

**KOL NIDREI 5780 SERMON
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2019
BY RABBI AVIVA GOLDBERG**

Shana tova and gmar chatima tova – loosely translated, **very** loosely translated as may the end of this long day be a good one for you.

Last week I spent about thirty minutes in my grandson's classroom. I was there to explain the traditions of Rosh Hashanah, to blow the shofar etc. As my grandson is in a group of 28 very active, very loud, very little 4 and 5-year old's, I do consider this altruistic act as being one of either great bravery or just plain stupidity. But I did promise to do it and of course bubby's can never break their promises. So, I found myself last Thursday sitting in the big chair, and all 28 of these very active, very loud, very little children sitting at my feet on the smiley carpet. And despite the fact that I have for close to fifty years of my life taught children of all ages, I will admit that for a brief moment looking at those eager faces, I had a feeling of panic. But thankfully that passed, and I was able to blow the shofar more than adequately, explain to them that we all have birthdays but Rosh Hashanah is a very important birthday because it is the birthday of the world. And to keep their interest I told them a story with no pictures nor props other than two apples. The story I told them was a variation of one that Eden told last year at our evening Rosh Hashanah New Year's service. As I was close to the end of the story,

I added something which I realized would become the key to the theme of this evening's sermon.

Let me explain first by retelling this little story which has its origins by the way in the educational philosophy of Rudolf Steiner who created the Waldorf schools. And at the end I will tell you what I added.

The story goes – and no you do not have to sit on the smiley carpet to hear it, but I do have the props with me. An apple lived in a tree with many other apples – and the tree that apple lived on was part of an orchard – an apple orchard of course, where there were hundreds of apple trees.

Now this little apple was very unhappy and lonely – even though it was surrounded by so many other apples it just didn't feel right. At night this apple would stay awake and look up at the sky and see all the beautiful stars and it would sigh – big breath- inhaling and exhaling sighs. And because it was of course a Jewish apple the sigh came out as an OY. The little apple would say unhappily to itself “I wish I was like the stars in the sky each one so bright and beautiful and unique” - and the little apple hung on to its tree branch and was very sad. Then one day there was a huge storm and the rain pelted down and the wind blew and blew – and the tree branch that the apple was on swayed back and forth, back and forth – and suddenly the apple fell to the ground with a loud PLOP. “Oh my, oh my, OY VEY” said the apple – “I

think I have broken in two"! Then the apple looked at its two parts and saw that right inside of it, right there in the middle was a star! He was no longer unhappy, and he laughed, and he smiled, and he said, "I do not have to be like the stars in the sky for I have a special star right inside of me."

And then I ended the story by saying to the children that this is what our Jewish holyday of Rosh Hashanah is all about – to remind us of how special we each are – and here I added not just how special we are but to remind us how we can be the best that we are.

As I noted earlier, it was then that I added these words to that Steiner story, that I realized more fully the theme of this evening's speech – we as human beings are indeed special – we as Jews, as a people who has endured thousands of years of change and dispersal of sorrow and celebration are special. For we are in fact unique in this world to have flourished and endured as a tiny nation a tiny people. We have within us and within our tradition, that special star - the potentialities and gifts for all the triad of tikkun we have focused on at these high holy days – we can repair this earth, we can repair our hearts and we can repair the world.

But I ask you are we – are we opening our tradition to these potentialities? Are we saying that the Judaism we espouse, and the Judaism all around us

particularly here in Toronto but as well worldwide including Israel is living up to its potential?

Or are we allowing Judaism to be taken over by fundamentalist thinking, rigid interpretation and theology, hollow ritual and rote practice even in the most liberal of settings? It is my opinion that the answer is yes to all these questions - we are indeed failing our faith and relinquishing our religion's promise.

How many of you have in the past or perhaps in the present looked at our liturgy, our words of prayer and shaken your heads in bewilderment and frustration?

How many of you feel uneasy with the concept of prayer when directed to a God you do not fully have faith in?

How many of you have heard representatives of the Jewish mainstream applaud the actions of Donald Trump because he is 'a good friend of Israel' purposely blinding themselves to the core evil, dishonesty and disrespect of this individual and his minions.

How many of you have felt that you would be considered a traitor to our people if you finally stood up and said "wait I believe that there must be a State of Israel but change has to take place with its leadership. A leadership which has handed over control of everything from restaurant kashrut to public

school education to a vociferous minority of the right. A minority who present an ultra Orthodox perspective that has eroded decency and diversity – an Ultra Orthodox minority that if it has its way will overturn the liberal democratic decisions of the Israeli supreme court and bring its right wing agenda into all aspects of secular life. And a government that in catering to this minority has ridden roughshod over the rights of the Palestinian people and demonized their plight.

How many of you are waiting to hear more from our political parties and our Jewish institutions who initially condemned but now are silent in the face of the Quebec governments secularism law, known as Bill 21; a law which prohibits public sector workers, including teachers and police officers, from wearing religious symbols at work.

You say you are helpless, no one will hear your protests.

You say you cannot change the heads of our Canadian Jewish organizations.

You say you cannot change government policies.

You say you cannot change the Toronto board of Rabbis pronouncements and decisions. You cannot change decisions of the Reform and Reconstructionist movements here in Toronto who unlike their counterparts in the U.S. refuse to recognize as Jewish a child born of a Jewish father and

a non-Jewish mother – even when this interfaith family has made a commitment to bring their children up as Jewish. In other words refusing to agree to patrilineal descent.

You say you cannot create anew nor improve the state of our synagogues and religious and cultural institutions.

