

## **Rosh Hashana Sermon**

**Ithaca 5770 / 2009**

**Where have you come from?**

**Where are you going?**

### **Introduction:**

It is such a honor and privilege for me to be here with you tonight. Your congregation has a wonderful reputation and I am delighted to share this special time with you. I am so grateful for the generosity of your leaders, Dianna and Patti, who have welcomed me so lovingly. It has been such a joy to work with Abbe Lyons preparing the services. She brings such wisdom, talent and kavvanah/deep spiritual intention to the task of leading services. You are truly blessed to have such wonderful leaders and such a special community.

I also know many of the inspiring rabbis who have served this community.

It is also very special for me that my cousin Ian Shapiro and his partner, Dalya Tamir and their family attend this Temple on Rosh Hashana and are here tonight. I am delighted that Ian's mom, my beloved aunt Elsa, my sister Annette, and my daughter and son in law, Chana and Lincoln, have all come to Ithaca for this Rosh Hashana. For me this is a blessed moment and I thank you all for this opportunity.

## Cheshbon Hanefesh/ A Time of Questions

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is a time of Cheshbon Hanefesh/ Soul Reckoning, a time of reflection and a time of asking ourselves questions: questions about our lives, questions about where we are, where we have been and where we are going. This is one of the great treasures of Judaism: our New Year is not only a moment of celebration but it is also a time of reflection, introspection and renewed commitment to our core values.

### **The Question**

Tomorrow we will read the story of the expulsion of Hagar. A few chapters earlier the Torah tells us of an earlier incident when Hagar herself flees after she is taunted by Sarah. She is distraught, in the wilderness when an angel appears and asks her:

Ey mizeh vaat? V'ana telchi?

Where are you coming from Hagar and where are you going?

These two questions are the questions each of us must ask ourselves as we cross the threshold into the New Year.

Where are you coming from? What are you bringing with you from your past?

### **And**

Where are you headed? Where are you going?

How are you going to shape your future?

Tonight I want to share with you my answer to those questions as a way of sharing some of my deepest beliefs and in the hope that it will be helpful to you as you ask the same questions about your life and your beliefs as a Jew.

Ey mizeh vaat? Where are you coming from?

### **My Story**

I was born into a traditionally observant Jewish family in Cape Town, South Africa in 1952, 7 years after the end of the Second World War. I went to a Jewish Day School where almost all my Hebrew and Jewish Studies teachers

were Israelis. For my father, Sydney z'l, a passionate Jewish communal leader, Judaism and Zionism were his most important life commitments. The Holocaust and the subsequent miraculous establishment of Israel were the two central themes of my Jewish upbringing and education. Zionism and love of Israel defined our school and the curriculum. The very names of the two schools I attended, Weizman Primary School named after Haim Weizman, the first President of Israel and Herzlia, named after Theodore Herzl, the founder of Zionism, reflected the centrality of Zionism in my Jewish education. The close connection between the Holocaust and Israel was emphasized in many different ways, both in classroom learning and in the culture of the school.

From a young age I was drawn to the rituals and spiritual practices of Judaism, which have been central to my life from an early age. I remember how as a young child I would pour my heart into traditional prayer.

I was also haunted by the Holocaust and mesmerized by the miracle of Israel. Three months after I graduated Herzlia High School, I went on aliya to Israel.

This is the Jewish context in which I grew up.

There is one story from my childhood that has in some way shaped my life.

Every day on my walk home from Weizmann Primary School, from Bus Stop 23 to 25, I would pass the Central News Agency, a newspaper and stationary store at the corner of Main Road and Quendon Road. This corner was the place where the Cape Times and The Argus, our daily newspapers, were distributed to African men and young boys who would then deliver them to our houses or sell them to us, as our parents, the white masters, drove past in our cars.

As a child I noticed that the African children did not attend school, were very poorly dressed and would deferentially call us "baas" (master) as did their parents. Often barefoot, their clothes torn, they would run up to our cars, stopped at the traffic light shouting "Argie" "Argie" "City Late"

Around age 10 or 11 I noticed something very disturbing that happened at that corner almost every day. Police vans would come to a screeching halt and armed police dressed in blue uniforms with guns and batons - a very frightening presence to a 10 year old kid - would jump out of the vans and rudely ask the African men on the corner for something. The African men,

sullen and submissive, would fumble around in their pockets. Some would pull out some kind of book that the police officers would then check. Frequently, the officer would grab hold of the man questioned, handcuff him and literally throw him into the back of the van.

