

God and Moses were hanging out together. Moses was checking in with the Holy One. The story as told in the Talmud portrays God decorating the Torah with scribal ornaments and crowns on top of the letters of the Torah. What else would God be doing with all this free time except to beautify the art of every Torah scroll. Moses, on the other hand, was in one of his cranky moods wondering just what would happen to the Jewish people in the future. That's a fair question since Moses invested so much of himself in the drama of the Jewish people. Does he not have a right to ask God whether this great adventure will survive long into the future?

God, becoming irritated and annoyed by Moses' questions, blinks an eye and Moses is immediately spirited away into the distant future. He suddenly appears sitting inside a building with a group of young students pouring over the Talmud and asking questions of their teacher.

"What is the message of this passage Rabbi?" The students asked their rabbi. The teacher reminded them that in the future a great rabbi named Akiva will one day rise up and lead them to national liberation. Meanwhile Moses, sitting in the back of the classroom, became totally agitated not even able to understand what language they were all speaking. "What could God have had in mind for me by sending me here to this future classroom where I can't even decipher what is being said?" Moses asked. When the students questioned their teacher about a particular question that had no clear cut answer from the text of Talmud, the teacher said, "We know this teaching from Moses who at Sinai gave us this teaching." At that moment Moses perked up when he heard his name quoted, and finally smiled. Moses now understood and no longer feared for the future of Judaism.

The Judaism of Moses' time and the Judaism of our own day looks very different. We wouldn't recognize earlier forms of Jewish practice. And will the Judaism of 2000 years from now look radically different than what we know to be Judaism today? If we take a look at Reform Judaism when it officially organized itself in 1885, does it look the same 120 years later? No it does not and it has changed its theological direction in profound ways. But does that mean that Reform Judaism abandoned its principles? The answer is emphatically no! Judaism has always been able to adapt to changing times. And we are seeing that happen today as well. This is the reason why I would like to address three questions regarding the future of our own Jewish community at Bet Yam. What does it mean to belong to a reform congregation? Can we be inclusive and embrace diversity at Bet Yam? And finally, where are we as a congregation headed at Beth Yam in our journey towards a vibrant future?

Are we not changing and evolving as a congregation, not just by entering a new house of worship, but also in our spirituality and religious practices? Obviously we are changing, but, the real question is; does that mean we are abandoning something sacred or does it mean we are preserving the principles that become the continuity of the future? Judaism has always been an evolving system of beliefs and practices. We at Congregation Bet Yam understand that rabbis and lay leaders fashion the practice and values of a Jewish community in accordance with the times we are living in. Clearly what we are doing in our congregational practice is different today than 25 years ago and it will be just as different thirty years from now.

The bottom line is that no matter how many prayer books over a course of three score years we use in the reform movement or what kind of music we sing or how much or little Hebrew we recite in the service and what rituals we practice in public worship we will always be Congregation Beth Yam, the full service congregation in the low country that serves its members and strives to preserve Jewish life for all ages. We will still read the Torah, no matter what the prayerbook looks like and we will still interpret Torah knowing that we are standing in a continuum that goes back to Sinai.

But what does it really mean to be a member of a reform congregation?

This congregation is a reform congregation. It stands for an approach to Judaism that affirms our continuity to Sinai and celebrates freedom of thinking that enables us to fashion Judaism to fit into the times we live in. Reform Judaism is about balancing tradition and modernity. Reform Judaism, in its American inception by the rabbis in 1885, rejected most time honored Jewish rituals as anachronistic and outdated. It also rejected, for example, any return to a Jewish state in Palestine as inconsistent with Reform's belief that Judaism was more about ethics than ethnicity. It was more about right than ritual.

Yet, within fifty years Reform Judaism reversed itself on Palestine and embraced Zionism. By the nineteen sixties ritual and righteousness became forever interwoven. Today we have experimented with ritual coming to the realization that no branch of Judaism owns any ritual. Reform Judaism enabled us to reinterpret and adapt tradition into our culture that would have been unthinkable one hundred years ago. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the founding rabbi of our movement, always understood that the cycles of history would require us to reexamine our tradition. We have done so and the future generations may take our movement in a completely different direction. But what we are doing today is responding to a diverse community at Beth Yam that comes from all sorts of backgrounds who bring different expectations and criterion as to what qualifies as authentic Judaism. Sorting all that out is our challenge.

If the last century has proven anything, it was that reform's vitality and ability to see that the times required us to change has been its greatest strength even though that could be irritating to us. Music, liturgy and religious practices blossomed. Reform struggles to provide continuity to its membership in these areas while at the same time responds to the influx of people who have expectations and needs that cover a broad spectrum of religious practices. Because we all come from different communities and do not have one tradition that extends back a century or more, we are still in our formative stages.

Still, do we not all, to some degree, harbor the belief that the authentic Jewish practice is based upon what we experienced growing up or in our adult years? And then, we have many in our community who never joined a congregation and that Beth Yam is their first real temple experience. We need patience and understanding. If we want to prosper and be an inclusive community, being the only full service congregation in the low country, then we will need to keep to this course of tolerance and acceptance.

We look so different than we did decades ago years ago. We have not only a spectrum of Jewish observances but we have interfaith families of all ages. We have converts. The reform movement has opened its doors to Gay and Lesbian Jews. Our community clearly looks different from Jewish communities of New York's Lower East Side for example, or any other Jewish community a century or less ago. We have come to a crossroads in

understanding that not only are the religious practices and worship traditions different today but the demographics of our Jewish community are also profoundly diverse. It is just like being in the classroom of the future like Moses where we do not recognize the language, the people or the style of learning. The question is whether what we have become will lead us to a healthy future or not?

