

To Break Down Barriers, to Build Up Hope: Kol Nidre 5775

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Back in the summer, we had a blackout at Temple. A tree fell down on a line in the alley, and the electricity was cut off. It was Shabbat, and we had a bar mitzvah scheduled. We decided that the only thing we could do was proceed, and so we did, grateful for the windows in the Sanctuary. But we had no lights, no mikes, and the caterers were getting nervous. The bar mitzvah family were champs, including the bar mitzvah boy, and the service proceeded without incident. I launched into my sermon, as I am wont to do. I reached a particularly passionate part – as it happens, about Jewish pluralism and our good relationship with our neighbours down the street, at the Shaar Hashomayim – and just as I lifted my arms to make my point, the lights went on.

It was a moment. Truly, I don't think I have ever felt so affirmed in the eleven years since I was ordained. The fact is, in this line of work, it's really not about the person standing in the front of the room, but every now and then, it's nice to feel like you've got some divine approval.

Would that things were always so clear.

Sometimes, we don't see things because they just aren't so obvious. Other times, we keep ourselves from seeing. And so, at this time of year, when we are meant to examine who we are in this world, there are some hard questions I want to ask.

Some of you have been following my exchanges in the Canadian Jewish News with Rabbi Daniel Korobkin, an Orthodox rabbi in Toronto. At one point this summer, we took on the topic of anti-Semitism in Europe. It may not be a surprise that despite our differences, we both were opposed. Where we disagreed, however, was about what it augured. I insisted that we were not seeing a reprise of Europe in the 1930s. But Rabbi Korobkin wrote:

When it comes to the human condition, you're an optimist, I'm a realist. You see the glimmers of humanity and hope amid the rising violence and hatred against Jews, and I – perhaps because I'm a child of a survivor – see the clouds of Nazism rolling in once again. If history has taught us anything, it's that anti-Semitism resurfaces under a new guise every other generation or so.

So while I'd like to be positive, I can't afford to gamble Jewish lives on the altar of idealism. In 1933, when Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, the holy Chafetz Chaim, was told of the impending rise of Nazism in Europe, he responded, based on a verse from Obadiah (1:17) that Zion would always be a place of sanctuary for the Jews. His prophetic words ring as true today as they did before World War II, and while we're not on the precipice of another Holocaust, we cannot afford to ignore the warning signs, either.¹

Now, for years, I have been disturbed by another teaching of the Chafetz Chaim, this rabbi who lived from 1838 to 1933 in Eastern Europe. In 1933, his final year of life, he would have been 95 years old. Writing on the tokheha, the collection of verses at the end of Leviticus which promise dire punishments for not obeying God's laws – punishments ranging from pestilence to eating one's own children – the Chofetz Chaim mentions the tradition that in many synagogues, these

¹ "Rabbi 2 Rabbi," *Canadian Jewish News*, August 5, 2014.

verses would be read quickly and quietly to get past them, and some people would even leave the synagogue entirely when they are read – and not just in the usual stretching-your-legs-during-the-Torah-service kind of way. In response, he gives this parable:

To what can one compare such behaviour? To a person who was warned not to walk through a certain path, because it was filled with thorns and dangerous obstacles. The person, though, did not heed the warnings, and decided to walk along this path. He did take one precaution, though – he blindfolded himself so that he would not see the various dangers. Of course, by blindfolding himself, he simply made the trip that much more dangerous.²

It gives special resonance when we realize that the Chofetz Chaim lived to see Poland in 1933.

I wonder sometimes if I am like the person in this parable; not in terms of my own deeds and not in terms of divine punishment, but in terms of what is happening in our world. I wonder whether he meant it, not in terms of deeds or divine punishment, but in terms of what was happening in his world, and the urgency of opening one's eyes to see.

There is no question that it has been a difficult summer to be an optimist. I spoke on Rosh Hashanah about the war in Israel and Gaza. Tonight, I come to you struggling with the surge in anti-Semitism, and what it means for our lives and for our world.

The truth is, this year, I have been afraid. Last year at this time I spoke to you about my experience wearing a kippa in the context of the Charter debate; this year, when I wear my kippa, I think of the rabbi in Miami who was shot walking to shul, and I wonder if I am safe. Is it any wonder that I got an email after Rosh Hashanah from a congregant saying she didn't bring her new baby here for a blessing, because she was nervous about security? Is it any wonder that I have received more than one inquiry from Jews in France, searching for a more welcoming home?

I have been afraid, and I have been angry.

