

EREV ROSH SERMON – October 2, 2016
Rabbi Aviva Goldberg

Shana Tova. I'd like to begin my talk for this evening by sharing with you excerpts from a story, *The Messiah*, which is one of a group of short stories in a book entitled *In The Land of the Armadillos* by Helen Shankman. I shall paraphrase and summarize most of it for you and only directly quote certain passages that I find most significant.

The short story takes place during World War II in a small Jewish village in Poland. One early morning a stranger appears on the bed of the young boy of the house. The stranger is wearing a long white gown with a rope around his waist, a linen robe woven with stripes and on his feet sandals. "Heh kid," he says to the little boy "do you mind if I stay here for a minute – it's been a long night."

The little boy was rather sure he knew who this stranger was. In fact his whole family was getting ready for the coming of this visitor, for of course there were rumours that at this, the most horrible time in the history of our people the *mashiach*, the Messiah would finally arrive wearing a long white gown, with a rope around his waist, a linen robe woven with stripes and on his feet sandals.

But when the stranger, who introduces himself as Shua, meets the rest of the family, he tells them that he has resigned his job as the Messiah. Though they urge him to reconsider and beseech him to stay "at least to the end" as the father requests, he leaves their home slamming the door behind him and yelling "NO, I QUIT!"

Two weeks go by and the family, together with one hundred or so Jewish souls, are corralled into the village square. Those that are not shot on the spot are herded into an old cinema where they're told to wait until they would be "transported somewhere farther east where there would be food and lodging upon arrival" – and so crowded together with no food, and no water, they wait and wait and soon the little boy falls asleep, only to be awakened by the Messiah, Shua, who has traded his robes for ordinary workman's clothes. "Psst" said the messiah bending over the boy, "let's get you out of here." And looking around at the other townspeople he asked, "Anyone else wants to get out of here? This is your big chance".

But alas, and here I will continue the story verbatim. "Only the boy and his sisters with perfect faith followed the Messiah through the innards of the theatre to a cellar that opened up out of the earth and they walked across frozen fields to the curtain of trees at the town's edge. There in the clearing five German soldiers suddenly appeared and advances upon them, and "we" writes the narrator, "raised our hands in the air – waiting for our imminent martyrdom."

But martyrdom did not take place as the soldiers were interrupted by the Messiah's voice raised in anger. "I'm going to do it" he said with determination to no one in particular. "You just watch." And then deep in conversation to what appeared again to be no one in particular, he continued, "Well, you knew what you were in for when you hired me, that's all I can say. Just go ahead and stop me!"

"It was at this point that the Messiah," the narrator writes, "levitated into the air over our heads. For a moment he remained there serenely floating, then he started to glow and his fine features illuminated as if he were made of frosted glass and he rotated faster and faster and there was a deafening crack as if the heavens had split open and the trees disappeared in a flash of brilliant white light!"

Years later, the boy, now a man, would read about it in a scientific journal, that in the predawn hours of November 19, 1942 a blast knocked down a hundred thousand trees in the forest just west of his very town – the energy of the impact was compared to the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

But to continue with our story, eventually the group caught up with Jewish partisans and boarded a ship to what was then Palestine. Shua married the boy's older sister and died in the battle for Jerusalem a bullet in his heart. And the boy? The boy became an author. One afternoon, thirty years later, at a reading of his book *The Orphan's Messiah*, he met a woman who on hearing his story, came up to him. She said she knew who Shua really was. The woman, a holocaust survivor, told him about a promising *yeshiva bocher*, rabbinic student, whose parents died when he was very young, leaving him alone and penniless. Losing all faith he became a thief, trafficking in all sorts of illicit fare buying and selling on the black market. Gradually his reputation and ruthlessness grew when quite suddenly when the Germans had invaded the country, he disappeared and eventually returned to his town transformed. The once notorious gangster Shua Tzedek entered the main synagogue of his town wearing a long white gown with a rope around his waist, a linen robe woven with stripes and on his feet sandals and announced that angels had directed him to abandon his criminal ways, to mount a donkey and to lead them to Jerusalem.

