



Yom Kippur 2005 Sermon

Do I have a dream . . .

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In March, 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, stood shoulder to shoulder as they marched from Selma to Montgomery. Faithful Christian and observant Jew, these two prophets taught us of the purpose of religion. Judaism, says Rabbi Heschel, "is an answer to the **ultimate problems** of human existence, not merely a way of handling observances. . . . What people need is not **religious tranquilizers** . . . but **spiritual audacity** . . . and the **power of defiance!**"

For Heschel, the ultimate problems of human existence -- that's our purpose. Spiritual audacity and the power of defiance, these are to be the fruit of our Jewish existence. Dr. Heschel, I believe, is describing this very day of Yom Kippur. On this day, we are to address the ultimate problems of human existence. On this day we seek to cultivate spiritual audacity, the power of defiance. We are supposed to leave this day changed. Not changed as in -- comfortable and safe, but changed as in -- our world is in desperate shape and deteriorating fast. It is time to act. We're desperate for communities all over the world to exercise spiritual audacity, the power of defiance.

COMMUNITY

And Yom Kippur is a day of community. We observe Yom Kippur at Temple, not in the privacy of our homes. On Yom Kippur we see and feel the awesome potential of a community moving and speaking as one. On this day, we recognize that what we can achieve together is enormous, while what we can achieve as individuals is rather small.

Yom Kippur is **not** about our fast. This is a tool, an important tool, but only a tool. It also is not about praying that the coming year will be free of heartache. The tragedies of hurricane, flood, tsunami, cancer, etc., tragically, some of us will suffer in the coming year. Teshuva, tefilla and tzedakah, repentance, prayer and righteous deeds, are not an insurance policy against the vicissitudes of life, they're not religious tranquilizers.

But they do guarantee something. They guarantee for us a future filled with dreams. They guarantee for us a recipe for creating a world of love and dignity and respectability. They represent the power of defiance, spiritual audacity.

MOST AWESOME DAY

"Let **us** declare the sacred power of this day. It is awesome and full of dread."



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And the prayer continues: "who shall live and who shall die. Who by fire, who by water." And ultimately we declare, "Teshuva, tefilla and tzedakah will remove the evil decree."

We know this prayer. The *u'netane tokef*. "Let us declare the sacred power of this day. It is awesome and full of dread." But awesome AND full of dread? **Must** this day be "full of dread"? I don't **want** our most sacred day to be full of dread. Aren't there other ways to get our attention, dear God!? God do you have to threaten us!?

That's been my reaction for many years to this prayer. But recently, something's changed. Dread . . . I feel it. I think the prayer is right. Maybe it's the arrival of a perfect baby girl. Maybe it's that for Tara and me, all but one of our parents faced rather serious illness in the last 12 months. Maybe it's because I'm now 45, and I'm beginning to look it. For most of us, our mortality is somewhat dreadful.

But it goes beyond our mortality. Want to change the world, you want spiritual audacity says our central prayer, three revolutionary ingredients: lovingly shape our **actions**, through tzedakah, righteous deeds; carefully choose our **words**, through tefillah, with the help of prayer; and, sincerely nurture our **feelings**, through teshuva, the process of repentance.

So why else is today full of dread? Because so many of our deeds lack tzedek, righteousness; so few of our words are prayerful; and so infrequently do our feelings allow us to perform the work of teshuva, repentance.

TZEDAKA -- RIGHTEOUS DEEDS

I'm thinking about power these days and how we use it, particularly as Americans, living in the most powerful nation in the world. We've been the engine for so much good in the world; the source of so many dreams and the home to so many dreamers. We have inspired so many.

But truly, I'm worried. We travel around the world to fight a real and extraordinary threat in terrorism, spending \$200B in the meantime, and without much need for debate. We send \$100's of millions to help tsunami victims desperately in need of help, and without much need for debate. Its clear, our capacity for tzedakah, for righteous deeds is enormous.

But we've got neighbors, a few miles from here, and in every city across America, many of whom are children, who go to bed every night, aching for a proper meal. We've got fellow tax-payers in this city, state and country who are in desperate need of all kinds of help. In effect, they feel the tragedy of tsunami, flood, and hurricane, every single day.



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Tzedek, tzedek tirdof. "Justice, justice" we are commanded "to pursue." In truth, we're **not** overflowing with righteous deeds for so many who live right next door. Let's be real, with the money we've recently sent around the world, with money like ours, if we wanted to end hunger in our land, we could! Dreaded human suffering around the **world** inspires our attention, but as for suffering around the **corner**, we're either disinterested or we've just closed our ears.

Fail in the command to pursue tzedek, to perform righteous deeds, teach the rabbis, and watch, your society will show signs of deep distress. Oh my God, I think the rabbis are right. Fail to address the ultimate problems of human existence, and you will sense the imprint of an evil decree.

TEFILLA

And do we speak to each other with any greater righteousness than we act? Think about the dialogue in our public arena. Our weekly magazines, print and TV, are obscene in the gossip that they sell. So much of our time is spent on the material possessions, sexual exploits, and broken relationships of our celebrities.

