

THE NEW SHUL / Kol Nidre 5766 (2005)

Sermon by Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein

We find in the book of Proverbs the following verse:

“Just as in water, face reflects face,
so, too, does reflection occur
in the *heart* of one another.//
But what exactly does this mean?
For the Ba’al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism,
it meant *everything*.//

The Hasidic master asks,
“Why use the image of water
rather than the more obvious image of a *mirror*?”
His answer?

We can only really see our reflection in water
if we bend down very *close* to it—
and the only way we can truly see *ourselves*
is if, in *humility* & respectfulness,
we incline our heart toward that of another.//
In encountering & experiencing *their* heart,
we will discover our own.//

On Rosh Hashanah,
I spoke about passion & *compassion*,
about feeling & acting,
about Judaism’s *charge* to translate empathy
into moral behavior.//
And yet,
in contrast to the 400,000 Israelites
who stood in the desert beneath Mount Sinai
to receive God’s covenant of love—
a covenant we honor during these Days of Awe—
most of *us*, & the world, have sat by
as 400,000 men, women, & children
have received only *death* in the desert of Darfur.//

What’s gone wrong?
What has our community, & our country, *lost*?//
Sadly, the tragedy in Darfur is but one example
of the myriad calamities & conflicts
I mentioned last week,
calamities & conflicts that are largely the result
of human ineptitude, inattention, & indifference.//

We are all products of our culture,
& ours is a culture of passivity & indifference—
not the culture of *action* & *initiative*
that is demanded of us
by our religious, spiritual, & moral tradition.//

What *is* traditional Judaism
 in its most authentic sense?
 It is the primal urge to act *out* & act *up*,
 to call truth to power,
 to uncover the nakedness of kings,
 to heal & protect the weak.//
 It is the *prophetic spirit*,
 the voices of Isaiah, Jeremiah, & Deborah,
 men & women who were willing to take chances,
 & sometimes risk life & limb,
 in order to do what was right & just//

That *spirit* is what we are now in danger of losing,
 & when we lose that,
 we've lost everything—
 our hearts, our souls, our communities, our world.//

I spoke on Rosh Hashanah about the Enlightenment,
 & how, in some ways,
 what it illuminated more than *anything*
 was just how *easy* it was to hide from the commands
 of our hearts,
 as well as the cruelty & oppression human beings
 can direct toward one another as a result.//
 Some scholars think that, partly in reaction
 to the Enlightenment & its rationalistic,
 repressive, cold, bourgeois sensibility,
Jewish identity has been linked in modern times
 with an intense urge to “act out,”
 to *rebel* against rules, codes, formality, civility,
 authority.//

That urge has frequently expressed itself in brash,
 truly outrageous ways,
 & this revolt against accepted norms
 has often led to wonderful creativity & innovation,
 most overtly in the sciences & arts.//

Take Freud's revolutionary & discomfiting ideas
 in the field of psychology;
 or Marx's in the area of economics;
 or Einstein's rebellion against the way we think
 about time & space.//
 Or look instead at popular culture,
 particularly comedy.//
 Who do you find among its classic figures?
 The Marx Brothers & The Three Stooges—
 bands of audacious Jews
 who turn society world completely upside down.//
 Nearly every plot involves some pretentious,
 snooty party at a mansion,

or a stuffy evening at the opera,
 or a staid journey aboard a fancy cruise ship—
 all of which are absolutely *ruined*
 by men acting like buffoons in order to show
 who the true buffoons really are.//

Below the surface & beneath the hilarity,
 that urge to overturn, overwhelm,
 & overcome is a distinctly *Jewish* urge.//
 It might not be “religious” per se,
 but it is real, raw, & right in your face.//

And so I ask us,
 where have all our powers gone?//
 Are we no longer at the vanguard
 of societal revolutions
 or uprisings of the *spirit*?//
 Are we too comfortable with the status quo?
Have we sold out?//
 Sure, we still have some good scientists
 & episodes of “Curb Your Enthusiasm”
 to shake things up a bit,
 but is that all that’s left of the bold, brazen,
 rock ‘em sock ‘em drive to upend the *world*?//

How do we regain the impulse to “act out,”
 & reconnect it,
 not just with artistic expression
 or scientific discovery,
 but with our prophetic, social justice tradition,
 our deep, rich culture of activism & initiative—
 a culture that *predates* modernity
 & that is as fiercely *spirited* as it is spiritual?//

 One way is by inculcating in our souls a sense
 of *urgency & immediacy*.//
 I’ve given you many disturbing illustrations
 during these Days of Awe
 that show how much is *wrong* with our world,
 & how *little* our country & others are doing
 to combat hunger, poverty,
 our abuse of the environment, even genocide.//

