

Kol Nidrey - September 24, 2023

Good evening and thank you for inviting me to share some of my thoughts with you at this auspicious service.

When Cantor Wunch asked me if I would like to give a sermon for these high holy days I answered yes but - may I be political - controversial even? And she said by all means go right ahead - and gave me her blessing.

And so over the past number of weeks I began to think about what I wanted to say, to make notes and to compose different parts of this evening's speech and yes it was to be VERY political - I was going to talk about Israel and our relationship here in the Diaspora to a country that seems today quite alien to me; a country whose government is anything but normal according to Pulitzer prize winning journalist Thomas Friedman - a country that seems to have lost its bearings - challenging the very core of its democratic norms - a country where Netanyahu and his allies, as noted by the newspaper Haaretz, are trying to build an alternative to the diplomatic support of America by catering to the xenophobic and extremist parties in Europe. A country whose main threat is internal not necessarily totally external, for this internal threat manifests itself through the homophobic, sexist, anti Palestinian anti democratic religious right wing members of kneset. Where there are such people as Bezalel Smotrich

Israel's new finance minister responsible for governing the occupied West Bank - who is a notorious racist ultra nationalist - and a staunch supporter of building illegal settlements on occupied Palestinian lands - and another member of the government Amichai Chikli who in his desire to bridge relations with all Jewish communities, all communities everywhere in fact, was here in Toronto several months ago speaking at an evangelical Christian college that is infamous for espousing anti 2SLGBTQIA rights. And who has said that he believes the Pride flag is an anti Zionist symbol and equates public criticism of Israel with antisemitism - a man who has the ironic title of 'diaspora and social equity minister' yet stated that he has a problem with Reform Jews who according to him seek to assimilate and affiliate themselves with groups who are anti Israel.

I could go on.

I was also going to talk about what is happening in the United States and to focus some of my remarks on the Republican party - the party of Abraham Lincoln, a party that also seems to have lost its bearings. A party that has elevated Donald Trump the twice impeached President the man who has four indictments against him the man who said there were good people on both sides of the white supremacist march in Charlottesville Virginia and who with his minions has rewritten history rewritten what we saw

with our very own eyes and has said that the January 6 rioters were actually a peaceful group of sightseers and tourists to the Capital. This is the man who now holds a lead over his rivals for the Republican nomination at approximately 60% with his closest competitor now Niki Haley standing at least 40 points behind him. I was also going to talk about the repeal of Roe v Wade and in this regard what can be called the pelvic theology of so many churches, synagogues and places of worship in America and around the world - a theology which is diametrically opposite to the liberation theology of the 1970s - a theology that understands the Divine ethic as centering on control of that which is below the waist, hence pelvic theology - the control and suppression of women's sexuality and the rights of all genders and individuals. Rather than an ethic which focuses on the liberation of women, of children, and of the disenfranchised.

I could go on.

I was also in composing my notes for this evening going to mention issues much closer to home - Doug Ford - who calmly blithely uses buzzwords that incite transphobia and hatred of non binary individuals - who instead of helping our educational system instead of helping our children and grandchildren by providing more funding more programs, more supports to teachers and students has the gall to accuse the Ontario school boards of

'indoctrinating' (there's that buzzword!) - INDOCTRINATING students on issues of gender - Doug Ford who disgracefully blasted the official Toronto District School Board's policy which has rules against outing students - a policy which has been in place since 2011 - over a decade!!

I could go on.

I was going to talk about the imminent threat of climate change how the words of the unetaneh tokef prayer ring too close to home - who by water - flooding in Libya - who by fire - forest fires in Greece, the biggest the EU has ever recorded, devastating fires in Maui and of course here in Canada - in Ontario, in Quebec and in BC.

Yes, yes I could go on and on.

BUT as I read through my notes for this proposed sermon I realized that I cannot do this - I cannot give such an angry and bleak sermon to an intelligent audience more than well aware of such depressing disheartening news and feeling not just upset but impotent.

And I realized that despite my own anguish and my horror and anger regarding what is happening in our world there are also many more important uplifting stories to relate and to share.

There are our stories - those we keep within ourselves, those we tell others and those we read - for as author Rachel Joyce has

said our stories are important - we need them - it is through telling and hearing stories that we make sense of the world. And I do not mean this in any way in the abstract - I mean it quite personally. Just yesterday I was reading an incredible book by David James Duncan, Sun House and suddenly in reading the words of one of his characters I recognized and realized something about myself. Suddenly, wonderfully, incredibly I saw the Aviva of sixty or so years ago - the crazy screwed up complex defiant lonely adolescent that I was and I remembered and understood viscerally my behavior of that time, and maybe even my behaviors of the present. A revelation that came not from a therapist, not from a dream but from a book, from a story, from a character in a tale I had just read and I wept in recognition, in both joy and sadness. For when a story is shared with us from a book or when a friend shares her story with us we realize, as Joyce writes, that we are not alone - because that thing that you feel I may have felt too, and that thing described in a book I may have felt and sometimes in the sharing we think again, we reevaluate who we are and who we can be.

