

Yom Kippur 2006 Talk

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Good evening! Let me start by sharing a thought with you: we dismiss the wisdom of old sayings at our own peril! For example the one about being careful what you wish for! This past July I attended a meeting of Beth Chai's Program Committee because I wished to be a part of the group that provides us with our stimulating Adult Education and our Sabbath lectures and discussions. There was a long list of possible topics for our consideration, among them guilt and obligation. There was a sub-head labeled 'Holocaust', and I remarked that I'm probably one of only a few of our members who was alive during the years of that tragedy. In short order I was recruited to share some of my thoughts on my obligation, if any, in connection with that monumental slaughter. So you see: I wished for a place on the Program Committee and I wound up *on* the program.

My family was lucky; both sets of my grandparents came to America around the turn of the twentieth century, so that we had no immediate experience of family loss. One exception was the arrival from Europe around 1936 or 1937 of one of my mother's first cousins who spoke only Yiddish, which I didn't understand, and who burst into frequent tears. I learned from my mother that she was worried about family that remained in Europe under some kind of threat, but mainly I recall that her tearfulness spoiled my pleasure in the visits with her young daughter. It's almost certain that many of her relatives did not survive the war and in retrospect I regret my childish irritation in the face of a tragedy I didn't understand until many years later. Cousin Frances, however, seemed to have had a quite clear foreboding of the horror that was beginning to unfold.

A few years earlier, just about when Hitler was elected Chancellor, in 1933 I think it was, I spent my after-school hours in the care of my paternal grandmother in a neighborhood in the Bronx populated by a number of families of recent German descent. My very closest friend Margaret, a few years older than myself, told me one day that her father had forbidden her to be my friend because I was Jewish. I was stunned, and at first it was difficult for us to remember to stay away from one another. Very soon, however, I saw that she looked at me with increasing hatred, and I usually felt compelled to drop out of any group game if Margaret arrived to play. I was also terrified of her kid brother, Russell, who, with his friends, menaced many of the little-girl games in which I participated. I can still remember after all these years, how like a victim I felt, even in that relatively benign situation.

By the time the War was well under way I was in my teens, a very young and relatively thoughtless college student, certainly not aware of Concentration Camps. Just about the time of the Allied invasion of Europe - - - D-Day was June 6, 1944 - - - my parents and I moved to Atlanta, where I was shocked by my first confrontation with the South's continuing racial bigotry of which I had been only dimly aware. In my immature mind the Emancipation Proclamation had solved the problem of slavery and that was that! You can imagine my surprise when I saw signs on rest rooms and drinking fountains stipulating 'Colored' and 'White', and I remember my feeling of moral superiority that the North didn't engage in that kind of discrimination.

During the weeks since taking on this assignment, I spent time in the library and on the Internet, reading books, essays and articles that I thought might be relevant in preparing this talk. I read “Embattled Selves”, our own Ken Jacobson’s gripping book, in which 15 men and women who survived Hitler’s “final solution” reveal their very individual reactions to their experiences, and while I found their stories riveting and often heart-wrenching, I did *not* find clues to help me determine what, if any obligation *I* have with regard to the Holocaust. Everything else I read gave me a wide perspective of thought and emotion on the events leading up to and including the Holocaust, as well as on its aftermath, but again, that wasn’t instructive to me in answering my own question.

I must tell you that having committed myself to this presentation I seem to have been hurled into a state of heightened awareness; everything I saw or heard or read took on special significance. I watched a wonderful documentary on Public Television on the history of the Jews, but I couldn’t help but note how often the forces of hate have threatened our survival.

And I read articles about the current resurgence of anti-Semitism; and I attended a reception at the Holocaust Museum for a new exhibition called “A Dangerous Lie: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”. For those of you who may not know, this hateful fiction about a secret conspiracy by the Jews to take over the world, frequently exposed as a fraud, continues to be re-born to provide fuel for anti-Semitism. It was originally published in Russia in 1903 and was finally officially refuted by Russia in 1993. Despite refutations by most governments of the so-called civilized world, the myth lives on.