The second question: Can we be inclusive and embrace diversity at Beth Yam?

Some have expressed to me that more tradition means we are becoming conservative and that is unsettling. I want to take this opportunity to remind us that we are and will always be a reform congregation. Reform is diverse in its practice. Embracing tradition in a thoughtful way does not mean we are becoming conservative. It is time that we move beyond that kind of thinking. Reform Judaism combines a passion for social justice, ever evolving worship and learning. Our new prayer book Mishkan Tephillah symbolizes a blending of traditional and contemporary readings. God is now gender neutral and the English transliteration makes reciting the Hebrew accessible to all.

I understand and respect how sometimes we feel frustrated like Moses in the classroom of the future when we hear music we do not recognize in our liturgy or when we try new rituals that we never did in our youth.

But let us not lose faith that what we are doing is consistent with Reform's principles that the revelation of Sinai continues to flow to each new generation that rediscovers itself. That lesson is what Moses had to learn when, at first, he sat dazed and frustrated at what he was hearing in the classroom of the future.

There is a wonderful quality of Judaism that enables us to raise at Beth Yam as a big tent that not only welcomes Jews from various backgrounds but also welcomes non-Jews from diverse religious traditions. Some come with their spouses and raise their children as Jews. Others maintain their earlier faith traditions. Still, others chose to become Jewish. Our congregation has and will continue to welcome all of them whether it be in the pew, on the bimah, inside the classroom or in the social life in the congregation. Yes, this is not the traditional model that we know from 2000 years of Jewish history, but it is the model that we have accepted and that Reform Judaism embraces.

How will we know that the pathway we took was the right one?

Dear friends, we can see that Judaism is changing not only in terms of the makeup of our Jewish demographics but also in the spiritual aspirations of the people. We all know Jews who define themselves exclusively by their secular ethnicity and who insist that they do not need Judaism as a religious system. Admittedly, we are a people with a rich literary heritage and folkways, and culinary delights. But it is not enough today to sustain us and our progeny into the future. The days when we could claim Jewish identity from our socialist workman circle heritage are gone just like Yiddish as the language we spoke when we arrived in this country. Cultural Judaism alone is not enough to sustain us. There must be a blending of religion and culture for Judaism to thrive in America. Israel and the Holocaust are critical but not enough either to grow new generations. The twentieth century was about teaching Jewish immigrants and their progeny to become American while still holding on to Jewish identity. The twenty first century must be about teaching the assimilated grandchildren and great grandchildren of those brave immigrants to

discover what it means to be a Jew. At Beth Yam we have work to do with our modest Sunday and Hebrew schools to accomplish that task. We need everyone's support to demonstrate that it can be done.

There is a great organization in our community called VIM-Volunteers in Medicine. The temple is its own Volunteers in Judaism. We are all experts by virtue of our life experience. At the same time there is still more for us to learn and share with each other. What we need to do is to recognize that being different or having different experiences as Jews does not mean we cannot see the blessings and welcome that learning from another person's experience. Sure, we want to be comfortable with the familiar as we age. Sometimes that makes us resist change particularly in later years.

Of course we want stability and continuity, but isn't part of the fun of living here that we are meeting new people and seeing how we can make new friends in our retirement years? That is part of the joy of life and it is no different when it comes to religion either. Can we embrace the fact that our congregation's diversity elevates and enriches us?

Conclusion:

Moses stood at the beginning of Judaism but he really worried about its future. Maybe he did not have faith that the future would carry on with what he had started. The story from the Talmud of his trip to the future was meant to assure him and to give him faith to know that Israel would survive. Our people would surely take what he had bequeathed to them and preserve it. It may take different forms and shapes. It may even be unrecognizable at first but in the end it would be the authentically Jewish message. We could all rest easy knowing that fact.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his book, *God in Search of Man*, put it best when he wrote:

"What is at stake in our lives is more than the fate of one generation. In this moment we, the living, are Israel. The tasks begun by the patriarchs and prophets, and carried out by countless Jews of the past, are now entrusted to us. No other group has superseded them. We are the only channel of Jewish tradition, those who must save Judaism from oblivion, and those who must hand over the entire past to the generations to come. We are either the last, the dying Jews or else we are those who give new life to our tradition. Rarely in our history has so much depended upon one generation. We will either forfeit or enrich the legacy of the ages."

That is exactly what Moses was worried about to enrich Judaism for the future. That is the question of these high holy days for us as a community. What generation are we? We answered that question last August with the construction of a new synagogue. Is it enough? We need everyone's involvement to be the part of the generation that could say that we in the low country did our part in body and spirit to enrich Judaism for the future. That vision should apply to the future children and grandchildren. This hope should include the future retirees that are planning and dreaming of the moment when they too will enjoy the fruits of their labors in Hilton Head. We have a future before us that is bright, and a vision that should carry us into a future with children and grandchildren. Their inheritance will depend on what we do now. How shall we respond?

### ***Introduction***

I had arrived at the wedding hall where I was to perform the ceremony. The bride was crying and the groom, dressed in jeans and sport short, refused to go on with the service. The issue was the prenuptial agreement. After conducting what seemed to me like endless circles of shuttle diplomacy between the wedding parties, I ultimately performed the ceremony. Of course that all blew apart like dust in the wind when the bride called me the next day to inform me that they were separated which led in turn to their getting a divorce. How did something that seemed so good when I first met them turn into a nightmare within a period of weeks? And no matter how I tried to resolve their concerns, the truth was that the will to listen and to compromise on both sides was not there.

