-Nazis marching through an historic American city shouting, "Jews will not replace us," if persona or policies undermine the rights and opportunities of those too often made to feel that they don't belong in this land, then when we speak out, when we march, when we wear out our voice or our shoe leather, we are expressing our love for this country and what it has always stood for, expressing our patriotic yearning to become, again, *one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.*

I love Israel. Ever since I huddled with my classmates around a transistor radio scared that the Six Day War would be their last, I have loved and been dazzled by the Jewish homeland. I lived in Israel for a year, been there at least thirty times, taken many groups, including Rodeph Shalom congregants and shared my boundless admiration and profound connection.

But when persona or policies threaten to undermine her democracy, when persona or policies undermine the principles of her own Declaration of Independence, when persona or policies send a clear message that all of its citizens are not equal and do not have the same opportunity or access to justice, when we speak out, we do so out of real love and hope that Israel lives up to her own promise. I have said this before and it bears repeating:

Do not believe polls that tell you that the next generation cares less about Israel than we do. They have been to Israel more than any other generation in the history of the State and understand how miraculous Israel is in so many ways. They, as we, simply want Israel to do all it can, surrounded we know by enemies, by feckless Palestinian leadership who have never given peace a chance, to create laws and vision that will help the Jewish homeland live up to her own stated ideals.

Let us bear witness to the fact that Israelis often exhibit incredible compassion and kindnesses that are rarely reported and that you simply would not find anywhere in the world.

For example, I want you to know that Israeli medical personnel treats soldiers that even seek to kill Jews, with dignity and first class care. I was very moved by a book written by Dr. Elisha Waldman, pediatric oncologist, whose practice is treating Jewish, Muslim and Christian patients at Hadassah hospital.

Dr. Waldman writes, “When you have a child with a massive tumor growing in her little body, you’ll do anything to help. A mother waiting through check points, carrying her child in her arms never knowing if she’ll reach her destination while exhausted Israeli medical personnel having worked a double shift, knowing how long it took her to get there wait because they want to be able to do everything they can to save this Palestinian child’s life.

Incredible, untold stories you need to hear.

They are heeding God’s call to act as if the Holy One walked in our midst. They are living embodiments of Rabbi Hirschberg’s teacher who said to his students, “*Kinderlach*, if you have no compassion, what makes you Jews?”

We Jews learned in the 30’s and 40’s how little compassion existed anywhere.

We remember that:

Walls were erected, borders slammed shut. Our parents and grandparents were desperate for some country, some politicians, to recognize our plight, our humanity. We say *Kaddish* for all the members of our family who died as a result. Today, people are escaping countries where certain death awaits them and their children, as we did. These people again raised their eyes towards America and plead: “We are the tired and the poor, the huddled masses. Won’t you please help us?”

You and I, we at Rodeph Sholom, have answered *Hineni*, yes, we can, yes, we are here.

And as you well know, with tremendous communal effort and pride, we have resettled refugees in New York City, helping them with jobs and apartments, welcoming them with open arms and overflowing hearts.

They are not Jewish, in fact, they are Muslim. We resettled these terrific young men because our Jewish values so dictate, because it is the way we can finally leave Egypt and ultimately look toward the Promised Land.

I don’t have to tell you that there is much more that needs to be done. In New York City, in our town, a woman with multiple myeloma who is undocumented, told her doctor she would not continue chemotherapy because she feared the federal government would deport her because she was receiving medical care. Many more people than we realize are weighing the risk of death by disease versus deportation. In our city there are more than a million undocumented immigrants face agonizing choices every day.

Today in New York City, many people do not feed their children properly, because, for example, they do not want to put them into WSCAH (West Side Campaign Against Hunger)’s database. They don’t give their children basic healthcare, they don’t report crimes perpetuated against them, don’t

report domestic violence, and don't drive because they can't get a license and because a broken taillight can deliver them to immigration and customs enforcement.

How can any church, any synagogue, any school, any children of God, possibly stand for this? We did not and we shall not!

Isaiah's words in tomorrow's haftarah must penetrate our *kishkes* and provoke righteous anger: "Will you call this a purposeful fast, an acceptable day to God? Only if you loose the feathers of wickedness, only if you deal my bread to the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your homes and never hide thyself from thine own flesh and blood."

Nadav and Abihu, sons of Aaron, may have looked at the destiny carefully laid out by their parents and decided it was not enough, it did not meet this standard. They who came out of Egypt and stood at Sinai had to do more. Perhaps they wanted to live a life of higher purpose, a life of meaning, a life that would make a real difference to people in urgent pain.

We must honor that in our own children. We must model those values not in word but in deed.

As Professor Michael Walzer once wrote:

Wherever you live, it is probably still Egypt.

There is always a better place, a promised land.

The way to that land is through the wilderness and there is no way to get there except by joining hands and marching together, to the land that God will show you.

There is always something that you can do, something you *must* do.

Do it.

Amen.