

Erev Rosh Hashana – 2009
Rabbi Brad Bloom

Introduction:

Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Ishmael, Joseph and his brothers are all examples of how brothers in the Torah do not have the best record of building bonds of trust. Yet, sometimes just the right set of circumstances opens a possibility to transcend long time animosities. A story is told by Rabbi Huna that based upon a verse in Genesis, Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and went forth glad at heart. As he left God, Adam met him and asked, “What sentence was given you for killing your brother Abel?” Cain replied “I vowed repentance and was granted clemency.” Hearing this, Adam proceeded to strike himself in the face in self reproach, saying: “So, repentance has all this power, and I knew it not!” From that day Adam, according to the rabbinical tradition, went out and composed Psalm 92 a Song for the Sabbath.

One never knows how people can change or even make the smallest changes that lead to larger ones like Cain regretting his crime against his brother Abel. The possibility to do the impossible suddenly becomes a reality. In a crisis, people see new opportunities for getting along and working with each other in ways they themselves would never have anticipated.

A great example of this brotherly cooperation from unexpected corners inside the Jewish community is the case of Rabbis Robert Lowey and Uri Topolosky. Rabbi Lowey, a reform rabbi of the New Orleans based congregation, Gates of Prayer and Rabbi Topolosky, an orthodox rabbi and spiritual leader of Beth Israel, have entered into a new partnership that would have been unthinkable before Hurricane Katrina days.

Ravaged by Katrina, the Orthodox congregation found itself ten feet in water, knowing that returning to that location was probably out of the question. Rabbi Lowey and his congregation offered his colleague a short-term refuge in which to hold their services. As time progressed, the leadership of both communities developed a program for sharing the facility. And last week both groups announced that the reform congregation had given the go ahead for the Orthodox congregation to build a new synagogue on the property of Gates of Prayer.

We have experienced too much tumult this year, where bad news (as usual) seems to dominate all other, kinds of news. We read about war. We watch ethnic and political rivals destroy nations. We see how achieving peace, whether it is between Israel and its neighbors, or some other set of nations, seemed to be always eluding us. The collapse of the world economy brought more stress and disillusionment than hope to most of us. Yet there were stories about how we can overcome old rivalries that once blinded us to new thinking about how we can resolve old problems.

Is that tension between the almost instinctual pull of focusing on the trauma versus the wish to see good in the world not part of a deeper challenge we face today in a world that often times appears to be on the brink of implosion? What I have found is that it takes more time to find the stories of hope than it does to deal with a never ending rush of negativity. It takes more determination to look to places where people are building on good will. Even small or modest stories help move us forward. Those moments should not escape our attention.

Maybe there is a lesson in which events we direct our attention to. I think we forget that even a small opening of hope can expand into a whole new set of opportunities. The message here in the case of rabbis Lowey and Topolsky is that as Jews we never give up on bridge building between ourselves as well as with other peoples and faith traditions. But we should extend that lesson to how we should make the best on stories and events that offer us a glimmer of hope where people are working together and transcending old rivalries for a better world. If we believe, therefore, in the idea of Tikkun Olam- repairing the world- then we must somehow keep our hope alive.

First Point:

Of course, we should never close our eyes to suffering and injustice. Still, we must remain vigilant when dark clouds of war-and particularly nuclear war- begin to gather around us. We all acknowledge as Americans and as Jews who love freedom and our way of life the grave threat that Iran's theocracy poses to Israel and to the world. We can protest and raise our voices to continue pressure on the UN for sanctions against the Ahmadinejad regime."

We have seen how the American economy has set us back in profound ways not only on an economic basis but on a spiritual basis. In Florida, for example, where we see several people at every freeway exit along I-95 with signs asking for work and where the lines at food pantries extend for a quarter mile each day. We have seen how when thousands of college graduates cannot find jobs and end up cutting grass or up north shoveling snow , then we know that there is a rupture in the American dream. They along with all the others who have lost their homes say, "This is not the way it was supposed to go." That is an example of what contributes to a much deeper malaise in the American psyche. And we, especially our children and grown up grandchildren, are not immune from being enveloped by the circling dark clouds above us that lead to disillusionment.

Yes, and then we see the prominent role which some Jews have played in these financial scandals which has brought shame and embarrassment upon us. I have heard more and more people say, "This just isn't the same country I know America to be!" We have seen our great automobile industry, banking and financial institutions fail and receive tax payer bailouts and we wonder whether we are throwing away good money after bad.. Our country is now debating the solutions for Health Care and Health Insurance Reform and it is has brought out an ugly side of our national character that I believe many of us, regardless of our political affiliation, have been pained to watch on television. We see an America whose racial and ethnic diversity has become increasingly the target of fear mongerers and practitioners of slander and vitriol. Some have exploited that as a kind of call to arms to keep America the way it used to be. All these issues have led to a demonizing of one group or another and that is exactly how hatred and suspicion have fanned out across our nation and our world.

Point Two

It is so easy to be caught up in a downward spiral of cynicism and fear. And while we cannot simply stick our heads in the sand and hide from reality, we should not forget, at the same time, that there is a counterbalance of hope where people and even governments are making a difference.