The problem here is about poor communication. Poor communication is not always about not enough communication. It can also be about an overexposure of communication between couples and more so in our society especially in the square of public opinion.

We add to that the technology frills of twitter and Facebook which can in a matter of hours create a national issue from coast to coast or lead to cyber bullying in our young people's school culture. Then turn on the television and watch cable news wars and observe the combative sparring of conflicting political opinions, an IED of spontaneous outrageous statements which like shrapnel could explode across the airwaves. The reasons for this lust for conflict go much deeper than a political culture on steroids. It is about, at least in my estimation, a spiritual malaise or deflation of mutual respect for the integrity and dignity of human beings all over our country. The rabbis say, "In a place where people do not act right, strive to be a human being." In other words this maxim is now a call to action for a restoration of civility in our society today.

If the problem is an increasing pattern of incivility then what can we do to restore mutual respect in the world we live in? We must balance between freedom of speech and responsible speech, and to do so there are three critical rules for civil debate and constructive listening that we must observe. One, do not indulge the temptation to demonize the other. Two, before making judgments about another person's viewpoint or that person's character, make sure we have the facts. Three, perceptions or snap judgments about people without adequate thought and reflection do not equate with truth. Today we want to talk about these issues and their impact not just upon our freedom of speech but upon the obligation to be responsible when we speak directly or indirectly with people we disagree with or those who have antagonized us.

If religion is supposed to stand for any fundamental value, it is surely not to hate. Judaism teaches us to take the moral high ground. The high holy Days are all about asking hard questions. Sometimes that means separating the wheat from the chaff in deciding whether public leaders have credibility. Other times asking hard questions means being open and honest with ourselves about how we conduct our lives. It is easy to attack the culture of political debate that appears more often like a food fight than high minded discourse. Is it not a different and more complicated challenge recalling some of those moments this past year when we may have succumbed to harsh words and brief spurts of unrestrained emotions that did not represent the best of ourselves? Or did we pull inward to the point where we became so self absorbed or lost from listening to and responding to the needs of our loved ones?

***Point One***

To demonize someone is to create a destructive narrative around them that becomes their defining frame of reference. We all know this because we have been doing this since we were kids. Some of us may have felt the frustration of not being able to break free of rumors and accusations that have followed us around.

In the Torah we see how Joseph is demonized by his brothers who see him simply as a spoiled brat and a threat to their well-being. The jealousy, fear and envy of his brothers led to his being kidnapped and sold into slavery. Maybe less obvious is the case of Esau. I think he was demonized as the boorish brother of Jacob. The truth may have been that he should have been portrayed as the brother who never got a fair deal. In the end of the stories of Jacob and Esau when they met up after years of separation when Jacob fled to Haran to save his life after having tricked Esau and Isaac out of the Patriarchal Covenant. It was Esau who acknowledges the painful past and bid Jacob peace as he moved on. Certainly Esau, who we liken to the evil powers of Rome in later Talmudic stories, did not appear to be a revenge seeking sibling, out to settle a score with a brother who connived to cheat him out of a birthright that was his due. In the end both biblical characters experienced the unmistakable feelings that the dye had been cast against them.

We see this demonization process gone completely haywire when it comes to our nation's presidents. It is one thing to disagree and condemn the judgment of a president on a particular issue. But I fear we are losing total respect for the office of the president when we become sidetracked and distracted onto issues that have nothing to do with a presidents' job performance. Where is the verbal restraint towards and respect for the dignity of the office of the president of the United States of America? When we reduce ourselves to the kind of school yard gossip against a sitting president it not only tarnishes the credibility of our nation but it also opens a door that says there are no more rules and manners for respect of any office or any person in this country. That goes from the president to the public school teacher.

The problem is we are turning into a society that doesn't care if what people say about our neighbor is hurtful, true or false? How can that kind of behavior be consistent with Judaism?

***Point Two***

The High Holy Day Siddur contains a statement of about the sin of prejudging a situation. "For the sin we have sinned against You -For the sin of making judgments without the facts." I immediately thought of that sin when I watched the unfolding drama of the USDA employee Mrs. Sherrod who was demonized and thrown under the bus for the alleged racist remarks she made at a NAACP meeting over a decade ago when she referred to helping white people to keep their houses in rural Georgia. This speech was preserved on UTube. The speech was delivered years ago and was a reflection about how she had overcome her own prejudices. The USDA, the White House and the NAACP summarily made a snap judgment that she was a racist based upon the film clip they watched on line provided to them by a political blogger and then summarily called for her resignation. Well, we all know the result of that deliberative process. It turns out that they all had egg

on their face. They were all wrong. Worse. They succumbed to the temptation to demonize and made a judgment without knowing the facts. A sin.

This case of jumping to conclusions without the facts reminds me of the story of this morning's haphtarah of Hannah. She is desperate to conceive a child. This story appears in the book of Samuel. She is upset and despondent. She goes to the temple which then was located in Shiloh and seeks divine intervention to enable her to become pregnant. As she is praying in her own voice, quietly uttering her own private prayers, the chief priest of the shrine Ely arrives. He watches her from a distance and because of the distance he erroneously decides that she is not sincerely praying but is in fact drunk and profaning the shrine and God. He intervenes and reproaches her, only to discover, that he was wrong.