Angry that in 2014 (or 5775, depending on how you count), this old anti-Semitism is still something that needs to be addressed. Angry that the old biases still are alive and well. I grew up on a staple of "Israel I love" contests, and the story of a land without a people for a people without a land. As I grew older, the story got more nuanced; I understood that others had their stories too, and that more sides needed to be heard. But I have come to discover, and it is a disheartening discovery, that much of what the world says still is lacking nuance; it's just that instead of assuming that Israel is always right, the assumption is that Israel is always wrong. It is that assumption which stinks of anti-Semitism.

There's a joke that made the rounds in Israel this summer, and it goes like this:

A CNN Reporter, BBC Reporter, and an Israeli commando were captured by terrorists in Iraq. The leader of the terrorists told them that he would grant them each one last request.

² Chofetz Chaim on the opening of Parshat Behar.

The CNN Reporter said, “Well, I’m an American, so I’d like one last hamburger with French fries.” The leader nodded to an underling who left and returned with the burger and fries. The reporter ate it and said “Now, I can die.”

The BBC Reporter said, “I’m a reporter to the end. I want to take out my tape recorder and describe the scene here and what’s about to happen. Maybe someday someone will hear it and know that I was on the job till the end.” The terror leader directed an aide to hand over the tape recorder and he dictated some comments. The reporter then said, ‘Now I can die, knowing I stayed true until the end.’”

The leader turned and said, “And now, Mr. Israeli Tough Guy, what is your final wish?”

“Kick me,” said the soldier.

“What?” asked the leader, “Will you mock us in your last hour?”

“No, I’m not kidding. I want you to kick me,” insisted the Israeli. So the leader shoved him into the open and kicked him.

The soldier went sprawling, but rolled to his knees, pulled a pistol from under his flak jacket, and shot the leader dead. In the resulting confusion, all the hostages went free.

As the soldier was untying the reporters, they asked him, “Why didn’t you just shoot them in the beginning? Why did you ask them to kick you first?”

“What?” replied the Israeli, “and have you report that I was the aggressor?”³

I hate that this joke rings true to me. But it does. And it is not just in the media that we have seen anti-Semitism this year, and not just in the streets. It is also among those who we want to see as friends.

This summer, Rabbi Michael Marmor, the Provost of Hebrew Union College, was invited to speak at St. George’s Cathedral in South Africa. There, he had the courage to give this message. He said:

In an appeal to Israelis published last week, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu insisted that criticism of Israel should not be automatically equated with anti-Semitism. I want to state in the most direct way that I believe he is right. You can and should be able to criticize without fear of knee-jerk claims that you are anti-Jewish.

Nevertheless, when I see a poster outside and within this cathedral which declares that it is Gaza where Jesus Christ is crucified today, I have to ask: do you say this of every place in the world where there is egregious suffering and injustice? Or is the scene of the crucifixion reserved for the scenario where once again the Jews may be characterized as

³ Based on <http://www.breakingisraelnews.com/20483/cnn-bbc-israeli-commando-taken-hostage-blame-israel/#Q2pFuxU8oDORmjYR.97>. This joke originally came to me through a sermon by Dr. Adena Berkowitz, Rosh Hashanah 5775.

killers of Christ? ...If the latter is the case and this imagery is reserved for one conflict alone, you might consider how this plays into our fears and concerns as Jews.⁴

Rabbi Marmur is right. Right in his analysis, and right in having the courage to share it, as it were, in the belly of the whale. But it makes me angry that this is what he had to use his time to say. It makes me angry that this is what I have to use this time to say.

I have been afraid, and I have been angry. There is no question that anti-Semitism exists, and that this has been a horrific year. But I still don't believe that what we are experiencing is equivalent to Germany in the 1930s, and unlike Rabbi Korobkin, I don't think that the existence of Israel – as significant and miraculous as it is – is the only differentiating factor.

For the sake of honouring the past and enabling the future, I think we have to be very careful about the analogies we make. The differences matter. It matters that moderate Muslims are denouncing fundamentalists. It matters that people of all faiths and none have banded together to support the Jewish community in the wake of these attacks. It matters that Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, said these words this year:

Anyone who verbally abuses or hits someone wearing a kippa or a Star of David... is hitting and injuring us all. Anyone who desecrates gravestones in Jewish cemeteries, debases our culture. Anyone who makes synagogues a target of hate and violence shakes the very foundations of our free society.⁵

These are not words that would have been said 80 years ago. We live in a different world.

But it doesn't just matter in terms of the state of the world, though clearly that is of the utmost importance. It also matters in terms of how we see the world, and how we see ourselves in it. Despite Rabbi Korobkin's framing of the debate: "You're an optimist, I'm a realist" – I don't think these two approaches are mutually exclusive. I don't believe that pessimism is a truer way to see the world. I do think, however, that how we choose to see things matters.