One unique example of a small but significant step is in Egypt. Yes, does that surprise you to hear me mention this nation? But recently a report circulated in the press that the Egyptian government has been quietly, under the radar, rebuilding and refurbishing eight synagogues in Cairo and other locations. The news report showed pictures of the construction going on at the Moses Ibn Ezra synagogue, one that I visited, in which the greatest of Jewish philosophers, Moses Maimonides for example, attended in the 12th century. It has been in disrepair for too long.

Why is this happening? Our first reaction is that the Egyptians want tourist dollars from Jewish tourists. I am sure some of that is true. Other observers of the Egyptians see a political motive that has to do with the leadership of Egypt wanting some very prominent roles and positions coming up in the UN and they have to prove they are doing their best to promote peace and good relations with Israel and Jews as well. Now it is easy to say, 'that is not an authentic basis for peaceful relations.' And I would say, 'Wrong.' What brings an adversary to the table and makes peace is not love but self interest. And if that self interest is what it takes to keep peace then that is a good thing. I see hope here in a very small but significant symbolic way to open doors to Israeli tourists and others who will see the beginning of Egypt's reconciling with its own Jewish history and accepting it as a valuable asset in its culture not only for tourism but for its standing in the council of nations.

And let us not forget the pressure that these officials will experience from so many in a Muslim population that is profoundly anti-Semitic and anti-Israel. It is a small step in the long road to peace and reconciliation between Arabs and Israelis, but it is a step that never happened before. The case of religious pluralism at work in New Orleans is also a hopeful sign for inter Jewish relations. We are so busy defending ourselves against anti-Semitism in the world that we often forget the difficulties we have in getting along with our fellow Jews. Like the Israelis say, 'we fight against the Arabs, but our real fear is getting along with ourselves.' The same is true for us in America. There is no question that resentment and rivalry exists between Jews in America. Orthodoxy has been the big winner over the last thirty years. Their presence is felt in every Jewish community. We talk about one people and community but in larger communities our theological differences make it hard for different branches of Judaism to maintain healthy working relationships. Yet there are instances like New Orleans that defy the myopic tendency of fundamentalists in our own ranks who balk at such co-operative ventures.

I am sure that the orthodox rabbi has taken more than his fair share of criticism from his right wing outside of New Orleans. I have even read blogs where people across the country have condemned him for giving in to Reform and betraying Orthodox Judaism. Sad. Yet it is a reflection of our own internal struggle for unity and collaborative relationships within the Jewish community in America.

Again the case of Beth Israel and Gates of Prayer is a sign of hope that two completely opposite branches of Judaism can put aside theological differences and see a greater moral imperative in our common roots in the soil of Jewish peoplehood, enabling us to form partnerships without diminishing our commitment to do God's work each in our own way. The point is that what seemed to be impossible is now possible. A small opening of hope can usher in much wider opportunities for other cooperative relationships. Is this not what Jewish unity is all about?

Point Three

The big issues that make us wonder what kind of world we are leaving behind to our grandchildren will not go away. They challenge us on so many levels. War, economic downturns, natural disasters and so forth afflict every age and are part of the downside of civilization. At the same time, we see the small moments of hope that show us able to confront those threats to our way of life with hope and courage.

We have come a long way in history when we think about how many churches have offered their facilities to a new Jewish congregation. Now synagogues like ours are offering their facilities to churches. It serves the interests of both from a financial point of view. And it also forces both to understand and learn about each other's faith traditions. I am wondering if a day will come when mosques will host a worship service for a fledgling synagogue or church or one that was forced to leave their facility? Hope is there if we look for it.

We live in perilous times when storm clouds of hatred and mistrust hover over us. But our challenge is to summon the winds of hope to disperse these clouds. We are a Reform congregation with a wide spectrum of people from Conservative and even a few modern orthodox perspectives to interfaith families where both are practicing their faith traditions. It doesn't make it easy for us to make everyone happy at one time. But the strength of this temple has been its ability to maintain an open door policy and to remain inclusive and tolerant of differences. Our willingness to maintain an incredible spectrum of beliefs and practices should give us pride even when we do not always connect to traditions that are unfamiliar to us. But at the end of the day can we rise to the moral high ground? Do we have faith that what we are building at Beth Yam is right for us in order to be the congregation we need to be for the Jewish community in the low country? Is this big tent our achievement and our contribution to a world that desperately needs more stories of people who transcend differences and work for the common good?

Conclusion

Rosh Hashanah is about seizing the moment when it comes, improving ourselves and making changes in our lives. It isn't so easy to make those changes and some would say that most of us will not do anything more than sit in the services, go to the festive meals and simply carry on with life as usual.

Yet the rabbis say, according to Rabbi Yose, that God said to the Jewish people: "My children open to Me in penitence an opening as small as the eye of a needle, and I shall make an opening in me for you so wide that through it wagons and coaches could enter."

No doubt the world seems a lot like this parable. Small opportunities for progress can make all the difference. We know people are resistant to change and prefer to just move the real issues on to next year. This idea of postponing tough issues is pretty much expected, not only because of our human nature but also because of the way in which change is resisted by governments and societies throughout the world. Do we not tend to become jaded by so much travail and forget the good that is going on all around us?

Jews need to be hopeful not just for survival but to share what we have learned with others as well. Repentance is one piece of a mindset that says I can make a difference in the world. Even with a slight opening, we can usher in a new world view. May this year's High Holy Days be for us that opening we need to show ourselves and the world why this world is sacred and worthy of our best efforts keep it holy.

Shana Tova.