Understanding the stories of others who enter our lives figuratively or literally, albeit briefly is to understand the relationships between adam l'adam person to person, what we are to consider on Rosh Hashanah and then perhaps in that

understanding, that empathy we can find what we are seeking on Yom Kippur a connection to the divine essence in each of us.

Can we change all that is happening around us? No, not if we are alone - not if we argue, not if we do not respect our differences, not if we do not work together

To paraphrase Judge J Harvey Wilkinson - being true to oneself should not mean being untrue to someone else - simply having different views and leading a different life makes no one lesser than another.

A week or so ago my grandson and I were walking on the Danforth near Pape and a very rough looking, not particularly good smelling person was asking everyone who passed him by for some money to purchase, he said, a hotdog at the store nearby. I stopped and gave him some money and said "here go buy yourself a hotdog and a drink too if you like." My grandson looked at me and said "do you think he will bubble? - do you think he will buy something to eat?" And I said "I don't know. He may not - he may use the money for something else or he may use it for food - it isn't up to us to choose what he does with it." And then my grandson as we continued walking turned his head back and saw the man stepping out of the store with some food and Ethan said to me - "he did buy something" - and I said "good."

As we went further on our walk I told my grandson a story about Eliyahu Hanavi, Elijah the prophet, who according to the scriptures didn't die but went up to the heavens in a whirlwind, accompanied by a chariot and horses of fire. And who, according to some aggadot, tales, still dwells with us here on earth - not just coming invisibly into our homes on Pesach to drink the wine placed in the center of the table for him, but coming to us disguised often as a beggar, and if we help that beggar who is really Eliyahu in disguise, so the aggadah tells us, we are blessed. My grandson smiled at me in delight and in joy "good story" he said. He is of course my best audience!

It made me think of a story I read about one of my favorite authors Holocaust survivor and father of logotherapy Victor Frankl, who was once asked to express in one sentence the meaning, the purpose of his own life. He said, "The meaning of my life is to help others find the meaning of theirs." Here was a man who had lived through the concentration camps, who had lost most of his family there, who had observed first hand the brutality, the degradation of and evil in human beings and yet did not become despondent and bitter.

Had I been in his shoes I wonder, could I have been able to find such meaning in life? How can I, how can we find meaning, joy in our lives despite the sorrow, the ugliness, the perils around us?

Therapist and minister Angela Gorrell suggests that joy is what we feel in our bones when we feel connected to what is good, beautiful and meaningful. That as Kahlil Gibran the poet suggests that our joy is our sorrow unmasked. It comes he wrote from the self same well from which our laughter rises, oftentimes filled with tears.

But how, how can we find that connection, that joy, that meaning? I would suggest that by reaching out to that person next to us who we do not know and to the person who we know who sits right beside us we can find connection. Like Frankl I would suggest that helping someone else find meaning and joy in their lives provides us with that purpose and that connection. I would suggest that in never giving up on one another, never giving up on our awesome earth, in never giving up hope for Israel, for our neighbor to the south and for our own government we can rise above sorrow.

I would suggest that we dust off our Birkenstocks if we can and go on protests for what we believe even if we are the only person there - that we sign petitions - that we help to clean up our rivers close to home and our oceans far away- that we volunteer if we can - that we help just one stranger and in so doing be blessed and perhaps even recognize that the beggar on our corner is Elijah, Eliyahu in disguise.



And finally I would suggest celebrating humor. I would suggest rereading the books at which you laughed out loud - or better yet, making a list of the most absurd films, tv shows and podcasts that you have loved and have giggled at and inviting friends to be with you as you watch together and laugh so hard that tears run down your faces. For laughter is certainly within our most ancient of traditions as the Talmud tells us, the great sage Rabba began each serious lecture and discussion on theology on the Torah and the law with a joke and after the laughter subsided - he and his students would begin their debates and study.

To paraphrase our sages - to know the needs of humanity and to bear the burden of another's sorrow, to cry with them, to laugh with them, to hold them is the true life, the true value not only of friendship but of humanity. KOL YISRAEL AREVIM ZEH BAZEH. All of Israel, all of humanity is responsible for and to each other.

Messages to remember in these difficult times.

Shana tova and a gmar hatima tova