

THE NEW SHUL / Kol Nidre 5769 ( 2008)

*Sermon by Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein*

There is no question that we are *all* living through *deeply* unsettling & troubled times. Between the pain of the financial crisis, anxiety over the upcoming election, & grave concern about our wars abroad — not to mention the dark specter of *terrorism* — ours is an era of insecurity & uncertainty, a period of feeling beaten up & exhausted, of sensory overload. Every one of us in this room is probably asking: “How in the world will I get *through* all of this?”

As a consequence of all these very serious problems & the emotions stirred up by them, I fear that many of us have become like the animals in Martin Seligman’s famous experiments on what he termed “learned helplessness.” In the psychologist’s research, laboratory dogs were taught that they would receive an electric shock no matter *what* they did (such as barking, or moving to a different part of the cage). The result was that the dogs stopped *all* action — they just sat still & accepted the shocks, as if the shocks were unavoidable, almost necessary features of their living conditions.

In our day, many of the great institutions, ideologies, systems, & role models our parents & grandparents embraced have either been discredited, or collapsed. The media & the internet bombard us with troubling, sometimes horrifying images & stories that eclipse any *good* we witness in our everyday lives. *Nothing* seems to have solid footing, & if God exists, God seems to be somewhere in hiding. If 21<sup>st</sup> Century humanity appears dazed, confused, & *immobilized* in a seemingly expanding wasteland, much of its paralysis comes from the feeling that anything *positive* we do will inevitably be met with *negative* reinforcement.

So how can organized religion, Judaism in our case, play a role to *help* us, to *save* us from this paralysis & despair? And how might *Shabbat*, our focus for this season, *aid* in that vital effort? Presidents & policy makers can only do so much to restore confidence in us when we are anxious or shaken. What they can *never* do is restore vigor & hope to our *souls*. Through its rituals, rites, & ceremonies, *that* is the provenance of religion — and religion alone — & it has rarely been as essential as in our own time.

Shabbat, as I preached in my Rosh Hashanah sermon, is one such religious practice. It is our anchor, our safe haven, our palace in time — it is something we can *count* on, a reliable, stress-free zone within which we can *recharge* our inner batteries. & that’s where Shabbat gains so much of its power — it offers us the *regularity* of *restoration*, each & every week, the opportunity, not just for rest, but for renewal. Shabbat is a gift we can always look forward to, a salve for our souls in times of trial, a ritualized, but *real*, promise of hope, and, somewhat paradoxically, a catalyst for *action*.

Religion & ritual can only lead us to the starting gate, yet they can cultivate in us the tools we’ll need in order to achieve victory in our lives. *Hope & stamina*, along with a large dose of *courage*, are the keys to human perseverance, to *prevailing* over paralysis & despair.

One of my favorite mystics is the Kotsker Rebbe, a great Hasidic master who was well-acquainted with the night & never tried to hide from, or whitewash, the challenges of being human. No matter how dark life may seem at times, the Kotsker’s worldview *always* allows for the possibility of *hope*. In his bold approach to life, if we have the drive to *persist*, the will to

*evolve*, & the *capacity* to face & overcome adversity, we *will* move forward — even if it sometimes takes a divine hand to guide us.

For me, 1 parable in particular captures the essence of the Kotsker Rebbe's spiritual vision as well as his attitude toward the human condition.

The Kotsker teaches that all souls descend a ladder from heaven down to earth, a different one for each soul. Once they have arrived, the ladder is removed. In time, they are ordered to ascend back to heaven. The Kotsker writes: "Some despair and do not even try to ascend because their ladder is gone. Others jump up and fall, again and again, until they too give up. But a few souls refuse to surrender, despite the apparent foolhardiness and futility of leaping and crashing back down to earth. 'We must do what God asks of us,' they say, 'no matter the consequence of our actions or the impossibility of our task.' They leap and leap, and plummet over and over to the ground, until—in an act of mercy—God ultimately draws them up to heaven."

The Kotsker's core message to us seems to be clear: it is thru *stamina*, thru never giving up despite the apparent futility, even absurdity, of our actions, that *transcendence* comes to human beings. When we "leap" toward God — or confront, struggle, & do battle with those forces that threaten to hold us back from our spiritual growth — we are striving, not for the known, but for the *unknown*. For him, that is authentic faith, in all its ambiguity.