We make judgments everyday about people and events in our lives. But the real issue is whether we have the facts. The community center and Mosque near ground zero has become a tragic example of a kind of melee that can result when we jump to conclusions without the facts and demonize all sides based upon our cherished values. Obviously it is possible to have conflicting opinions as to whether this structure should be built. There are many reasonable people who differ on this very point.- but does anyone here really know the facts behind the legal and the political process that preceded the decision to approve the construction of this building? What was also disappointing is the reactive nature of all sides from those who incessantly rang the bell of freedom of religion to defend the Muslims to those who blindly intoned the chant of freedom of speech and assembly opposing the structure's location and the fear of Islam, to those who callously put on display the raw pain of families who lost their loved ones in 9-11 as a political tool and finally, the Muslim community, which was not immune from capitalizing on the shock and the visceral reaction to this project and then questioning whether America will accept Muslims?

We need dialogue away from media mongers and demonizing political opportunists. People of good faith and the real stakeholders need to sit down and work this problem out in private and come out united to the public in order for this issue be resolved.

### ***Point Three***

People say perception is reality. The problem with that statement is not that it is not accurate. The problem is that when we no longer distinguish between truth and falsehood then have we not betrayed the values we hold sacred?

The rabbis say Al Tistakel Bakankan Eleh mah sh'e yesh bo. Do not look only at the outside of the bottle rather what is inside it that really counts. That is the message of Judaism when we say people are created in the image of God.

Why couldn't Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the former Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, learn that lesson? The other day he was quoted in the press on a Shabbat sermon as saying that the Palestinians, including the PA leader Mahmoud Abbas, should perish. That kind of statement, if press reports are accurate, coming from a prominent rabbi cannot, in the end, be helpful to the process of winning the peace for Israel.

We are on a slippery slope when perceptions become reality and then slide into a misguided version of truth. And what I have tried to say to us today is that when we have

fallen victim to emotions and to our opinions without being fair-minded on issues or on people then are we any better than those we condemn? The lack of civility in the public square is a forewarning of what could be a severe deterioration of public manners and conduct throughout the nation. The Torah says, 'Derech Eretz Kadmah LaTorah, Good manners takes precedence over the Torah itself.'

### ***Conclusion***

The one prayer that the rabbis chose for us to read during silent meditation is (insert prayer). Out of all the prayers that the rabbis had to choose from they decided on a prayer to God to cause to not be destructive in our speech and to resist the temptation to respond to those who speak against us. They understood in ancient times how unrestrained vicious feelings and lack of regard for the dignity of our neighbor, even one we could not stand, could ignite a tinder box of instability in any Jewish community.

In addition none of the Jewish movements have changed this prayer. Did our sages see the wisdom that religion is about lifting our souls to the moral high ground? Religion is about demonstrating our ability not just to speak freely but to be silent. Sometimes silence is the most powerful and mature response to anger. Responsible speech requires us to avoid demonization, know the facts before we make judgments and discern between our perceptions and the truth. That wedding couple might have benefitted from these lessons and who knows if the marriage would have survived? Religion is supposed tame our emotions and provide guidance for living.

Dr. Abraham Heschel wrote "What is required is a continuous effort to overcome hardness of heart, callousness and above all to inspire the world with the biblical image of man, not to forget that man without God is a torso, to prevent the dehumanization of man. For the opposite of human is not the animal. The opposite of human is the demonic." (No religion is an Island)

The opportunity for us is to honestly evaluate the times we used words as weapons to hurt. Did we give our emotions and feelings a launch pad to take out anyone we deemed a target? Can we start afresh to not only give up the habit but to show that our best instincts and noblest conscience can triumph and make God's judgment of humanity on this Yom Kippur a joyous act?

***Introduction:***

The prophet Isaiah said concerning the future of ancient Israel. "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it and many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways that we may walk in his paths for out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations; and shall decide for many peoples." This is the Israel I know. This is the Israel that Jews have hoped for over 2000 years. This is the Israel that Isaiah, Jeremiah and the rest of the prophets dreamed. But is this the same Israel that Time magazine characterized as self indulgent and uninterested in peace?

Israel is very much on our minds these days, especially with peace negotiations getting underway. We read articles, most recently in Time magazine, that question whether Israel even cares about making peace with its Arab neighbors. Many other scholarly articles and the public media demonstrate a certain degree of skepticism about Israel's intention to pursue peace while others even compare us to South Africa in its apartheid days. Military leaders declare that the key to peace for America is Israel making peace. The political climate has changed decisively, and we are at a point where Israel's adversaries can now say that Israel is the chief impediment to America's campaign against terrorism. That is a lot of pressure and I am sure that we in the American Jewish community and the Israelis themselves feel it, particularly when peace negotiations are portrayed by media commentators as doomed to failure.

What is ironic here is that, once again, Israel is seen as the world's problem child. Why is it ironic? Because what started out in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the Jewish question for what to do with millions of Jews in Europe became, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Final Solution to the Jewish problem. Now that we have Israel, we still remain a question but instead of the choices of assimilating us into European society or keeping us in ghettos, or gassing us in the concentration camps the issue is now whether Israel is the cause of all the unrest in the Middle East. When does the image of the Jew as the problem go away?

How do we cope with this perennial image of the Jew as the problem for the world? It doesn't seem to matter that Israel is a dynamic society and a powerhouse in technology that it is making our world a better place to live in or that Israel extends its hand to the needy, most recently in Haiti. The perception still hovers over us like a dark cloud that never lets the sun shine.

