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Kol Nidre

September 27, 2020 | 9 Tishrei 5781

Congregation Rodeph Sholom

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The Urgency of Now

Over a half century ago, Elie Wiesel visited the former Soviet Union to find out firsthand about the Jewish community living behind the Iron Curtain. This is how he begins his book, *The Jews of Silence*:

Their eyes. I must tell you about their eyes. At times it seemed as though the entire country was filled with nothing but eyes, as if somehow they had assembled there from every corner of the Diaspora.

The eyes Wiesel saw were fearful, suspicious eyes.

For months now we have ventured out cautiously, masks securely in place. The only thing we can see is those eyes, the most expressive part of the human persona. Like Wiesel, we saw suspicion in those eyes: who are you? Are you a carrier? Maybe yes, maybe no, but just stay away from me!

But there is more, much more in those eyes—a sense of disbelief, shock even. How did we get here? How will we get somewhere else? We feel a true sense of urgency particularly now we know that life is fragile. Longevity is guaranteed to no one. So hopefully there is resolve to live differently, love differently, forgive differently.

Since we can't project so easily into the future, we yearn for, pray for a different present, a time of affirmation and embrace.

It is interesting to point out that Hebrew, a language as ancient as our Torah, has no way to use the “to be” verb in the present tense. In Hebrew we can say we were, we can say we will be but we really can't say we are.

So it would be very difficult to translate Descartes's famous phrase, “I think therefore I am.”

Nor can we easily say:

“I breathe therefore I am.”

“I pray therefore I am.”

“I give to the Yom Kippur Appeal therefore I am.”

Perhaps Hebrew has no present tense for the “to be” verb because historically the present was just too painful to experience. We yearn for better and different so we look backwards we look forwards we look anywhere but in the here and now.

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That may be so, but our liturgy for these High Holy Days contests that sentiment, contends that the present matters and dramatically proclaims what I will call the Urgency of Now.

Could anything be more dramatic than the Unataneh Tokef:

The great shofar is sounded, the angels declare in awe: Today is judgement day! Today is the day to honestly scrutinize our behavior. Today is the time to celebrate our wonderful potential as human beings...

We hear these powerful words and realize that there is something we can do, something we must do now. It begins with awareness. However, being aware is much easier said than done.

Senator Corey Booker of New Jersey spoke to the graduating class at Yale a few years back and told this story:

When I was Mayor of Newark, there was a group of kids who used to hang out in the lobby of my building. One in particular reminded me of my own father with his quick wit and great swagger. One month into my mayoralty I got a call about a shooting. I saw the name of the murder victim. He was the kid from my lobby this sweet, charismatic young man God had put in front of me every single day. So I thought to myself: God put him right in front of my face but I was charging off to do important things. I could not see what was right in front of me.

I could not see what was right in front of me. We Jews know from painful historical experience what that feels like, to be right in front of people and not to be noticed.

In July of 1938 President Roosevelt called a meeting attended by thirty-two countries at a posh hotel in Evian Le Bas, France to see what countries might step up and save Jews from impending Nazi brutality. Ironically, President Roosevelt called the meeting but had no intention of using his clout to truly save us.

Future Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir was present as an observer from Palestine. She was not permitted to speak at Evian but later wrote, "I wanted to get up and scream. Don't you know that those so-called numbers are really human beings? People may spend the rest of their lives in concentration camps or wander around the world like lepers if you don't let them in." As prophetic as she was, even Golda could not imagine what awaited the Jew who no one wanted. That is precisely why we must open our hearts to those discarded by society, those who we don't truly see, those too easy to forget.

I would hope that the events over the past months would help all of us open our eyes to profound injustice affecting people of color in this and every other country.

Now to be honest, when we see African Americans, in our own eyes there may be concern, fear even. How fast do we look away or get away? George Floyd begs us to do otherwise. He begged his attackers, his tormentors, to let him breathe and from his grave now begs us to care about those who were killed or paralyzed as an act of racism and profound injustice.