I’ve also received many semi-hysterical emails on those occasions when newspapers published pictures of Muslims celebrating in the streets of their villages after violence had befallen Westerners, Americans or Israelis. Each time I was urged to be aware of the Muslim threat and join forces against it. The call to hate never seems to stop, and it comes from all directions

I watched “South Pacific” again a few weeks ago and I was moved again, as I had been before, by the words of the song that Bloody Mary sang, that “- - you have to be carefully taught” to hate. Its implications for what we teach our children are obvious.

But as I began putting some of these thoughts on paper, I realized that bigotry doesn’t really have to be carefully taught; casual learning happens easily and the results can be pretty insidious. I remembered my teenage smugness when I first went to the South and was appalled by the obvious discrimination I saw there. I hadn’t ever questioned the absence of people of color from restaurants and other public places in my enlightened North.

Speaking of teaching to hate: Did you know that part of the training our fighting troops receive before being sent into battle consists in dehumanizing the enemy by ridiculing them, giving them derogatory nicknames, and depicting them as animal-like and disgusting, to make it easier for the young warriors to kill without serious pangs of

conscience. It happened in Viet Nam and it's happening in Iraq, and that's exactly how Nazi Germany depicted the Jews before putting the "Final Solution" into full swing. And by the way, the process of dehumanization is a key ingredient of "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion".

Over the weeks it became apparent that evolving events were making it difficult for me to concentrate on the Holocaust. I was constantly being distracted by what's going on in today's world, and it gradually dawned on me that I can't really bear witness to the horrors that took place thousands of miles away when I was a child. After all is said and done I'm not sure that I have an obligation to that faraway event.

I concluded that the Holocaust has been well documented and continues to be examined and analyzed by historians and philosophers and psychologists. There are monuments and memorials and school curricula, all in some way fulfilling the obligation to honor the millions who died, those who survived, and those who took unbelievable risks in saving others.

Then, what *about* me? I'm a charter member of the Holocaust Museum; I've been to Israel three times, and was lucky enough to have been there at the 50th anniversary celebration of the liberation of the concentration camps; I assure you, that was a day to remember! And to the extent that I can afford it, I respond to requests from worthy charities, Jewish and otherwise. Do I have no other obligations?

What of Darfur? What about global warming? What are we doing about stem cell research? What about the resurgence of hostilities in Afghanistan? What about the continuing and escalating death toll in Iraq since our "mission accomplished" celebration more than three years ago? How do I react to the recent conflict between Israel and Hezbollah?

When my bowling league season got under way recently, I felt some of the confusion that I experienced as a 6-year-old when Margaret and I were forbidden to play together; some of my favorite people in the group are Lebanese, and reasonable or not, I wondered if current events might color our camaraderie! How must I respond to these ongoing national and worldwide issues?

To quote the modest Admiral James Stockdale, vice-presidential candidate with Ross Perot on the Reform Party ticket in October 1992, who said in his opening remark during the debate with Al Gore and Dan Quayle, "Who am I? Why am I here?" It must be told that those words caused considerable derisive laughter. He was a Viet Nam war hero, a returned prisoner of war and an academic, but he seemed out of his element in the role of candidate and debater. Happily I took the trouble to 'google' the transcript of the debate, and this is how Admiral Stockdale ended his opening statement: "Why am I here tonight? I am here because I have in my brain and in my heart what it takes to lead America through tough times."

SO WHO AM I? I'm an old-fashioned depression-era Roosevelt liberal democrat who

believes the government has responsibilities to its people as stated in the preamble to the constitution, and I think many of those responsibilities aren't being fulfilled.

AND WHY AM I HERE? Like Admiral Stockdale I believe I have it in my brain and in my heart not to lead, but to play my part in getting through the current tough time. It's my obligation to be alert to the demonizing of *any* group: Muslims, gays, immigrants [you name it] and to sound an alarm either in words or at the ballot box.

I'm here to tell you that Germany was a very weak country in the aftermath of World War I and the Nazis were able to seize and hold power by demonizing the Jews, as well as gypsies and homosexuals and other minorities, to the extent that they *literally* scared the wits out of the German people so that they became capable of doing all kinds of crazy things and justifying that craziness because the targeted enemy were considered to be sub-human and a serious threat to the well being of the German people. Does any of this sound familiar to you?