The answer to this question takes us back to the Torah itself when God declares that we are a stiff necked people. It is both a blessing and a liability. Yet, if we remain stubbornly committed to our core values we can withstand the currents of self doubt, resentment and cynicism that could infect our spirit. Yom Kippur means we stand before God, humbly, and without defenses taking off our armour. Today we reflect and rededicate ourselves to the values of peoplehood, not ethnicity. However, we also dedicate ourselves to a sacred purpose that has protected and sustained us despite history's tyrants and longstanding prejudices against us. Is it possible that if there is anything we can atone for it is that we

may have neglected that memory of our fortitude and faith? We need it now for Israel more than ever.

The first point we face now and have faced, for two millennia: namely, that the world sees us simply as the problem. The second point is that modern Jewish history taught us that we must decide what defines us rather than allow the world to define who we are and what we are about. The third point is that we cannot stand on the laurels of our recent past, instead, we have to educate our own people, particularly the young generation about why Israel is still unique and worthy of our support. The truth is that there will always be nations who perpetuate these prejudices against Israel and Jews in general but that unfortunate fact should not sour us on the privilege of being a Jew, or the inalienable right of Israel to exist as a proud nation that is always in search of peace with its neighbors.

***Point One:***

If we travel back in time, even then our sages lamented the fact that the world saw no place for us in the family of nations. The rabbis were struggling with the same issues of how to reinforce faith in the people despite all that transpired against the Jews. In other words, even then our sages lamented the reality that the world constantly was picking on us. However, they tried to reconcile this observation with the belief that suffering was the only means by which Israel could be made to feel the need for repentance. And of course, the rabbis told the same story, the Jews were always in the middle of either controversy or chaos but waiting out the storm was our best hope.

But whether we are the cause of our own problems or whether or not these sages tried to make sense to their people of why the world felt so threatened by our existence. Were we simply being tested by God? We cannot ignore the fact, instilled in us over thousands of years, that the world is often our adversary. Today, theologians like Elie Wiesel have rejected the traditional theology that our suffering would lead to our return to God. But this was the way these sages followed to make sense to their people why the world continually was hostile to the Jewish people. And so we ask again, what has changed?

***Point Two:***

In reading modern Jewish history, we see for the first time in 2000 years Jewish leaders in Europe advocated a revolutionary answer to the old problem of what to do with the Jews. It was to move them to Palestine which gave birth to Zionism. Zionism was born out of the conviction that European society would never really allow the Jews to assimilate successfully, and that if the Jews wanted to achieve real self-determination they would have to remove themselves from the Diaspora and emigrate to what was then Palestine. Only then, Herzl and his fellow Zionists believed, would the Jews be able to shape their own destiny rather than waiting to see what non-Jews would make of them.

In fact, the birth of Israel would eventually also give birth to a new image of the Jewish people. The Holocaust was over and we had a new start to create a future that would completely reshape the image and substance of the modern Jew. The great thing is that we did what we set out to accomplish. The frustrating part was that our adversaries made us into the problem again. Instead of being vulnerable and the victims of greater powers,

Israel's military prowess provided its enemies with an opportunity to portray it as the bully of the Middle East, endlessly oppressing the Palestinians. From the wars with its Arab foes, to the Intifada, to the recent confrontation with a pro-Hamas flotilla, Israel has fallen prey to the propagandists today who have succeeded at shifting the debate away from Arab terrorism towards Israeli abuse of human rights. Once again we are the problem of the world.

The widow of Anwar Sadat told me that if only Israel would give us the West Bank, 95 percent of the violence would end. I responded, "Along with Israel too. Right?" Again modern history will tell the story of the resurrection of the Jewish people in the previous century. It is a miracle story. At the same time the pundits have changed the rhetoric but the message is the same. We are the cause of Middle East terrorism and its ripple effects that circle round the world. Has anything really changed?

***Point Three:***

Now what does the future look like for Israel? Obviously we cannot rest on the laurels of earlier generations of what Israelis and world Jewry achieved. We have left the ghettos of Europe and we have broken the chains of being second class citizens in the Islamic world. We are free and we now have decisions to make for investing in the future of our people. The biggest mistake we can make is to think that our children and grandchildren understand Israel the way that we do. They do not. Don't mistake me when I say this because there are birthright and other fantastic programs for teens and college students for experiencing Israel.

The other truth is that many we do not see going on these trips are increasing in number. I know I have said that Israel is not the core of their Jewish identity for most young Jews today. But we must recognize that more assimilating Jews are caught up in American life than having grown up witnessing the life and death struggle for existence that we did over the last sixty years.

This entire means is that our work is not yet done. We have work to do to bring more of the culture of Israel to the shores of America. We have more work to do to help our synagogues save up money to send kids to Israel. This is why we are planning a congregational trip to Israel in the fall of 2011. We have more work to do to motivate our own children and grandchildren to get them to show interest in a summer trip or to connect a more active Jewish life with increased involvement in Israel.

And we have even more work to do if we want to change our neighbor's minds about what is really happening in Israel today. In a recent cover essay in Time magazine, Israel was portrayed as a country of self-satisfied materialists who feel no urgency about negotiating a peace treaty with the Palestinians. It created an image of the Jew as disconnected from spiritual or moral values and instead presented Israelis as content with their lot and having given up on peace. Now it is not our military prowess that makes us the problem, it is, instead, Israel's narcissism and preoccupation with prosperity, we are told, that make it apathetic about peace. Once again, we're the problem and no one else. Has anything really changed?

