

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah
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Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
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On Thursday November 9, 1989, President George H.W. Bush was sitting at his desk in the Oval Office in the middle of the afternoon when National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft came in to share news that would change the world: “The Wall has been opened.”

Following the triumph of the allies in World War II, German territories were divided into four occupation zones – the eastern portion controlled by the Soviet Union, and the western portions by the British, French, and Americans. Although Berlin lay completely within the communist sector, 100 miles from West Germany, the city too was divided into sectors – communist East and liberal West. Soviet Leader Nikita Khrushchev declared that West Berlin “stuck like a bone in the Soviet throat.”

Over the years, more than three and a half million people defected from East Germany to the West. In June 1961, some 19,000 people left East Germany for the West through Berlin. The following month, 30,000 fled. In the first 12 days of August, more than 18,000 crossed the border into West Berlin.

For Khrushchev, the time had come. Within two weeks, a crude wall of concrete block and barbed wire divided the city and became one of the most powerful symbols of the Cold War. Over the years, more than 100,000 Germans attempted to escape – 171 people were killed trying to flee. So on the night of November 8, 1989, when a government spokesman confirmed to Tom Brokaw that East Germans now had “freedom to travel”, thousands flocked to the wall with hammers and picks. It was an epochal event.

But President Bush’s reaction was muted. At a press conference in the Oval Office, Lesley Stahl of CBS News said: “This is a sort of great victory for our side in the big East-West battle, but you don’t seem elated...”

“I’m not an emotional kind of guy,” Bush replied.

“Well how elated are you?” she asked.

“I’m very pleased,” he said.

Very pleased? America had just effectively won the Cold War – Democracy had just triumphed over Communism. And President Bush says, “I’m very pleased.”

Everyone was clamoring for the President, the leader of the free world, to make a grand gesture declaring victory. “To acknowledge the tremendous significance of the destruction of the Berlin Wall,” said George Mitchell, the democratic Senate Majority leader, “I urge President Bush to travel to West Berlin.” Many called the president weak. Richard Gephardt, the House Majority Leader said that Bush was “inadequate to the moment.”

And still, Bush refused. You see, he understood that Mikhail Gorbachev’s efforts at reform involved significant risk, not just for him personally, but for the entire hope for a peaceful resolution to the Cold War. Just a few months before, the Chinese had violently quashed the protests in Tiananmen Square, and he did not want to provoke a similar Soviet response. He knew that if he went to Berlin for a victory dance on the rubble of the wall, it would pour gasoline on the smoldering embers of every eastern European capital that could ignite the entire region into flame.

And so, at great personal cost, he refused to press for his own personal advantage and gain. And because President Bush chose to exercise forbearance and restraint, the Cold War ended without a single gunshot.

There is a paradox to human life. On the one hand each of us is an individual – unique and separate. We see the world through our unique perspectives, formed and shaped through our individual collection of personal experiences and lessons we formed into our distinct set of beliefs, opinions, and ideas. But on the other hand, we are bound together in bonds of mutual destiny, bound in covenant to God and each other.

One of the greatest truths our people has contributed to the world is the idea that each and every individual life is of infinite value. The rabbis taught that in the beginning, the Holy One created swarms of Bees, Birds and Bears, but only one human being, in order to teach that to save a single human life is to save an entire world, but to destroy a single human life is to destroy an entire world. A human being, the Mishna teaches, mints coins and they all come out exactly the same, but the Holy One mints people ... and every one is unique. Therefore, each and every one is obliged to say, "For my sake the world was created."¹

And unfortunately, a lot of us are acting that way. Dominating our discourse is an incessant fixation with our rights – that we each ought to have the freedom to do whatever we want, however we want, whenever we want. We bristle and rail against the idea that we should have to limit our freedoms. And some go to horrible extremes. Last week in Arizona, a father and two men carrying zip-ties stormed into the office of an elementary school principal, threatening a citizen’s

¹ Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5

arrest because following county public health guidelines, the child was asked to quarantine for a week following a COVID-19 exposure. The FAA has recorded more than 4,000 incidents of abusive behavior directed toward flight attendants just since January – an increase of more than 400 percent from 2019. School board meetings and debates on college campuses devolve into indignant shouting matches. Ever more radical bills to secure partisan advantage pass through state legislatures – from laws to strip governors of executive authority, to extreme partisan gerrymandering, to restrictions on access to the ballot.

But in the incessant clamor over what are our rights, we have stopped asking an even more fundamental question: what are our duties? We spend so much time thinking about what we want for ourselves that we spend almost no time thinking about what we owe to each other.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,” reads our Declaration of Independence, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” But a century later in 1860, Italian philosopher Giuseppe Mazzini understood that we needed to balance the pursuit of one’s individual happiness with a sense of duty to those with whom we share our society. “With the theory of happiness as the primary aim of existence,” he wrote, “we shall only produce egoistic men. We have therefore to find a principle ... which shall guide men toward their own improvement, teach them constancy and self-sacrifice, and unite them with their fellow men.... And this principle is Duty.”²

Championing an ethic of interdependence, and a sense of our shared responsibility for each other, Mazzini taught, was the precondition for social improvement. “The sacred idea of Liberty has recently been perverted by some deeply flawed doctrines,” he noted. “Some have reduced it to a narrow and immoral egoism, making the self everything, and declaring the aim of all social organization to be the satisfaction of personal desires. ... Reject these false doctrines, my brothers! ... If you were to understand liberty according to these flawed doctrines, you would deserve to lose it... Your liberty will be sacred so long as it is guided by an idea of duty...”³

None of us is an island. In his “Letter From A Birmingham Jail”, Martin Luther King famously noted that “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

² References to Giuseppe Mazzini, *The Duties of Man* taken from “Rights vs. Duties: Reclaiming Civic Balance” by Samuel Moyn, Boston Review - <https://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/samuel-moyn-rights-duties>

³ Ibid.