There is no guarantee that we will not be *wounded* thru our efforts. And human effort *alone* is not sufficient for the realization of transcendence — for that we need divine aid. The mystical ladder that linked our primordial souls to God is gone. A *gap* now divides us from the divine, a void of egocentricity & human limitation. The petty distractions that *root* us to the material world *hinder* our vision of the world of the spirit; the reason that produces scientific knowledge cannot fathom a transcendent God, a God who transcends reason *itself*. Faith is more than a challenge —it involves *pain*, since God's reality is interrelated with God's *absence*, that vague sense of separation we feel so frequently in our everyday lives.

In the end, God is the only answer to our yearnings & our needs. But first, despite the discomfort it might cause us, we must acknowledge, express, & work hard to satisfy them. The Kotsker makes this point thru a second parable.

The venerable prophet Elijah chances upon a hunter in the wilderness. He inquires as to why the man is living alone so deep in the wild without the divine guidance of the Torah. The hunter responds by saying, "Because I was never able to find the gate that leads to the presence of God." "You were certainly not *born* a hunter," Elijah notes, "So from whom did you learn to follow this calling?" "My *need* taught me," answers the hunter. Then the prophet says in response, "And had your *need* been equally great because you had lost your way very far from God, do you think that it would have *failed* to show you the right path back to Him?"

The Kotsker is teaching us something that is actually very empowering: God's presence has less to do with external reality than with our *own* inner lives. The path to God, & a more redemptive life of direction & meaning, requires 3 actions on our part: First, we must acknowledge the "inconvenient" truth that we are lost in a wilderness; second, we must *express* our deep need to connect with the divine; & finally, we must make a concerted & serious *effort* to develop that relationship.

God is waiting for us, but if we give up too quickly, if we don't make a genuine (& possibly lifelong) attempt to *search* for God, we will remain befuddled in a spiritual wasteland. "Where is God?" the Kotsker asks. "In any place where He is given entry." He also says, "One who does not see the Omnipresent in *every* place will not see Him in *any* place."

Whether or not God plays an active role in our lives is ultimately up to us. If we can't find "the gate" to the divine, it is not because we are searching in the *wrong* places, but because we are not searching *hard* enough. If the hunter in the story put as much time & zeal into tracking down God as he does into chasing game, he'd find far more than *food* at the end of the day.

We are, all of us here, *hunters*, & we are all lost in a (sometimes hostile) wilderness — *adversity* is just part of the human condition. What makes us stronger & wiser people is when we are able to summon the courage, often with the help of community or the rituals of religion, to fully accept this difficult fact — and the stamina & determination to respond to it in noble & inspiring ways.

There is an element of *risk* that is always present whenever we venture into the new & unknown. At times, our journeys & challenges will take place in the company of others; much of the time we must face them alone. Yet individual initiative is often the *key* to our success and, sometimes, even to our *survival*. As the Jewish sage Hillel instructs us, "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me?"

Drawing from his own experiences & observations as a concentration camp prisoner in Dachau & Buchenwald, Bruno Bettelheim argued that the inmates who gave up & perished were the ones who had *also* given up any effort to act with personal *autonomy*, who had fallen prey to their captors' goal of *dehumanizing* them & exercising absolute *control* over their lives.

Bettelheim believed that even the smallest &, on the *surface*, most trivial expressions of a persistent *will* — an inmate, for instance, deciding whether to eat a piece of bread he or she had been given right at that moment, or to store it away for future consumption — could *literally* mean the difference between life & death. It was the *resolve* to keep living, & a *hope* that their ordeal would come to an end, that served as the most effective *weapon* in the prisoners' fight to go on.

Although none of us will ever have to go through the kind of *horrific* experience I've described, we *all* face hardships at different points during the course of our *own* lives. Yet it often takes a challenging event or an arduous episode to show us just how resolute our wills actually *are*, or can *become*, if really put to the test.

There is a scene in the Tennessee Williams play, *The Night of the Iguana*, thru which the playwright captures & conveys the powerful, almost *salvific* role that raw & unrelenting *stamina* can play in our own spiritual journeys.