Yom Kippur Day - 2010  
Rabbi Brad Bloom

For 2000 years, the Jewish people never took up a sword against the world. Our right to survive and fight for that survival took its toll upon us too. After the triumph of the 67 war, then chief of staff General Yitzhak Rabin, of blessed memory, wrote in a book of conversation by Israeli soldiers from the 67 war.

“The joy of our soldiers is incomplete and their celebrations are marred by sorrow and shock. There are some who abstain from all celebration. The men in the front lines were witness not only to the glory of victory but the price of victory; their comrades who fell beside them bleeding. The terrible price which our enemies paid touched the hearts of many of our men as well. It may be that the Jewish people never learned and never accustomed itself to feel the triumph of conquest and victory, and we receive it with mixed feelings.”

And this is the people, according to Time magazine, who are uninterested in peace? Despite all the political obstacles, the leaders and the state of Israel will never forgo an opportunity for peace and reconciliation with its neighbors.

***Conclusion:***

The truth is not an easy thing to accept. Old prejudices die hard, and there is little prospect of anti-Semitism disappearing from our world. It is part of the neighborhood we live in as Jews.

But there are moments like this day of Yom Kippur when as the parasha says, “You are standing this day before the Lord your God, to enter in the covenant of the Lord your God.” We cannot lose that unity God instilled in us and that history has welded into our souls. Every generation has the responsibility to bequeath the Torah and its teachings to the next generation. We have fought to define our collective fate. We have fought and died to clear the pathway for freedom that eluded us for 2000 years. We have fought through history to this hour and we cannot succumb to those old prejudices. Israel is not a perfect nation. The Jewish people never presented themselves as perfect. We are just as vulnerable to sin and error as any other people. But having said that the Jews would return to their ancestral home and make that home the place that every generation of Jews has dreamt of since the first generation stood at Sinai. That has been the single moral imperative of our people.

Elie Wiesel tells the story of Yom Kippur in the Moscow synagogue when Soviet Jews lived their Judaism in secret. It was at Neilah the congregation was chanting the last Avinu Malkeinu petitioning God to seal us in the book of life. The entire congregation recited the Kaddish then the cantor proclaimed “God is the Lord!” seven times and brought out the shofar and sounded the Tekiah. The congregation held its breath and then it happened. The three thousand Jews standing in the synagogue looked up into the visitors’ gallery looking into the eyes of representatives of Israel looking directly into their eyes, as if trying to read in them their past and their future, the secret of their existence. Then in the awful mounting silence, they suddenly burst into a wild spontaneous cry which seemed to issue from a single throat, a single heart: “Next Year in Jerusalem. Next year in Jerusalem! Next year in Jerusalem!”

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I want you to imagine for a moment that your child comes to you and says, “I have decided what I want to do with my life? I intend on being a prophet.” Your child goes to prophet school and graduates. After the first year on his or her first assignment, your child has defied the word of the Almighty, fled on a boat only to be thrown into the ocean, swallowed by a giant fish in whose belly it remains, washed ashore in a land whose people it hates, only to see that people respond to a call for national repentance. Your child, out of protest and sheer exhaustion, leaves the city and finds rest under a shade tree which God then makes disappear, leaving this rookie prophet to burn under the heat of the Middle Eastern sun. Finally to add insult onto injury, God tells your child that no one will ever quote a word of actual prophesy for the rest of his or her career. Now what would be your advice to your child regarding his/her prospects in the field of biblical prophecy?

Yet that was the fate of the prophet Jonah whose entire book we read in the afternoon service of Yom Kippur. Just when we are the most famished and exhausted anticipating Yizkor and Neilah, we read the entire book. There are no great literary statements or maxims that we can intone like the poetry of any other of the major or Minor Prophets. We are not sure whether to empathize with him or laugh at his predicament nor is the story itself clear about its meaning. Yet, it is there and it remains a fixture of our Yom Kippur liturgy and so it beckons to us to figure out what message it might contain for us on Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur is about trying to influence God to forgive us. Maybe from God’s point of view, Yom Kippur is a test to see just how rebellious humans can be before God decides enough is enough. Maybe it is a story about why even a prophet deserves a stern lesson on getting his priorities together? In other words, we can run away from the truth for as long as we want and no matter how honorable we think our reasons are, in the end, God will point out the hypocrisy of our ways.

The best lesson I learned about the book of Jonah is from Elie Wiesel. He says; “The lesson in Jonah is that nothing is written, nothing is sealed: God’s will may change. Every human being is granted one more chance, one more opportunity to start his life all over again. Just as God has the power to begin, man has the power to continue by beginning again and again.” That lesson is part of the beauty of Judaism. It is a tradition that gives humankind the ability to make repentance real and to renew ourselves.

What other holy day besides Yom Kippur is better suited to a story which teaches that even a prophet needs to reassess his role? And ultimately it is Jonah who learns that lesson the hard way. He learns it for our sake.

***Point One:***

God bids Jonah to travel to the capital of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Assyrian empire in Nineveh to warn its inhabitants to repent before God destroys their city. Yet, unlike any other prophet, Jonah refuses and boards a ship to Tarshish. We do not know why he chooses this path. The text tells us nothing. The next major scene is while he is on the boat to Tarshish a level four storm arises. The crew is convinced that God is punishing someone on board. Jonah is awakened and proclaims, “I am a Hebrew.” They draw lots and he finally demands to be

the one to be thrown into the raging sea. Is Jonah a fatalist or does he realize at last that the spirit of God is inescapable?