We who share in this worship service celebrating the New Year are individual parts of a greater whole. We are members of families, neighborhoods, communities, a congregation, cities, counties, states, nations – a world. Who we are and what we do individually affects everyone else – not just those we know and see, but those we will never meet because they live across the globe, and because they have yet to be born.

The fact is that the world we live in is interwoven and interconnected – and we need to learn that strength is to be found not just in asserting our own rights and dominating the other, but in tempering our own drives with forbearance and decency. This has been the core essence of our tradition for millennia. I may want something but I may not steal. It might be to my advantage to lie, but I have to tell the truth. It would certainly be to my benefit to keep my entire harvest, but I must share with those less fortunate and vulnerable.

Two thousand years ago there were two illustrious rabbis, Hillel and Shammai, who differed in their interpretation of Torah and Jewish law. The Talmud teaches that: “For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, the former asserting: ‘The law is in accordance with our opinion,’ while the latter countered: ‘The law is in accordance with our opinion.’ Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: *Elu V’Elu Divrei Elohim Chayim* - Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the law is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.

But if both are the words of the living God, for what reason does the law follow the rulings of Beit Hillel? Because they were kindly and humble, showing forbearance and restraint when affronted, and because they studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai, making sure to mention the teachings of Beit Shammai before their own.”⁴

The law does not follow Hillel because he is more intelligent or wise, nor because he was greater in erudition or understanding. The law follows Hillel because he recognized that the Jewish world was one he needed to share, that even as he professed his own beliefs, and asserted his own opinions, that he needed to exercise restraint and forbearance to make room for Jews who saw the world differently than he did. His exercise of forbearance and restraint didn’t just make him nicer – it made his response more divine.

Rosh HaShanah has many names – we often call it the birthday of the world. But the liturgy calls it *Yom Harat Olam* – the day of the world’s formation. The word *Hara* doesn’t mean birth but conception. In our Haftarah this morning we read:

⁴ Talmud Eruvin 13b

“*VaTahar Chanah VaTeled Ben* – Hannah conceived and bore a son.” So today is the day, not of the world’s birth, but its conception.

Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld teaches that: “To remember that birth begins with conception is to remember that we each begin our lives as part of another person... When we are born, we become separate — and we spend our lives longing for connection, learning over and over to love, to let go, and to love again.”

She reminds us “We long to belong to each other, and we also long to become fully ourselves. We long for a deep sense of connection and we also long to know that we are valued as unique individuals with our own sense of dignity and self-worth.”⁵

The great 16th Century Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria taught that at the beginning of time, God’s light and presence inhabited all space and every dimension, extending from one end of the universe to the other, without border or boundary. And then God was overwhelmed with love, and decided to create a world – a world in which God could emanate compassion and mercy. And so God engaged in a process of *Tzimtzum* – contraction and withdrawal, pulling God’s light and presence to the edges, leaving a void, a dark space in the midst of the light. And it was into that darkened void, that Divine Womb, that the world was conceived and brought into being.

Just as when a mother conceives, she needs to contract, to make room within for a new life to grow, so in conceiving the world did God make room within God’s own self for life to flower and blossom. We stunt our growth as a society when we seek to inhabit all space, leaving no room for the life and spirit of another. If we truly want to be agents of transcendence and holiness, partners with God in repairing the broken work of creation, then we have to do a much better job of making room for each other.

In 1967, my dear friend Norman Jacobson bought a small drugstore on the north side of Chicago in a predominantly Italian and Irish neighborhood with very few Jews. The day after he opened, a man came into the store and asked him in a thick Italian accent, “Are you the big boss?”

“Yes,” he replied.

He paused for a moment and then asked: “Are you going to sell newspapers and magazines in your store?”

“Well I was planning to,” he said. “Why do you ask?”

⁵ From a sermon by Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld originally delivered on Rosh Hashanah 5776 at the Newton Centre Minyan, published by Hebrew College - <https://hebrewcollege.edu/blog/3178-2/>

“I own the newsstand across the street,” the man said.

“Is that how you support your family,” Norman asked.

“Yes that’s how I make a living,” he said.

“Well, I promise you,” said Norman, “that tomorrow morning all the newspapers and magazines will be out of here.”

Two days later Norman received a phone call. “Mr. Jacobson, this is Msgr. Cunningham from St. Angeles Catholic Church. I need to meet with you.”

So Norman went to the rectory and Msgr. Cunningham said, “You know, Jacobson,” said Msgr. Cunningham. “you’re really a mensch.” Soon the church contracted with Norman for their pharmacy needs, then four parishes, and then even more sent all their business to Norman’s pharmacy.

In his political masterpiece *Hind Swaraj*, Mohandas Gandhi wrote: “Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves.”

Forbearance seems completely counterintuitive. It would seem to me that I should fight as hard as I can for what I know is right, for what’s in my best interest. What’s wrong with pressing my advantage? Shouldn’t a boxer go for the knock-out?

But a boxer’s job is to be the last one standing in the ring. And vanquishing the other leaves no one left to play with. And maybe triumph ought not always be our objective. Maybe winning is not always the goal. Perhaps instead love ought be the objective, and peace become our goal. Maybe it’s about learning not to subdue the other, but to find ways for each of us to prosper – fairly, independently and interdependently.

Let the sounding of the shofar call shake us from our infatuation with our selves and turn us toward the path of decency, forbearance, and love. May it awaken in us a yearning to do *Tzimtzum* – to make room for what we might create together. Let it call us to awareness of our interdependence and mutual responsibility, not to press our advantage for our selfish benefit, but to use the holy and precious gift of life to build a world in which we can dwell together with each other and God as one.