Shannon is a troubled man at *war* with himself, a defrocked minister "at the end of his rope." Hannah is a kind & compassionate woman he meets at a secluded hacienda in Mexico. Shannon *pleads* with her to help him get thru his dark night of the soul:

HANNAH: I can help you because I've been thru what you are going thru now. *I* had something like your spook — I just had a different name for him. I called him the *blue devil*, and . . . *oh* . . . we had quite a battle, quite a contest between us. SHANNON: Which you obviously won.

HANNAH: I couldn't afford to lose. SHANNON: How'd you *beat* your blue devil? HANNAH: I showed him that I could *endure* him and I made him *respect* my endurance.

Whether we refer to them as spooks, blue devils, inner demons, or simply obstacles, all of us will encounter moments of challenge in our lives. If we try to avoid or *deny* that reality, all we'll do is *stunt* our own inner growth. Like existential prizefighters, we must have *confidence* in ourselves, & we must tap into our capacity for *fortitude* — even in the face of struggle & suffering.

None of this can happen without *faith* — not just in our own abilities, but in a *higher* power. Sometimes, it is only after hitting rock bottom that we find this hidden capacity for *resilience*, that we discover that, irrespective of the obstacles we must all inevitably confront & endure, life, in the end, has value, meaning, & purpose.

*Why* would a higher power permit such tribulation? *Why* not intervene & *prevent* the fall from occurring in the first place? Because as mortal, evolving beings, we need to come to that realization *ourselves* — the knowledge that we are only human, that we are flawed, that there is (if we open our souls & allow it entry) something *greater* that will lovingly guide us thru our dark nights. That “something greater,” for me, is the living God.

Which leaves us with really two options: We can grope for a way out alone, or we can strive to *endure* our hardships & have *faith* that our divine partner will, ultimately, lead us to a place of *safety*.

As a religious practice, & our focus for this season, Shabbat *is* that safe haven we can look forward to. It offers us the *regularity* of *restoration*, each & every week, the opportunity, not just for rest, but for renewal. Shabbat is a salve for our souls in times of trial, a ritualized, but *real*, promise of hope, a catalyst for action, transformation, & redemption.

It is often only after we pass thru life's *darker* trials that we truly gain a more insightful perspective on our own struggles, & start to develop the *empathy* for the struggles of those around us — & then to *act* in response. For many people, it is only when *faith* serves as our anchor that we are able to summon the inner strength & the *courage* we need as we strive to work our way thru the wilderness.

For Nietzsche, the most evolved element in the human personality is the “will to power.” This quality allows the superior individual to rise above all others & break free of the herd mentality. For people of faith, it is not the will to power, but the will to *persist*, that represents one of our highest achievements. If those who can tolerate the ambiguities of faith share anything with Nietzsche, it is a grasp of the necessity, even *spirituality*, of the affirmation of life, an understanding that without *fortitude*, no fear, trial, or challenge will ever be surmounted.

Our persistence & perseverance can *carry* us thru the most terrific of obstacles. While we need some measure of self-confidence before we take on new challenges, & though our initial inclination might be to act alone, we will nevertheless need *others* to help us. It is our capacity for *trust*, more than the wish to rely on ourselves, that will *save* us when we are tempted to give up.

That is the very heart of faith & the *power* of ritual, like the practice of Shabbat. When we make the leap of faith, when we jump feet first into the mystery of divinity, there are no guarantees.

Will we reach the other side? Will we be injured in the process? Will we find ourselves in a helpless free fall, staring headlong into an abyss? These questions serve as our *test* as seekers. Will we be the kind of person who stands, *paralyzed* by dread at the edge of uncertainty, or will we go forth into terra incognita, *trusting, open, & receptive*, into a brave new world of potential & possibility?

In the end, that's what a spiritual community is *for* — to support us on our journeys, to guide us thru dark nights, to offer us *hope* in times of despair. That is why we are here *tonight*. That is why, with your help, we will never turn our backs on anybody who is ever in pain, or in need, or alone.

*Ken Yehi Ratzon* —May it be God's will

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