At some point I realized that these men were being arrested for pass laws. Every black adult in Sea Point, our white suburb with a large Jewish population, had to have a pass to be in the city. If they did not have a job in our area, they would be arrested. When I was growing up about half a million Black South Africans were arrested every year on pass law offenses. They would spend 10 days in prison and were then often transported and dumped in the “homelands”, hundreds of miles from Cape Town and where there was no possibility for work. After their time in prison, they would migrate to one of the urban centers again in search of work and may be arrested multiple times.

The aggression of the police and their brutal racism frightened me. And, I felt ashamed and guilty. I just stood by and watched and the adults in my community did the same. We were too scared to intervene. We were just so happy it wasn't us.

I don't know exactly when, maybe it was at age 10 or 11, I made a clear connection between the experience of these men and the yellow star that Jews were forced to wear in Europe that I had just learned about in my Jewish Day school. I realized that, I, a Jewish child less than 20 years after the Holocaust, was now on the other side. In my context the Blacks were the targeted group, “the Jews”, and we, the Jews, were part of the privileged white community in a violently racist country.

The slogan, “Never Again”, was something that was repeated over and over again in our community and it resonated deeply inside me: never again would we allow another Holocaust.

In his many rousing public speeches as a leader of the community, my father would rail against the governments of the world, the church, non-Jews who were silent. Why were they so silent? I heard him say this with so much pain and passion many times. I remember once standing with him in the Jewish cemetery in Pinelands as he gave one of these speeches on Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Why didn't they speak up? Much later in my life I visited Oswiecim, the town outside Auschwitz/Birkenau. As I traveled through Oswiecim I wondered: What happened in their church on Sunday morning? When they prayed did they say anything about the crematoria just a few miles from their church? I feared that they didn't.

My father's message on that day in the cemetery was articulated so powerfully by Elie Wiesel in his acceptance speech on receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986.

Wiesel said:

"I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. **We must always take sides.** Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

Why were **they** so silent? Why didn't they take sides?

And then the question turned in a frightening direction:

What about **us**?

They? The governments of the world? The church? The non-Jews?

What about us?

Wasn't this question also about us? Didn't we understand fully why people are silent in the face of injustice?

Here we were, members of a small prosperous Jewish community, part of a racially privileged class of people, beneficiaries of one of the most brutal racist regimes in human history. The question was not only about them, it was also about us. Would we speak up? What would it mean to be a Jew, if we didn't speak up? Would we have the courage to intervene?

Sadly, the answer to this question is mixed. While many individual Jews were among the heroic opponents of Apartheid, there was an inverse relationship between involvement in Jewish life and opposition to Apartheid. The more someone was connected with traditional Jewish life and Jewish institutions, the less likely they were to take a stand against Apartheid. Almost all the Jewish heroes against Apartheid were alienated or marginal Jews. Our rabbis, our Jewish institutions, and our synagogues, with far too

few exceptions, were silent. In our Jewish institutions, our businesses and our synagogues we treated our fellow Black South Africans in the same way as all whites in our society. Watching my father and other members of my family treat their black workers poorly is one of the most painful memories of my childhood. And, in our synagogues there was an ironclad mechitza, a separation between our beautiful religious services and the brutality of Apartheid. We didn't address these issues because they were "political".

From a young age I was deeply attached to Judaism and it is from Judaism that I learned the imperative to pursue justice. I knew how much the Torah emphasized that as Jews we were slaves in Egypt and that we should never oppress the "other" because we know the soul of the other, because we were slaves in Egypt.

At age 15, I studied the book of Amos, a prophet in Judea in the 8<sup>th</sup> century at a time of great affluence. His words about the oppression of workers, the indifference to the poor articulated so powerfully my own reality.

"I loathe, I spurn your festivals,

I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies....

Spare me the sound of your hymns,

And let me not hear the music of your lutes

But let justice well up like water,

Righteousness like a mighty stream."

The choirs in our synagogues were beautiful, our rituals were powerful but what did it all mean if we didn't connect the words to the mass injustice around us and from which we all benefited. Amos and the other prophets of Israel made clear that God didn't care about beautiful rituals that were disconnected from the pursuit of justice, God wanted us to treat one another fairly, to build a community of justice.

The angel says to Hagar: "Ey mizeh vaat?" Where are you coming from?