The author listened to the woman's story and thought to himself: Could this be true? Was this messiah nothing more than an inspired lunatic and the miracle that saved him and his family just a run of the mill meteor? There were, he knew, many Messiahs in those years, coming from nowhere to emerge as heroes for a brief and terrifying time, vanishing afterward into the banality of every day existence.

And the narrator concludes with these words: "There are the times, the times that I have trouble believing in a merciful God. But about the messiah, I have no doubt. I know what

I saw. Sixty years ago he got as far as my town in Poland. At this rate, he will be here soon.”

How many of you were gripped by this story? How many of you albeit, for a brief moment hoped or perhaps felt that it could be real, it could be true?

If you're nodding your head in agreement then perhaps like me you are a closet lover of what is called magic realism - a category of literature in which realistic narrative is combined with surreal elements of dream or fantasy. When done well, as in this book by Shankman, I adore this kind of writing. I am almost obsessed with it.

I often ask myself, why is this so – especially when people ask me “What are you reading?” and I tell them and they respond with “It’s about what? A talking coyote? A boy brought up by wolves? A female golem and a jinni? You’ve got to be kidding!!” And so I ask myself, what is it about magic realism that talks to me?

On thinking about it I have come to a quite ironic realization. When I try to explain to people how I understand and how I approach life, I say that I am an existential idealist. Think about it – an existential idealist - is that not a **MAGICAL REALIST**?

This past month I have walked a great deal – ostensibly I am walking in order to exercise my dog but if you were a true dyslexic you would understand that it is less to exercise Rufus, my dog and more to dialogue with God.

On one of these early morning walks I heard someone behind me on the other side of the street yelling and swearing a blue streak. At first I thought he was yelling at the woman beside him and then I realized that no he was telling her, in a very loud voice, what had just transpired. He had been out to get the paper and some man and I quote “gave me the stink eye, so I said, what are you doing? You think I’m going to let you give me the stink eye!” And then the man kept screaming in the foulest language about how stupid people were and how he deserved respect and no one was going to get away with looking at him that way!

I couldn’t believe how angry he was and how violent. And then a day later, again in the early morning, I was walking down the same street with my dog Rufus and I saw a man in a black top hat and dark sunglasses, in a pair of shorts and in high top sneakers be-bopping along, gesturing with his hands to the beat of music that only he could hear without earphones. Initially when I saw him I thought, whoa this guy looks very strange and then I stopped and considered it more carefully and I looked down at Rufus and said to him, “You know what, this man’s enjoying himself, he’s happy, he’s not hurting anyone, he’s not angry, he’s not violent. He’s just grooving to his own rhythm.” And I thought to myself which of these two individuals is ill? Has a ‘dis – ease’? Which is realism and which is magic?

So what is the message I have for you on these High Holy Days? And should a High Holy Day sermon have a message? Well to answer this latter question, when I was researching for these High Holy Days I came upon an article in the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz, by a Rabbi Michael Knopf in which he asked this very question 'What is the purpose of a High Holy Day sermon?' He concluded that the purpose is to wake us up; "to disrupt the spiritual, intellectual or emotional status quo of the listener."

To a certain extent, I agree with him and so I return to my original question: What is the message, the purpose of this evening's sermon? I think that I have indeed kept you awake but have my words disrupted in any manner, as Knopf writes, your spiritual, intellectual or emotional status quo? I do wish, I do hope that at least in one of these categories you have been stirred.

On the first page of our High Holy Day supplements, I have printed the respective greetings for our newsletter that Daniela and I composed over a month ago. I think that these words are relevant when trying to find the purpose of this evening's talk. In my greeting, I shared a quote by the late author Elie Wiesel in which he states that we should never fail to protest in the face of evil, what I would say is the evil that is all around us today: the venomous rhetoric and violent acts of anti-Semitism, of racism, of homophobia, and demagoguery, all freely spewed and endorsed by state leaders and citizenry alike.

Wiesel said something else that I did not include in this greeting but which is relevant as well to the purpose of this sermon. "Remember," he wrote, "some stories are true that never happened."

And these stories can teach us, I think, more on how to live than can all the many philosophies, ethical treatise and High Holy Day sermons found in the libraries of this world, and spoken from innumerable pulpits.

Shana Tova Umetuka, may you have a good and sweet New Year. Good reading to you all.