The next scene has Jonah in the water with God sending a whale to save him by swallowing him up whole. He resides inside this mammoth mammal for three days and three nights. Finally after appeal to God, the Holy One frees him from the fish. Somehow Jonah is able to reach dry land and proceeds to the city of Nineveh. He prophesies in God's name and the people heed his call to repent. The irony about it all is that instead of being happy for their repentance Jonah, is angry and upset that he succeeded. He leaves for the outskirts of the city and builds a makeshift shelter which protects him from the unrelenting Middle Eastern sun.

Then the climax of the story occurs. Miraculously a plant grows above his head providing him with shade. Now Jonah relaxes and is happy. By dawn a worm devours the plant and the heat beats down upon Jonah. He wants to die because of the heat. Then God ends the story by ridiculing Jonah for being a hypocrite. God tells him, 'You call yourself a prophet? You felt such pity for the plant that is now gone but not an ounce of compassion for the people of Nineveh? Come on Jonah.'

Frankly Jonah is hard to fathom. How could he succeed at the prophetic mission at Nineveh but fail at getting the big picture from God? It is one thing to say to God, "I am not worthy of the mission." Moses and other prophets tried to convince God to find someone else. But Jonah does not reject the mission he rejects God. Is he delusional by actually believing he can avoid God's will?

One interpretation is that Jonah is not afraid to fail on this mission. He is, instead, afraid that he will succeed at convincing the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser and the citizens of Nineveh to repent.

For that reason, and because his own people refuse to change their ways, Jonah chooses to arouse the ire of God rather than face the humiliation of a gentile nation hearing the word of an Israelite prophet when his own people will not. So here, according to this view, Jonah chooses Israel over God. Does that make him a worthy of our respect?

One other view sees Jonah's actions as a protest against God creating the rules of the moral order. God says repent or be destroyed. Jonah is saying life is not that simple. Nations do not all of a sudden decide to change their ways. People, on an individual basis, are no different. They mostly change a little bit at a time. In other words, a person sins and then repents. Each year people make incremental progress. Even then Jonah was telling God, 'your choices don't work for me. The repentance of Nineveh proves nothing. This isn't the Noah story where you wipe everyone off the planet because you think there is no hope! That way of thinking will not work anymore with me!'

Instead of being subservient and compliant like Noah, Jonah's actions to avoid preaching at Nineveh is actually his way of protesting the way God metes out justice in the world. Jonah sides with humanity instead of God. Judgment is not an all or nothing proposition.

***Point Two:***

I love the tension in the tug of war between prophet and God in Jonah. Jews like the struggle to challenge God. We relish a good fight against God's view of justice. We stand up and quote God's scripture back to the Eternal One. We can bargain, cajole, threaten and walk away from God. We can rationalize, philosophize and satirize God just to show that our will shall not submit to that of the Holy One without a fight. But at the end of the day, will our words change the outcome of a divine commandment? Will our petitions persuade God to hold back divine justice and settle on the side of compassion? The answer is yes, at least according to Wiesel. From the book of Jonah the answer is, we can resist God and even succeed at tempering God's justice for a while but that short term success carries a price to pay.

There are people who pay that price not by their failure in life but like Jonah, by fear of success on the outside. It may sound trivial, but I know of a person who met his financial success with trepidation because he feared that his financial prowess would ignite a fight in the extended family. He saw it coming that the money would divide the family between the haves and the have-nots. The family business success story in the short run, would eventually lead to the division of the family in the long run. The person remarked to me, 'but what am I supposed to do sabotage my own success and hard work? My success will show up my brother who never made it in the world.'

Jonah is conflicted as well. He looks bereft and stunned at having God put him in his place. We do not know what happens to Jonah. The book tells us nothing and there is nothing else in the Bible that we can draw upon to speculate about the rest of Jonah's life. Is it possible, though, that our imagination could pick up from here the rest of the story? Maybe we need the struggle to make sense of the things we cannot control even though we may be smart and have common sense and good morals, there are times when we don't get it right. And when that happens it really stings when we feel as if God says to us, "You're not so great!" Then we discover that maybe it is time to rethink our ways and start over.

***Point Three:***

It had to be humbling for Jonah when God tells him that, in effect, his priorities were in the wrong place. But since we have no further record of Jonah's life, we can only speculate if he learned anything. Maybe he returned to his homeland and prophesied to Israel using the Nineveh experience as leverage to convince or embarrass Israel to atone for its transgressions. It would have been the perfect opportunity for Israel and Jonah himself to start over.

Contending with God's will can be tricky business but maybe that is the way many of us grow in wisdom. It is not the glory of professional success or the skill of our instincts and savvy that earns us the greatest rewards. And beware when we feel that tingle of self righteousness and confidence which reassure our moral and intellectual acumen. Maybe it all comes down to the moment when we delude ourselves into thinking we have done right and then face the reality that we have misunderstood what we were supposed to be doing

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all along. The moment of recognizing that misjudgment is a rude awakening. Painful lessons seem to be the only way people grow.

The brilliance of Jonah is that he exposes his own weakness and allows that to become a teachable moment for us if we can learn the lesson from his mistakes. We can start over and have a second chance if we have the humility to see where we went wrong. Painful but necessary.

There comes a point in time when a person must be prepared to admit mistakes. Jonah learned that lesson. He was not a bad man, nor even a particularly selfish one. He was just caught up in the moment and could not see the big picture. How difficult that is for us to see the big picture of how what we are doing in the here and now fits into a broader portrait of our life's purpose.

The struggle within ourselves is part of the Jewish ethos of God wrestling. This idea comes out of the Mahzor for Yom Kippur this morning.