We are, all of us, living in a historic period,
 but a very *dark* historic period.//
 What will we tell our children,
 & grandchildren,
 that we ourselves *did* when confronted with
 these omnipresent horrors?//

 I know that we are all busy, & short of time,

& we'd all like to do more—
 but work, parenthood, and other obligations
 often make that seem impossible.//
 Partly, this is an illusion,
 a matter of *perception*—
 &, in that respect, it can be *changed*.//
 Our perception depends on context,
 & context depends largely on mindset—
 when we change our mindset,
 we can change our perception,
 &, suddenly, the excuses we once used
 start to crumble.//

Let's look at a stark example of how to reshape
 our mindsets, &
 as a consequence,
 our perception, our priorities, & our behavior.//
 Suppose you had a very important meeting
 one day at 8 in the morning.//
 You dressed, fueled yourself with coffee,
 looked over your notes,
 & opened your front door to rush to the subway,
 filled with anxiety & excitement.//
 Suppose, though, that right in front of you,
convulsing on the sidewalk,
 was a young boy, unattended & in obvious need
 of medical attention.//
What would you do?//

Would you ignore & walk over the prostrate child,
 race to the train,
 & try to get to your meeting on time?//
 I doubt *anyone* in this room would do that.//
 Instead, probably forgetting all *about* time
 & that important meeting,
 you would drop *everything* & either call 911
 or bring that boy to an emergency room yourself.//
 The *urgency* & *immediacy* of the situation
 would take you *out* of yourself,
 if only for those few moments,
 & compel you to act from a place of *compassion*,
instinct, & deeply-embedded *values*.//

Your perception of what was truly important,
 your priorities & obligations,
 would change in a heartbeat.//
 Although this image is troubling,
 it is instructive on 3 levels:
 First, it illustrates a situation that, in *theory*,
 could happen to anybody in this city;
 Second, it shows how a sense of *crisis*

can motivate even the busiest among us,
 & animate us to *instantly* shift our priorities
 in order to do the right thing,
 regardless of consequence;
 And third,
 it offers us a model for changing our *mindsets*,
 for instilling in ourselves
 that feeling of urgency & immediacy
 so necessary for instinctual, activist behavior.//

That sick boy, alone & unattended on the street,
 is a tragic but powerful *metaphor*
 for many of those in the world today.//
 It is the baby starving in the sands of Darfur,
 the homeless woman in Oakland,
 the 12-year-old child soldier in the Congo,
 the little girl who's been beaten
 by her brothers in Pakistan,
 the body of a man slumped in a wheelchair,
 ignored at the entrance to
 the Convention Center in New Orleans—
these are the widows & orphans our prophets
 implored us to protect & defend at all costs,
these are the symbols of suffering & injustice
 against which our characters will be judged.//

 None of us in this room, I am well aware,
 could live our lives in the real world
 if we were to think about these tragedies
 every minute of every day—
 they would *paralyze* us.//
 What we *can* do, however,
 is file these images in the “hard drives”
 of our minds & hearts,
 & remember that this *is* a time of urgency,
 that this *is* a moment of crisis for our world.//

If we're able to engender that consciousness
 inside ourselves,
 if we can empathize with the pain of others
 without having it *cripple* us,
 then, ultimately,
 we will transform our mindsets
 & develop instincts & impulses within us
 that will make it seem
 we have more time for *altruism & activism*
 than we had ever imagined.//
 Our *perception* will reshape our *reality*,
 & our reality will become that much more rich,
 rewarding, & filled with moral action.//

This is *I* way we can reclaim the prophetic spirit,
 the inner urge we appear to have lost
 over the centuries.//
 Our challenge is to be *pro*active, not *re*active,
 to *initiate & anticipate*
 rather than to merely respond.//
 But let's keep our motivation in check—
 let's act, & *act out*, not from a place
 of fear, or guilt, or hatred,
 but by following the rabbinic dictum,
 "Wake up every morning
 ravenous as a lion to perform God's will."//

We ought to use inspiration that is *positive*,
 like the hungry determination to do right,
 not *negativity*,
 as the springboard for our activism.//
 It is too easy to blame a single person,
 or an administration,
 or a country,
 for *all* of the world's problems—
 it also let's *us* off the hook.//
 When we project onto a solitary entity
 everything that is ugly & evil & wrong,
 all we do, as Ahab did with Moby Dick,
 is *lose* ourselves
 in a maelstrom of manic rage & obsession.//

