

Erev Rosh HaShana

L'Shana Tova

Tonight is the beginning of the Yom HaZikaron, the Day of Memorial. It is the eve of Yom Teruah, the Day of Awe-inspiring Shofar blasts. This is the start also of Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment. The images that pour forth from the liturgy are images of choices, of fates decreed, of verdicts and pronouncements. The account books are opened and all columns tallied. But the coin of exchange is no mortal currency, for Yom HaDin is the day when the soul makes its account.

Account to whom? Before God, yes- but before God, every day is a day of accounting. A Midrash says that each night, the soul rises to the upper worlds and writes in a book all of the deeds of the day- what better symbol for saying that thoughts become words, words deeds, deeds, habits, habits character and character destiny? Everything we do and say and think and reflect upon filters each night into the depths of the subconscious, into the hidden recesses of the self and becomes how we live our lives, every day.

So if every day is God's day of accounting, before whom must we also give account on this day? Who if not before our community, before each other? It is part of the genius of the Jewish calendar that our entire community engages simultaneously in Teshuvah, in repentance and reflection- Teshuvah means turning; turning to God, turning to each other, turning to our Kehillah, our community. It is not that we stand in judgment of each other, God forbid, but that we stand in judgment of ourselves. According to the Torah of the Hasidic pioneer Rav Zusiya of Anapol, when we reach the other world, we will not be asked why were we not Moshe or Aharon or David or Sarah or Rivka or Rachel. We will be asked why were not ourselves- our best selves, the selves that we could be. We will not be asked why we weren't at the top of our professions, the top of the socio-economic ladder the top of salary scale- but we will be asked if we were there for those who needed us, not where we weren't, but where we were.

In only a little more than a month, the American people, and the Jewish community proudly standing among them, will need to make an awesome choice, a choice that, without exaggeration, will directly affect the lives of every human being on this planet. The vote we cast in that little curtained booth is an awesome one, one that requires our full attention, our full

commitment as Americans to understanding the full import of the issues that lie before our country and our full commitment as American Jews to bring to bear all of the wisdom, insight, compassion and truth of our heritage as we cast our ballot.

As members of the Nation that taught the world the meaning of the unity of humanity, the requirement of Tikun Olam, of world repair, the infinite worth of the individual, created B'Tzelem Elohim, in God's Image, we are obligated to inform our choice with the words of Torah: words of love, justice and tolerance. We are obligated to recall the words of the Prophets of Israel who taught us to seek justice, to love mercy and walk with humility, to champion the poor, the widow, the disenfranchised, the abandoned and to create a society together based on those eternal values- the only values throughout human history that have brought about eras of peace, security, artistic and scientific achievement and the realization of the human potential.

We read every day about the issues facing our society- the issues of energy, economics, security, the environment, health care and education. To each of these awesome tasks, the Torah has much to offer by way of guidance. As the American Jewish community, we are required to fully engage in the life and issues of our country. John F. Kennedy's words, "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," might have well been said by Yehezkel the Prophet who declared, "pray for the Shalom, the welfare of your land and work for it." For four hundred years, we have contributed to this country- contributed not only materially and culturally, but, through our values, to the very core beliefs that infuse the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Our contribution to the American conversation is one made not only by us as individuals, but by us as a Jewish community. And as Jews, we also have a list of issues facing us as a community; an agenda whose furtherance, a community whose future will not be decided on November 4th in the polling stations, but today, tomorrow, the day after, the year after, by the way we conduct our lives, by the way we spend our time every day.

What is our agenda then? What is the point list of Am Yisrael B'Artzot HaBrit, the Jewish People in the United States? For the past two years I have had the incredible fortune, thanks to you, my sponsors, to spend one day each week studying Torah with the Rabbinical and Cantorial students of

the Academy for Jewish Religion- the AJR. I have found in this cadre of fifty to sixty companions- many coming from careers in education, the arts, science, business, journalism and the law- people of incredible sincerity, dedication and talent. I am proud to number myself among them, a Rabbinical school for K'lal Yisrael, for the Jewish people, unbounded to any single movement or perspective. AJR graduates and Rabbinical students serve in synagogues all over the country from all of American Judaism's movements and outlooks, because it is not the outlook that is the goal, but service to the Jewish people. If anyone truly has their ear to the ground in the American Jewish community, it is them.

I put the question to them, to my friends, Chevrotot- study partners- and fellow dreamers. What is the American Jewish agenda? I would like to share with you their responses:

Claire Ginsberg-Goldstein, a thoughtful Jewish educator, creator of the "Bears from Bergen" Tzedaka program that sends thousands of stuffed animals and teddy bears to Israeli children- Jews, Christians and Arabs- traumatized by violence, answered that the top of our agenda is the personal meaning and relevance that Judaism has for every Jew. Reb Irwin Huberman of Congregation Tiferet Israel on Long Island, concurring with Claire, sees this as a crisis of leadership. Here are his words: I've heard increasingly both here and in Israel the phrase..."I'm spiritual, not religious." It seems like such an oxymoron, but it's not. I'm concerned and I often voice it that synagogues, movements and rabbis tend to be steeped in tradition while Jews thirst for the very thing we are supposed to provide...and both ships pass in the night. For both of these leaders, our greatest priority is the house of study, not to ask Jews to do it our way- but to provide the guidance, information, ideas and resources to empower Jews to discover the treasures within themselves and their heritage.

Jaron Matlow, a retired Naval officer who writes and leads in an impressive variety of Jewish life venues, speaks about Keiruv- drawing closer to each other and closer to Jewish spiritual practice; discovering in practice- lighting Shabbat candles, prayer, Tzedaka, Torah study- means for both elevating our individuality and extending our personal

boundaries and spheres of intimacy, to become more fully alive, more involved, more connected.

Melody Davis of Congregation Keneseth Israel of Allentown, extends Jaron's point: "Intermarried and non-affiliated families may feel unwanted, unneeded and may not see the point of Judaism, let alone belonging to a shul. The point word *is* community. When people feel that they are a part of a caring, warm community, they have a reason to be there." For us, holiness can only truly occur in a community- for the Torah can only be fulfilled and God's presence realized through relationships with our brothers and sisters. Ziona Zelazo, Rabbinical intern and adjunct professor of anthropology at Montclair State, emphasizes that community includes our brothers and sisters in Israel and Gladys Gruenwald, a Cantor, reminds us of the importance of reaching out to Jewish youth.

On this evening of judgment and choices, the Jewish activists and leaders who join me in spirit on the Bima see the challenges facing of our Jewish community as no less urgent and existential than those facing our American society. The difference is, that rather than issues of policy, of setting resources into motion, the issues of Jewish community are those of consciousness, of setting ourselves in motion, one community, one family, one person at a time.

The Call of the Shofar is essentially the ancient call to mobilize that we used when traveling through the wilderness on our way to Zion: Tekiah means to prepare. Shvarim means to array ourselves by clan, tribe and nation. Teruah is the signal to close ranks and the Tekiah Gedolah tells us to move forward. God is in the voting booth, ready to choose the leader of our people for the year ahead. Congratulations. You have been elected. Tekiah!