“How to realize the divine image in me—there is the question and the answer. Surely it means to seek You more earnestly, to submit myself to Your will; to say to You; Here I am; mold me, guide me, command me, use me, let me be Your co-worker, an instrument of Your redemptive purpose.”

***Conclusion:***

Maybe our first reaction would be to counsel our newly ordained child who became a prophet to try another line of work given all the frustrations that accompany this first assignment. If we saw our child learn that getting up from being slapped down makes one wiser and a more experienced prophet, then we might not worry so much about his or her future.

That is what Yom Kippur is all about. It is the one time of the year when we stand before God not so self-assured and ready to answer the question from God that we never saw coming. In that selfsame moment, we will learn that teshuvah may hurt at first but in the long run it is the only chance we have to start our lives again.

Peter came into see me one day right before the holy days. He was a professor at the university who along with his wife and teenage daughter had immigrated from the former Soviet Union to America. I could see he was perplexed and was struggling to express himself fighting back the emotions which precipitated his visit to my study. What came out of that meeting was an experience of remembrance I shall not forget.

It appears that Peter had a falling out with his father back in the old country. The issues were never resolved. Years went by as Peter went on to his new life in America and with his career to become a university professor. At the same time, the unresolved nature of the relationship remained hidden but continued to nag at his conscience. In the beginning, the emotional impact was minimal but as Peter became ensconced in the American way and comfortable with his career and family, that inner conflict with his father grew.

Finally, a few months prior to our meeting in early September, his father passed on. He could not attend the funeral in Russia. This was the trigger that brought to the surface the underlying and unresolved tension. So Peter spoke to me, in an almost confessional tone, appealing to me for a solution to the guilt he felt on multiple levels. He wanted to apologize to his father. He wanted his father's forgiveness but it was too late. Peter asked, "Rabbi, isn't there anything Judaism says I can do to effect atonement with my father even though he is dead?"

I knew there was a little known answer to his plea, nevertheless, I bid him goodbye and made another appointment with him in a few days. I wanted to think about how I would present this idea for repentance and atonement to Peter. We met again and in that time frame I presented his option. I explained to him that Jewish law has guidance on this subject. When someone wants to make atonement about their actions to a person who is deceased, Jewish law presents a process whereby the individual will assemble a minyan (a prayer quorum), and visit the grave of the loved one. Standing over the grave of the deceased, the repentant confesses their transgression. The tradition says that God will then, hopefully, grant atonement and forgiveness.

Right before Yom Kippur we entered the Jewish cemetery in our community and stood by a tree since there was no grave. We had invited ten individuals to form the minyan that tradition required. I explained that the roots of the tree would be symbolic of the stretching of the spiritual roots back to the cemetery in Russia. Surrounded by the ten people, Peter intoned his sorrow and remorse for not visiting with his father and his deep sorrow for not doing his part to resolve those longstanding issues. His voice cracked and tears began to flow down his face. It was both a beautiful moment and a heartbreaking one at the same time.

Admittedly, I was not sure this ritual would be helpful. Yet, it was effective in helping Peter release the burden from upon him. We all felt that we were standing in the presence of God that afternoon. My sense is that Yom Kippur was a catharsis for him because he took that leap of faith.

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The circumstances were unique in this case, but, the feeling of guilt from unresolved issues between a parent and a child is, sadly, not too unusual. Years later I would experience that same feeling of guilt for not having been able to be by the bedside of my own father before his death. Surely some of us here today have this kind of experience or something similar to this burden in our past.

Maybe some of us are thinking that this kind of ritual found in the pages of Jewish law sounds a bit extreme. Others might be nodding their heads understanding full well how that this experience fit the occasion and met Peter's emotional and spiritual needs. It is hard to judge what is appropriate or not when it comes to saving someone who is pained by the circumstances of a loved one's death. But the lesson may be that being alone in one's grieving can only last so long because a mourner needs to share their grief with others.

Most of us have had the experience of mourning a loved one. We know what it is like to feel the emptiness. The guilt and the yearning for reconciliation if there was unfinished business with the departed can linger on in our heart for a long time. It has a corrosive effect upon us. We may try to overlook it but the emotions return over and over. If only for a few minutes we could bring them back and make peace for both souls, the living and the deceased. Then we could move forward in our lives. It is these kinds of moments that make us feel helpless.

Later on that week one of the members of the minyan remarked, "Rabbi, it was a touching moment for Peter. But who was he talking to? His father? God? No one? What is the point? The dead cannot hear us.

(Moshe of Kobryn) In the midrash, the rabbi sat down for a Sabbath meal and spoke to his congregants. "I see that all the words I have spoken have not found a single person who took them into his heart. And if you ask me how I know this, since I am neither a prophet myself nor the son of a prophet, let me tell you. Words that come from the heart go to the heart in all their truth. But if they find no heart that will receive them, then God shows mercy to the person who spoke them: God does not let them err about in space but they all return to the heart from which they were spoken. That is what has happened to me. I felt something like a thrust—and they all thronged back into my heart."

I thought of Peter when I read this midrash. Any time we think of the departed who cannot respond to our prayer we might wonder why even try to speak? What is the point?

This then is the moment when our words invoke the midat harahamim, the divine attribute of mercy to comfort us and help us have faith that our feelings return right into our hearts and souls. Our words for the departed resonate back into us and deepen our reservoir of faith that memory is alive even though the physical person has passed on. The words will never be lost or linger in the universe as a waste of our energy. They renew us and comfort us. That is why we need Yizkor and why the prayers we now utter will return to us and not be in vain.