

KOL NIDREI 2013 SPEECH

Shana tova and Shabbat shalom.

Last week on Erev Rosh Hashanah I shared with you the words of Rabbi Hillel, the Talmudic sage, who centuries ago said: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now – he wrote - then when?”

As I noted in my talk, contemporary Professor Louis Kaplan rephrased Hillel’s remarks and suggested that instead of, who am I we should say what am I: “If you are only for yourself,” Kaplan said “you cease to be a real human being - you become no longer a who, but a what.”

And it is to this question I would like to address this evening’s remarks. Who are we and what are we? What does it mean to be human? How do we live our lives? How can we navigate the, at times, most difficult world we live in, particularly in this day and

age? How can we not become overcome by cynicism when we see what occurs in this world?

Our rabbis wrote that we are a combination of both good inclinations and evil inclinations, *yetzer hatov* and *yetzer harah*, and that we live within and despite these incongruities. They suggest that we realize and indeed embrace these inconsistencies in ourselves and in the world for they are the necessary ingredients in the journey we take as we negotiate our lives on this plane of existence.

Yet when I open my morning paper and read the world news I become overwhelmed with what appears to be the imbalance of these two inclinations. I read only of the evil wrought upon our fellow human beings by our fellow human beings.

I read of Syria – of the poison gassing of men, women and children – the denials of the State and the inaction of the world, despite indisputable proof of this atrocity.

I read of Russia – of State sanctioned homophobia and worse – the silence of the government as gays are tricked into meetings with violent thugs, who then proudly film the torture and humiliation they inflict with no consequence.

And I read of a cynical Olympics committee which endorses the winter games in Sochi Russia despite Putin's anti-gay laws and despite his unlawful decree which bans in and around Sochi, demonstrations and rallies for two and a half months before said games - a decree which is contrary to the Olympics very own internal regulations.

I read of an extreme group of ultra-Orthodox in Israel who channeling the Taliban wish to force their values or lack thereof regarding women on the rest of the state – spitting and swearing at girls, young and older women, for their attire – violently attacking buses with hammers in Beit Shemesh for example because the police arrested a couple who unlawfully forced women to the back of the

bus, insisting that women must sit in designated seats on public transit and wait in separate lines and in at least one extremist Haredi community forcing women to walk on special sidewalks, despite the High Court of Justice outlawing these practices.

I read of the regime of Korean Kim Jong-uns – he, the infamous BFF of Dennis Rodman – he, who has continued to operate so called political prison camps where in fact entire generations of families are kept captive, where in one such camp which sprawled across an area as big as London England over 20 000 people died of disease and starvation and where today over 150 000 men, women and children are incarcerated.

And closer to home, I read of immigration minister Jason Kenney who in early 2012, characterized most of the Roma claims as “bogus.” Bogus? Roma, who according to Amnesty International, are among the most deprived communities in Europe, prevented in some countries from obtaining citizenship and personal documents

required for social insurance, health care and other benefits and denied their rights to housing, employment, healthcare and education. Roma, whose children in Hungary are segregated into special needs schools without grounds. Roma, who are victims of forced evictions, racist attacks and police ill-treatment.

And here in Toronto I read of the little 11 year old boy who called 9-1-1, whispering into the phone that he was being beaten, before the line went dead and who is now recovering from emergency surgery in a Toronto hospital.

Is this who we are as human beings? Is this what we are? Have our evil inclinations out balanced our good?

The Torah commands that “we should walk after the Divine.” The Rabbis ask to what does the word AFTER refer? They suggest that it means that we should follow after, not the Divine Itself, so much as Divine attributes – attributes we recite on these High Holy days, attributes that the prophet Isaiah proclaimed are the true

essence of Atonement. We are to clothe the poor, to help the weak, to feed the hungry, to be merciful and to live with integrity.

Notwithstanding the litany of evil I have just recited, there are those who are indeed walking after the Divine - redeeming this world. Living their *yetzer hatov*.

There are those who are working every day in Russia, in Jamaica, in Africa, to protect gays from violence and fight discrimination on the ground. There is the Rainbow Railroad, an organization whose mission is to help LGBT people as they seek safe haven from state enabled violence, murder or persecution and assist them in coming to Canada and other safe countries.

There are those, who have formed a coalition, a coalition of Jews, Roma and others, working to end Canadian immigration bans. Who recall the Roma proverb that speaks of Jews and Roma trudging to the gas chambers together. A proverb that states that our ashes, Roma and Jew, mingled in the ovens. Who state that no

longer will we ever hear again the infamous words, “None is too many.”

There are those, who like Israel’s Anat Hoffman have persevered in fighting against Ultra-Orthodox religious extremism. Hoffman, who was named by the Israeli newspaper Haaretz as 2013’s Person of the Year. Hoffman, who as head of Women at the Wall secured over the past year equal praying rights for women at the Kotel, the Western Wall in Jerusalem, and who has championed religious pluralism and gender equality in Israel for over twenty years.

There are those who are working to see implemented the words of the United Nations World Summit which enshrined the principle and concept of the “Responsibility to Protect”: that the State and I quote: “carries the primary responsibility for protecting populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, and that the international

community has a responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other means to protect populations from these crimes and must be prepared to take collective action to protect these people..

I am not naïve. I know that to generate the *yetzer hatov*, the good in this world and in ourselves is most difficult, but again to paraphrase the words of the sage Hillel, we must not separate ourselves from the community. Rather we must work for it until the day that we die.

We are taught that Yom Kippur is a day of reckoning. Some see this reckoning as a judgment from the Divine. Others see this reckoning in a more personal sense, as a specific, once a year time, to evaluate our own lives.

We chant on these High Holy Days, “On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live and who shall die?” I would suggest that we re-write these words to read

not *who* shall live but rather *how* we shall live. How shall we live in relationship to our family, to our friends and to our community? How shall we live and work to let the light of the *yetzer hatov* manifest itself within ourselves and our world. And “if not now then when?”