This is where I am coming from. For me as a Jew there is nothing more important than the pursuit of justice. I love the rituals of Judaism and they are my way of connecting with the mystery of the universe and the mystery of our unfolding lives. But those rituals must be connected with ethical

living, with the pursuit of justice and peace. When they are not, they are indeed loathsome, empty rituals that we must spurn just as Amos did.

Lean telchi? Where are you going?

My experience as Jewish child under Apartheid has led me to devote my life to the integration of Jewish spiritual life with social transformation and justice.

During the Vietnam war, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "To speak about God and remain silent on Vietnam, is blasphemous." For me it is Abraham Joshua Heschel who best integrates Jewish spiritual life with justice. Heschel wrote several profound books on Jewish spiritual practice and he always connected the practice with his efforts to change the world. There are many Jews who are passionate advocates of Justice who have no connection to the spiritual traditions of Judaism and many Jews connected to the traditions who don't connect their spiritual practice to ethics. In his very being Heschel brought these two worlds together, the depth of Jewish spiritual wisdom from Eastern Europe and the incredible ability to fully engage in this new country in the pursuit of justice and social transformation. .

In my mind, Judaism offers us two treasures:

Firstly Judaism offers us spiritual teachings and practices: A body of teachings, rituals, life cycle events that connect us to the Spirit/to God, to the mystery of the life to the joy and the challenge of living. Jewish spiritual practices: the cycle of our holidays and our sacred texts open us to gratitude, to awe, to appreciation of the mystery of the universe, to compassion and to justice. They connect us with the ultimate, with God.

Secondly, Judaism calls on us to see God in every human being and to be the arms, the mouth and the feet of the God of justice and transformation, the God that stands on the side of the poor, the oppressed, the imprisoned.

These two core parts of Judaism are both critically important. The rituals and teachings connect us to the awe and wonder of being alive. They center us, they bring us joy, they help us reach understanding.

The pursuit of justice, repairing the world so it reflects the image of God is our purpose here on earth. Each of us fulfills this purpose in a different way

but we are all called to be engaged in the pursuit of a world reflective of the Divine.

Lo Alecha hamlacha ligmor, v'ayn ata rashai lehibatel mimena.

“It is not upon you to finish the work of repair, but you are not allowed to exempt yourself from the task.”

As a people we need to return to this original call which was the heart of the earliest understanding of Judaism. When God established the covenant with Avraham he makes it clear that the covenant is not just about ethnicity it is primarily about ethics.

“Shall I hide from Avraham what I am about to do for I have chosen him and his descendants to be Lishmor tzedakah umishpat”

To do what is just and right means that issues of justice must be at the center of our lives as Jews

That means facing hard issues and it means facing them in synagogue, in Jewish organizations, in our families. There can be no mechitza between religion and justice.

I was so pleased to hear that your synagogue participated in the torture banner project. Many synagogues were unable to participate because their members felt it was too “political” You deserve to be proud of your participation in this project.

During the time of the Banner project someone sent me photo of a wedding at Bnai Jeshurun, a synagogue in New York. In the photo the couple was standing under the huppah. Behind them was the beautiful ark above which hang the banner Torture is a Moral Issue. I felt that picture contained my dream for Jewish life, an integration of the beauty and power of our rituals deeply connected to our ethical vision of being a people.

And so the question God asked Hagar is addressed to each of us this Yamim Noraim;

Where have you come from and where are you going?

What brought you to this synagogue tonight and where does it lead you?

What difference will your presence here tonight and over these holidays make in your life?

I know that this commitment to spiritual practice and justice is part of the core of this synagogue. The name of this synagogue Tikkun v'Or embodies this vision. "Tikkun" refers to Tikkun Olam/repair of the world and "Or" to the Light, the divine light that we can access through Jewish spiritual practice.

How can we build a caring community that embodies what we wish for the world? How can we as a religious community make a difference in the world?

You are all already doing that. For those of you who are members, what can you do to help this community fulfill its vision? In what ways do you want to make a commitment to spiritual practice, to the pursuit of justice?

The most well known comment by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is what he said to his daughter when he returned from participating with Martin Luther King Jr. in the historic march from Selma to Montgomery.

He said, "I felt like my feet were praying."

We must continue to pray not only with words, melody and silence but also with our hands and feet.

May each of us be enriched by the services over these sacred days and may they inspire us to live more fully as Jews, celebrating the blessing of being alive and doing our part to repair the world. May the Source of life bless us with courage and strength to take on this task.

Once again, thanks for this opportunity and I wish you all a year of joy, blessing, good health and peace.

