

We Must Continue to Repair the World

KOL NIDREI SERMON, October 11, 2016

Rabbi Aviva Goldberg

Good evening and Shana Tova.

Ten days ago on Erev Rosh Hashanah I mentioned that I had read an article in Haaretz, Israel's oldest daily newspaper, regarding the aim of making a sermon on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Called, "Ahead of the High Holy Days, What's the Purpose of a Sermon?" Rabbi Michael Knopf, the author, asserts that on the High Holy Days a sermon should and I quote "provoke the congregants from slumber and help catalyze some change in their lives or inspire some repair in our world."

My first impression upon reading his words was, oh my goodness, what a frightening, daunting and indeed unrealistic task he is placing on those of us who present High Holy Day sermons. Does he really think that the words that we say once a year will truly impact our congregant's behaviours and attitudes for the next twelve months? Does he really think that we can in one speech, fifteen to thirty minutes, long propel people to go out and do *tikkun olam*, repair of the world?

The more I have thought about it, however, the more I have come to the realization that there is more than a grain of truth in his remarks. If we, if our words, do not, as Knopf writes, in some ways "disrupt the spiritual, or the intellectual or the emotional status quo of the listener", what is the point?

We all know how influential words can be, especially today when we are attesting to the power of words that actually are rending the very fabric of our democracies. We are witnessing, if you will forgive my alliterative acrobatics, we are witnessing the power of a fallacious fabricator of falsehoods whose lies have ignited a following that could elect him into the most powerful political position in the world. We are I fear at a dystopian juncture where like Orwell's 1984, words and truth are relative and have no meaning - war is peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength.

I would suggest to you that even if the demagogue Trump does not become the 45th president of the United States, the effects of his rhetoric will not just reverberate in the halls of congress, the senate and the world but will actually continue to function as a clarion call towards a xenophobic, homophobic, Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, misogynist and sexist world.

My questions to you, my challenge to you, is to reflect on the how and the why and the what? How did this happen? Why is this happening? Why are so many otherwise loving and intelligent people crowding into rallies cheering and affirming this venomous bombast? What can we do about it?

I find myself during these High Holy days often turning to the work of the late Elie Wiesel to find some answers. Over fifteen years ago Wiesel in one of a series of interviews he did on the PBS show "The Open Mind" was asked about the power of language and changing values in language. He responded with these prophetic words: "We don't talk. We shout.... The civility is gone; not only the tenderness, but the friendship in discourse... we have to start again to teach our contemporaries how to speak. When language dies," he continued, "violence becomes another language."

Interestingly, Michael Lerner, twenty years ago in his book *The Politics of Meaning* asserted some of the same concerns, only Lerner expanded his remarks into a political critique and philosophy. He wrote that the most important reason that the so called Right has been successful in at that time recent American politics and I would add in world politics today, is that it addresses some of the central manifestations of what he called a crisis of meaning – a crisis of meaning as reflected in family problems, rising crime, and the general decline of values and community, And the right, he asserted, tells people that these problems are caused because there is something deeply wrong in the larger culture. He noted that the dynamics of this trust in the Right is evident in the powerful success of right-wing radio talk-show hosts who reframe people's personal pain in racist, sexist, or homophobic directions. The radio hosts provide, he writes, a simple and powerful answer: "The reason you are being denied recognition and meaning is that the **liberals** have given these scarce commodities to **someone else**, and they've set up society in such a way that these **others** will get what you badly need. It's only if we can dismantle government and the programs that **they've created to benefit these special interests** that you, the American majority, have any chance of getting the caring you deserve but which these **liberals and their various client groups** are withholding from you."

Does this sound familiar?

Now I do not in fact concur with many of Lerner's statements particularly vis a vis the State of Israel or what Judaism ultimately stands for. It seems to me that very often he, like many other pundits, does not take his own advice. He has forgotten what I feel is one of his most important observations. Early on in his career Lerner wrote and I paraphrase, that liberals and progressives must understand that the resentment people feel is legitimate: they really are in pain, they really do not get recognized in this society, and they have a right to be angry.

But I am not here to espouse Lerner's politics of meaning, nor, despite what it may seem, to demonize the Right or to in fact canonize the Left. I am here to ask the question: where did it all go wrong?

Yes, those of us in the Western hemisphere, who are LGBTQ have more civil rights and religious rites than ever before in modern history. Women, not just in the West but in most of the first and second world, are bit by bit acquiring the same education as men, and in many instances breaking through the glass ceiling and what is called by some in religious communities the glass cathedral ceiling – in fact there is one woman who is rather close to becoming the leader of the United States.