I already told you that our service people are taught to think of the enemy as less than human, and I think we can somehow comprehend the atrocities at Abu Ghraib in that context.

Now the debate rages about whether it's okay for the United States to torture detainees suspected of being terrorists. I entreat you not to support those who insist that 'harsh interrogation' is our only recourse in the 'war on terror'. I think we've already lost more than we can possibly gain with those tactics. You've heard all week about the leaked report asserting that our invasion of Iraq has spawned terrorists rather than getting rid of them. If you didn't read last week's Outlook section of the Post, I have it here for you.

You know, - - - I remember going to Europe for the first time in 1973 and feeling defensive about being an American because Richard Nixon was making a mockery of the Presidency. Now, I'm supposed to go to Europe again in a couple of weeks; and this time I'm *afraid* of being recognized as an American because we're so unpopular as a result of our President's bullying policies. The recent so-called 'agreement' about interrogation techniques falls far short of the mark, in my humble opinion, and I think we should let our legislators know that they must vigorously oppose the administration on this matter.

Now I want to report on a few items that encouraged me. Did you read the eulogy by an Israeli father to his son killed during the recent war between Israel and Hezbollah. He said that Uri, his son, was a man of values and a humanist and really sensitive to the distress of others, even if the other was his enemy. This father asserted that he had learned from his son that we need to defend not only our physical selves, but also our souls, against the surrender to what Uri called "the corruption of cynicism. Not to surrender to boorishness and contempt of others, which are the really great curses of the person who lives his entire life in a disaster area like ours."

Did you know that Judea Pearl, the father of Daniel Pearl, the journalist who was

beheaded by Muslim terrorists, and Dr. Akbar Ahmed, a Muslim native of Pakistan and professor at American University, both senior citizens, are traveling the world to engage in dialogues on the issues that divide Muslims and Jews? It's their way of trying to substitute communication for violence in a quest for a more peaceful world.

I'm here to tell you that people can learn *not* to hate, or at least not to act in hateful ways. Think of the about-face that South Africa has achieved; and savor the example of the "Truth and Reconciliation" concept. In a speech in South Africa in 1966, a couple of years before he was assassinated and at the height of apartheid, Bobby Kennedy, who certainly didn't start out as a liberal, but who was mellowed by time and experience, said the following: "Each time someone speaks up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, - - - and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but I'm here to urge you to believe in the power of one! And now I want to end with a personal story. Three years ago, - - - that's well after 9/11 and shortly after we invaded Iraq, after several years of tutoring with no credentials, I got some formal training with the Montgomery County Literacy Council, and agreed to take on a student who was housebound because of severe rheumatoid arthritis. When I discovered that she had recently arrived from Iran I found myself struggling with biases I was surprised to find in myself, and with the fear that this woman who I assumed to be a Muslim would reject me.

During these three years we have been meeting once a week for two to three hours at a time, always sipping the ever-present tea. It has been slow going because she lives in relative isolation amongst a large extended family that speaks Farsi as soon as there is more than one of them in a room. They are indeed Muslim, but the women don't wear head coverings and they do wear makeup. Over time I have met most of the family; I've helped her sons understand notices they brought home from school, and given advice when asked. I've helped my student navigate her Health Care system so that she was assigned a doctor that would prescribe one of the more effective medications for rheumatoid arthritis that the previous one had been denying her, probably due to cost considerations.

Gradually, as her grasp of English has grown, she and I have had long conversations about children and family and customs and food preferences and illnesses and other worries; you know: 'girl talk'. More than once I've shared a meal with her family, and if she had her way she'd feed me every time I walked in the door.

Eventually I was able to tell her that we Jews have the same urge to feed our guests! My being Jewish hasn't dampened her appreciation for me, and not only does she thank me and bless me profusely constantly, but so does the rest of her family. In turn, I truly love this Muslim woman.

My student's husband is not the easiest man to live with, and sometimes, when they're

going through a particularly trying time, she'll confide her frustration at feeling trapped in her marriage because her handicap makes her so dependent. It was some months ago that she was unburdening herself, and with tears in her eyes she reached across the table for my hand and told me, "I can talk to you about these things and I can trust you because you're my sister." Today happens to be her birthday, and the card I bought to accompany the gift I have for her reads, "to my sister".