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People like Ahmaud Arbery.

Michael Brown.

Eric Garner.

Freddy Gray.

Trayvon Martin.

Tamir Rice.

Breonna Taylor.

Daniel Prude.

Just a few of the too many.

Our country is in desperate need of a vision that will not tolerate bigotry or profound indignity, but rather is based on our Torah's ringing call for justice, its command not to hide ourselves from our own flesh and blood, to take our boot off their neck and let them breathe, let them live, help them achieve lives of purpose and opportunity.

You and I know that these sacred goals cannot be achieved if the values upon which this nation was formed are trashed and ridiculed. How can justice be achieved if appointment to the Federal Bench is based not on legal scholarship or rectitude of character, but on how hard will they work to suppress people's ability to vote, to attain decent health care, to flee persecution and seek due process and the right to choose when to bring a fetus to term.

How can humanity be achieved when the Executive Branch and the Senate all see human suffering and decide that hunger and homelessness are quite all right if they are happening in a blue state.

Let you and I never forget that the world did not even notice us, did not want us, would not open their doors or hearts to us, so we must remove the callouses from our own hearts and live with Torah inspired empathy toward those who do not have enough to eat or a place to live, who stand on our streets because they have nowhere else to go. Judaism commands us to care and to help.

As Abraham Joshua Heschel has written, "Religion begins with a consciousness that something is asked of us."

Awareness is that something.

Response is that something.

COVID-19 should inspire both. Truly knowing how fragile life is, we must hug our blessings tighter than ever, resolve to bless others with our deeds and forge into life again with renewed optimism.

One thing more:

We need to devote time. The pandemic has taught us the value of spending time together. Sometimes maybe we spend a little too much time together. But in any case, we have learned the value of devoting time to those whom we love. In an essay written by a third grader entitled “What Is a Grandmother”, this child wrote:

What’s a grandmother? A grandmother is a lady who has no children of her own. She likes other people’s little girls and boys. Grandmothers don’t do anything except to be there. They never say hurry up.

Usually grandmothers wear glasses and funny underwear. They can take their teeth and gums out.

Grandmothers have to be smart to answer questions like ‘why isn’t God married?’ When they read to us they don’t skip or mind if it’s the same story over and over again. Everyone should have a grandmother because they’re the only grownups who have time.

Yes, but all of us need to find the time, but we also need to find the resolve and the courage to pick ourselves up and to move forward, however uncertain is the future.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of the time he was sitting on the beach during the summer watching two children hard at work building a sandcastle with gates, towers, moats, the whole business.

Just as they were nearly finishing their elaborate project, the wave came along and knocked it all down. I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they totally surprised me. Instead they got up, began to laugh ran up the shore and sat down to build another sandcastle.

We must do similarly.

Yes, our country is in turmoil. We are unsettled, insecure about our own mortality, missing Rodeph Sholom, missing our communal lives, less than confident in those who are leading us through this crisis.

Thankfully, we Jews never throw in the towel, never give up. We are the most resilient people on earth. We have survived attempts to exclude, exile, exterminate us. We do so by rolling up our sleeves, internalizing Heschel’s words, “Religion begins with a consciousness that something is asked from us.”

We did so by responding, by realizing that there is an Urgency of Now. It begins with the resolve to build another sandcastle.

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When famed NBC Bureau Chief Tim Russert, who was must-watch TV during political campaigns, collapsed and died suddenly, columnist Peggy Noonan wrote this poignant paragraph in the *Wall Street Journal*:

In a way the world was a great liar. It shows you it worships and admires money, but at the end of the day it doesn't. It shows you it adores fame and celebrity, but it doesn't. Not really. The world admires, and wants to hold onto, goodness. It admires virtue. At the end it gives us its greatest tributes to generosity, courage, talent well used. That's what it really admires. That's what we talk about at eulogies, because that's what really important.

Yes, that is what's really important. That is what our magnificent faith asks of us: to admire but also to display in our lives the simple virtue of goodness.

And the time is now!

Amen.