Essayist Adam Gopnik writes about two ships, "made at the same time, by the same people, to do the same job in the same way."⁶ One, the Olympic, became known as "Old Reliable," making its transatlantic voyages for over twenty years. The other was the Titanic. We only remember one boat. "You have certainly heard of the Titanic," Gopnik writes; "you have probably never heard of the Olympic. We have a fatal attraction to fatality."

"The story of the two ships is one to keep in mind," he suggests, "as we peer ahead into the new year:"

4 Rabbi Michael Marmur, "Vision in the Mist," delivered in St George's Cathedral, Cape Town, Sunday, August 24, 2014. The sermon can be found at <http://huc.edu/news/2014/09/02/vision-mist-sermon-delivered-south-africa-mandel-provost-michael-marmur>.

5 The full text of Chancellor Merkel's speech can be found at <http://www.thejc.com/news/world-news/122780/merkels-speech-against-antisemitism>. It was originally delivered at a rally against anti-Semitism in Berlin on September 14, 2014.

6 Adam Gopnik, "Two Ships," in *The New Yorker*, January 6, 2014, pp.17-18.

It reminds us that our imagination of disaster is dangerously more fertile than our imagination of the ordinary... We don't have one movie called "Titanic," starring Leo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, about a tragic love and a doomed adventure, and another called "Olympic," a musical comedy starring Hugh Jackman and Anne Hathaway, about a happy voyage over... We search for parallels of disaster, and miss parallels of hope. False positives are the great curse of diagnostics, in historical parallels and prostate screenings alike.

In other words, pessimism is not necessarily the more realistic option. The story with the happy ending, the story with the ordinary ending, also is part of our world.

The challenge is: we don't always know which ship we are on. And in truth, isn't that the message of Kol Nidre, that there is a deep, existential uncertainty in our lives and in our world? If we cannot even count on keeping our own words and intentions, how much more so can we know everyone else's? And yet, each year we confront our fragility and our fallibility and our mortality, and each year, the world keeps turning.

Gopnik writes:

Two boats set sail in those prewar years a century ago; the boat that sailed on and the boat that sank. Olympic or Titanic? Which is ours? It is, perhaps, essential to life to think that we know where we're going when we set out – our politics and plans alike depend on the illusion that *someone* knows where we're going. The cold-water truth that the past provides, though, may be that we can't. To be a passenger in history is to be unsure until we get to port – or the lifeboats – and, looking back at the prow of our ship, discover the name, invisible to our deck-bound eyes, that it possessed all along.

Maybe Rabbi Korobkin is right, and we should all be packing our bags; maybe I am right, and this too shall pass. But if we don't know which boat we are actually on, if we *can't* know one hundred percent, the question becomes a different one. Which boat would we rather act like we are on, assuming we are not blindfolding ourselves to disaster? Because if we always assume that we are on the sinking ship, we won't ever get to where we want to go. Imagine living a life in which you always anticipate moving. Who would renovate their house, put up their pictures, start a family, find the best job, fix the leak? It would all seem like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. But if we're on the Olympic and not the Titanic, maybe those chairs need to be rearranged. To live fully is to invest, to build, to grow. To live fully is to get our lives in order, to be the best people we can be. The constant anticipation of disaster leads to a life lived on hold. What a terrible loss that would be.

I never want to lose the capacity to be surprised by prejudice and hate. I never want to assume that anti-Semitism is the default option, always waiting to rear its ugly head. I always want to be looking, as Rabbi Korobkin charges, "for the glimmers of humanity and hope." I never want to think I need that suitcase by the door. If it comes to that, we will have our eyes wide open. But if history has taught us anything, it's that we never know.

And this: like it or not, we are part of the project of the world. If terrorism has taught us anything, it is that hate knows no boundaries. Syria and Iraq have old borders, meaningless to Islamic State. The person throwing a firebomb at a synagogue in Kiev just last week could easily

move one country over and do the same. The solution cannot be for Europe to become *Judenrein*, for everyone to pack up and move to Israel and only live with other Jews. We still have a stake in the success of the project of the enlightenment, in the belief that we can know each other, that we can live with each other, that under it all we are all human beings and all in the very same boat. And so it seems to me that even at this time, when we want to huddle and reach in, our role is to reach out. To break down barriers; to build up hope. Just as it was at this time last year. Just as it is every year.

“Hope,” writes Vaclav Havel, the Czech activist and politician:

...is a state of mind, not of the world. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good.

That is truly our task. We have no guarantees in this world. The lights don't usually go on to show when we are right. We each have our own blindfolds, and we see what we want to see – and at our best, which we strive for on these days, we try to see a little more. There is no certainty. There is only the opportunity to choose hope.