Religion is on the minds of many people today—
 the menace of Islamic extremism,
 the influence of conservative Christians,
 the conflict in Israel.//
 Newsweek & Time Magazine alone
 have devoted several recent covers & issues
 to the topics of God, faith, & organized religion.//

Many people see religion
 as 1 of the greatest problems facing us today.//
 Others, myself among them,
 see the *opposite* side as well—
 religion may very well be a root cause
 of some of the most serious problems
 around the planet,
 but it can also serve, paradoxically,
 as a compelling & powerful *solution* to them.//

 The Anglican Church invited me to speak last May
 in the Channel Islands,
 at a Christian-Muslim-Jewish conference
 that sought to find common theological ground
 & to build bridges of peace.//

I was joined by an Anglican priest & an imam,
 & our “God Squad” discussed sacred texts,
 uncovered shared values & beliefs,
 & cleared up misunderstandings about our faiths.//

When the event ended, it had become crystal clear
 that there was far more that *united* the 3 of us
 than divided us—
 &, by extension, that linked our traditions .//
 Aside from the seminal role that Abraham held
 in our 3 respective religions,
 the key point that came up over & over again
 was the *absolute* value
 that each of our faiths placed on protecting
 & preserving life.//
 For all of us,
 within every human being was a spark of *God*,
 & within every set of eyes a *command* to love.//

We acknowledged, & critiqued, the *extremists*
 among us,
 those who have *warped* our Abrahamic faiths
 to further political & apocalyptic agendas.//
 But we also *highlighted*
 our divinely-*mandated* obligations
 to pursue justice & peace, to protect the weak,
 to feed the hungry.//
 Once education has wiped away ignorance,
 stereotypes, & distortions of our faiths,
 we believed that religion can, & *should*,
 play the role it was *designed* to play, & mend
 the wounds of this world.//

 The Hebrew word for holiness, *kedushah*,
 implies “otherness,”
 something that *transcends* the ordinary,
 the world of rational, definable categories.//
 When we enter holy space or time,
 wherever or whenever that may be,
 we should feel
 as if we’ve entered a different *plane*,
 a different zone of existence & experience.//
 Our Judaism, if it is to be relevant & real,
 needs to *transport* us to that place—
 & the instinctive pursuit of justice,
 underscored *repeatedly* in the Torah
 as among our most sacred duties,
 is one such pathway toward transcendence.//

I began tonight’s sermon with a Hasidic teaching—
 let me now close with one.//

The Kotsker Rebbe, a great mystic & thinker,
 struggled with an ambiguous verse
 from the book of Exodus,
 a verse that says that Pharaoh's daughter,
 upon seeing the small ark with baby Moses
 caught in the reeds of the river,
 sent *amatah* to fetch it.//
 Now the word *amatah* can mean
 either "her handmaiden," the usual translation,
 or "her arm."//

While the rabbinic sages generally favored
 the former translation,
 the Talmud interprets the word in the *2nd* sense—
 it claims that,
 though the ark was beyond her reach,
 a *miracle* occurred
 & the arm of Pharaoh's daughter
 was *elongated* & extended, just for that instant,
 enabling her to rescue the child.//

The Kotsker Rebbe was perplexed—
 Why would a royal princess of the Pharaoh
 even *attempt* to save this little stranger,
 when she could see from the very *outset*
 that the ark was too far away for her to reach?//
 The Rebbe's answer?
 When it comes to doing a *mitzvah*,
 to doing what is right, just, & a sacred duty,
 it is not our *place* to make calculations,
 to analyze costs & benefits—
 particularly when it comes
 to the supreme *mitzvah* of saving a life.//
 Instead,
 we do what we *can*, we make our best effort,
 & then *God* helps us do the rest.//

 Sometimes miracles *do* occur,
 & we achieve, thru acts small & large,
 local & global,
 more than anyone could have rationally predicted.//
 But for that to happen,
 it takes commitment, passion,
 & the creation of a culture of *action & initiative*,
 a consciousness of *urgency & immediacy*
 that allows us to *break* boundaries & limitations—
 even limitations of the self.//
 That is our prophetic legacy,
 & that is what we must *resurrect* in our own age.//

 May we create that culture & consciousness now,

& in the weeks & months ahead,
as we strive together to fix our fractured world—
a world filled with hungry mouths,
broken bodies,
injured spirits,
dashed hopes, & shattered dreams.//
A world of beauty & majesty that has lost its way
& must find its path back home.//

May God be with those who, against all odds,
stretch out their arms in order to save others—
our moral beacons in this roiling, wine-dark sea.//

Ken Yehi Ratzon—May it Be God's Will