I say you are wrong.

There are alternatives and we must make alternatives in our theology, our practice, our institutions, our perspectives, our politics. For we must aim to be the best we can be.

In the past century Judaism has had many visionaries who recognized that for our tradition to be relevant it had to work up to its potential. This evening I would like to mention briefly just three of these incredible individuals.

The first, Mordechai Kaplan - In the last century Mordechai Kaplan the father of Reconstructionist Judaism, presented the thesis that Judaism is an evolving civilization, and that it changes in every generation. To Kaplan tradition has a vote but not a veto. His student Rabbi Harold Kushner articulated a new theology in which the Divine is neither all powerful nor omnipresent. Rather in this predicate theology God is not a noun but a verb. God is understood not as a person who rewards or punishes but rather its attributes of mercy and justice and kindness, attributes we reiterate on these

High Holy days are manifest in us as we work to bring Godliness into the world.

The second, Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi - Another visionary Rabbi who about forty years ago wrote of a renewed Judaism, a feminist, neo Hasidic, neo Kabbalistic liberal Judaism which he called Jewish Renewal. For some, this type of Judaism speaks to their very essence and their search for spirituality. He urged his followers to create fellowships where they could focus on a renewed Jewish practice, a renewed Judaism where the singing and dancing, meditation and contemplation of the early followers of Hasidism would be imitated but in a new egalitarian liberal setting.

And finally, Rabbi Joachim Prinz – a survivor of Nazi Germany, an activist and radical who understood the prophetic message of our tradition and lived it. A man who was not afraid to write letters to the American government in protest of its policies; a man who invited civil rights workers to his Reform synagogue in New Jersey, including the great Martin Luther King. A man who in 1963 simply stated that the most important thing that he had learned in his life was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence. “America,” he said, “must not be a nation of onlookers.”

Prescient words for today. I would add that we as Jews cannot be onlookers, cannot be bystanders to our own religious and community organizations or to events of the world around us.

Reciting words of liturgy that are not relevant to us, to a Divine we do not believe in, sitting in a worship service that goes on and on interminably is not what prayer should be about.

Being instructed by some rabbis that we must say this prayer or that prayer lest the Divine will be upset with us, lest we go against a particularly rigid interpretation of prayer itself, is to me at the very least a preposterous and meaningless assertion.

When more and more synagogues are finding that there are fewer and fewer people who attend. When more and more of our children and our children's children the next generation feel alienated and abandoned by what Judaism is offering can we remain silent.

And when it appears to me that even the most liberal of Jewish groups, Jewish Renewal, Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism are falling prey to institutional rigidity and rote practice as well the cult of personality of complete adoration and obedience to a particular rabbi, we cannot remain silent.

Our synagogue was established because the founders felt as women, as GBLTQ individuals that Toronto Jewry was not open to hearing our voices and celebrating our experiences. This synagogue has developed with the hope and the goal that you would be sitting in a service feeling that you do belong, feeling that the liturgy, the ritual, the theology makes sense to you and is not alien to your understanding. These readings in our handouts and supplements have been chosen to speak to the diversity of our community and our people.

It is my contention that we too cannot rest on our laurels and think that the task of revisioning is complete – we must not become captives of our own comfort.

I therefore ask that you please continue to be a part of this community, that you bring whether it be three times a year or twelve times a year or more all of who you are to this *makom* this holy place we have created.

I ask you to take your queerness, your mysticism, your meditation, your activism, your creativity, your intellectual curiosity and enact them not only in this small corner of Jewish life but beyond; that you write letters to your MP, organize politically, and take a stand against tyranny here at home and afar. Build a new tabernacle. This one of the soul, where each of us has a job, each of us a task to create, to beautify and adorn our tradition. A place where

some may wish to dance Torah, others to laugh the liturgy, some to chant psalms others to sing new praises to the Divine. A place where some may meditate on the 70 faces of the Divine and others will march in the paths already started by our prophets of protest. And whether that place be in the public sphere or with your loved ones in the private space of your homes bring all your specialness to it. For to paraphrase the words of Rabbis Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub, Judaism is a spiritual and physical structure in need of constant revitalization, reevaluation and repair. “In each generation,” they write, “we must carefully fulfill our obligations as Jews and human beings and pass on a thriving culture to the next generation.”

I began this sermon with a children’s tale of the special apple, and I would like to end with a more sophisticated but very similar message. It comes from my own personal experience that occurred over twenty years ago when I attended Elat Chayim the Jewish Renewal retreat as a participant and observer for my academic research.

Allow me to paraphrase from my notes of that Friday evening ritual mikvah experience: During the ritual immersion, I wrote, I witnessed the face of the woman I partnered with as she emerged jubilantly from her immersion. I found myself unable to articulate the glow in her face. And on that Friday night after the events of the late afternoon and evening, the women’s ritual

bath, the Sabbath welcoming service, and the festive meal, I awoke in the early hours of the morning from a fitful sleep. I could not grasp the unease I was feeling and kept returning in my thoughts to the ineffable expression I had witnessed earlier that evening on this woman's face. Quite abruptly, however, a clear meaning came to me. I was able to connect the indescribable appearance in my friend's face and the message of the Biblical Exodus narrative of Moses and the bush that was on fire but would not burn. I grasped that the image and voice which Moses heard in that bush was that same image within all of humanity. And I realized that within us we reflect the immanence of the Divine. That this is our specialness like the tiny apple with the star inside of it. May we find that star within us. May the light of the essence of all rise up from our our own essence and bring us peace and the strength to be all that we can be. Amen