A black man won two terms as president and despite the incendiary and incorrect statistics espoused by Trump, the unemployment rate for black teens, as well as for blacks ages 16 to 24, has dropped by more than half from its high point during the Obama administration. And though poverty among blacks remains elevated, it is down from its high in recent years. Yes, of course the economy and employment are issues in the U.S. and Canada. But, in fact unemployment is at 4.9% in the U.S. and as of May of this year, 7.1 % here in Canada. And despite again Trump's incorrect statistics the automobile manufacturer Ford, for example, will be building two new cars in Michigan this year.

Notwithstanding these points, there is a not so silent majority who feel as Lerner has written, alienated, misunderstood and put upon. They do not see progress within their social and economic spheres. Indeed they see themselves as victims of a conspiracy of political correctness and liberal values which has been rubbed into their faces. Their voices, their opinions their concerns, their fears are not being acknowledged.

And the question again is why?

There are some who suggest that it is not their responsibility to explain or justify their stance their lives their choices. If you don't understand my sexual orientation, my gender choices, if you do not understand what is meant by systemic racism in my life, if you do not understand my religion they say, it is your problem, go out and educate yourself. I have right to be who and what I am.

Now on one level there may be validity in that stance. After almost thirty years of being part of panels and discussions in which I have been asked to describe, explain and expound upon what it is to be a Jewish lesbian in Canada, I am a touch tired. And now nine times out of ten I decline these invitations but I do suggest that someone younger, someone more in tune with the Queer Jewish community speak in my stead.

For I do think it is my responsibility to discourse and discuss these issues and not to say to the person who doesn't 'get it' oh, go educate yourself.

Rabbi Daniel Feldman, the dean of the theological seminary at Yeshiva University recently wrote a short halachic guide to what he calls the art of forgiveness. He notes that someone who has aggrieved his or her fellow Jew is obligated to seek that person's forgiveness. Without doing so, Yom Kippur will not bring atonement. The point of the apology, he writes, is not only so that the victim releases any claims of anger or hurt against the individual who has wronged them, but so that there be a restoring of a more harmonious relationship. And, he points out, if the offender has sincerely apologized, if they have made all possible efforts to rectify the offense, if in fact their initial attempt is unsuccessful they must try a different approach to seek forgiveness asking as many as three times. And he concludes that it is proper for the victim not to withhold forgiveness under most circumstances.

Is it not our responsibility to expand upon these moral and ethical tenets of Judaism these acts of forgiveness? Is it not our responsibility to create a new template of acts of clarity and mutual recognition?

Let our task be in the New Year one where we take the time to truly explain ourselves, where there is no longer an abyss of misinterpretations, of misdirection, of misunderstanding between the so-called left and the so-called right, the liberal and the conservative. Let us work to repair this world so that we are not just tolerant of one another but again as Wiesel notes **respectful** of one another.

Initially I wanted to conclude this sermon by paraphrasing the words of late poet Ruth Brin. I shall now do so, but I will actually end with a Hasidic tale because I feel that perhaps Brin's words are too metaphoric and though beautiful, almost too fragile. She writes: "There are neither angels nor emanations; only people like you and me. We must listen to our own inner conversation: we will learn that when we work for justice, we are bringing redemption; when we work for freedom and peace, we are praying for salvation, and when we accept and love another person, the messianic time draws near." Yes, I would say Brin's poetry is lovely, but in our tempestuous times perhaps the following story is more truthful. It is about a woman, a righteous middle aged woman, who came to a very wicked city. She came determined to save its inhabitants from their wrongful deeds, from their violence and their lack of empathy for each other. Night and day, she walked the streets and alleyways of the city, protesting against greed and theft, falsehood and indifference. In the beginning people stopped and listened and smiled ironically. Then gradually they stopped listening. She no longer even amused them. The killers went on killing, the lies kept on being told, and the good people kept silent. One day, a child, moved by compassion for the unfortunate woman, approached her and said, "Lady, my parents have told me that you have been doing this for years and years, way before I was born. You shout, you scream – don't you see that it is hopeless – that no one is listening." "Yes, I see," answered the woman. "Well then, why do you go on?" asked the youngster. "I'll tell you why" said the now quite old and frail woman. "In the beginning I thought I

could change humanity. Today, I know I cannot. But if I still shout, if I still scream, louder and louder, it is actually to prevent them from ultimately changing me.”

Shana tova and well over the fast.