And in the American political arena today, relationships have never been more divisive, bitter, or even hateful. We live in a time in which the tenor and tone of political dialogue is poisoned with insinuation, insult and accusation. The desire to **build** on our common ground, **nurture** our common values, and **inspire** with our common dreams seems almost lost. And in the cozy confines of our homes, do we do much better?

Enter the rabbis, for the second ingredient in a uniquely Jewish recipe. Prayer, tefilla, that's the second ingredient. Our morning prayers may begin only **after** we can see the other. Only after the light of day has begun to shine, may we offer our morning prayers. And, it is no accident that our central prayer, the Shema, is about listening, truly hearing the Other.

The purpose of Tefilla, prayer, is to learn how to speak to one another. Like God's words in the beginning of creation, our words are instruments of creation. In fact, the **reason** God entrusted us with speech is to create a divine world.

We must understand that our prayers are not for God's sake. God doesn't need our prayers. **We** need our prayers. We allocate ample time for career, fitness and recreation. What about prayer? The ritual of prayer seeks to cultivate our ability to speak to each other with care and respect. We need to nourish our words of love, of gratitude and of hope. If we're honest, we simply don't take the time to master this divine art. We don't take the time to understand that the purpose and prize of a prayer life, is to change the world. Neglect our prayer life, and our speech, the foundation of our humanity, will generate evil, not blessing.



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The prayers we utter **can** transform our lives, not through magic or mysticism, but through us. Learn to speak to each other, teach the rabbis, with sincerity, with trust, and with love and the evil decree will be nullified.

TESHUVA

Finally, there's teshuva. The evil decree will be annulled and redemption of the world will come about, when we have the courage to do teshuva. Imagine a world, teach the rabbis, in which every human on the planet undertakes an accounting of his/her deeds for the past year.

Here's how it works: a month before YOM KIPPUR. We write on a piece of paper a list of our misdeeds, our mean words, our thoughtless choices for the past year. And then before YOM KIPPUR, we visit each person who appears on our list, by foot or by phone. Then, with love and devotion, we express our regret for the misdeeds we committed. To each person, we say: "I am sorry. Let me explain why. . . and Please forgive me!" This is not for kids. This is for us, the esteemed, educated, and enlightened adults. **We're** the ones who don't have the courage to say: "I'm sorry." In fact, sometimes nothing can be more dreadful than: 'I'm sorry'.

Dreadful also because our culture teaches us to never admit our mistakes.

Whatever you do, don't admit you've done wrong. Just listen to some of our presidents, past and present. Avoid, forget, deny, distinguish . . . do anything but the heroic thing. The heroic thing is to have the courage to be honest. The heroic thing is to fill our hearts with truth and with integrity. Want to change the world say the rabbis, be a hero. And all it takes to be a hero is to find and speak the truth.

SUPERHEROES -- GAVI

A couple of days ago, I told our son Gavi that Tara was giving a sermon on RH. He told me that **he** wanted to give a sermon. With no small amount of interest, I asked him what he would say. Surrounded by Yoda, Buzz Lightyear, Woody, Superman, et al . . . Gavi said: "Superheroes. I wanna talk about superheroes." Well, he was right. Today is a day to think about superheroes; about each of us becoming a superhero in our own unique way.

DO I HAVE A DREAM . . .

The name of this sermon is: "Do I Have a Dream?" It's a **question**, because on this day each of us is called to discern our most heart-felt dream. Don't let this day



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pass without addressing the following question: “when I’m gone what is my deepest, my most heartfelt prayer for the world?”

And, this sermon, entitled “Do I have a Dream!” is also a **statement**. It’s a statement about my own personal dream. My dream is that we become a Jewish community as described by Heschel, a people who possesses spiritual audacity and the power of defiance; that as a community, we become a superhero. My dream is that we do something big; that we blaze a new trail; that together, as a community, we dedicate ourselves to choosing and confronting **one** of today’s great social challenges.

On Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Greenstein challenged us to swim against a number of powerful ocean tides and Rabbi Tara challenged us to transform our love of nature into a passion for environmental action. They’re both right. So my goal this morning is not to choose between their equally-compelling passions, or to offer a new one. Don’t walk out of here saying: Rabbi Meir which cause should we take up? My goal today is to re-light the flame that **shines** within, to stir the fire that **burns** inside. My dream is that this fire, the audacity and defiance that we all feel, will lead us to a substantial and long-term process.

MITZVAH DAY EVERY SHABBAT – NOT CREED VS. DEED

We do so much incredible work already at Temple. On Mitzvah day almost 1000 members devote themselves to countless organizations in need. It’s awesome. And we support so many worthy projects.

But imagine Mitzvah Day every Shabbat. Imagine what we could accomplish if 1000 of us came here every Friday night. Rather than dreaming together during the High Holidays, what if 1000 Temple members gathered every Shabbat? What if every Friday night, maybe before services, we spent 30 minutes discussing, visioning, planning in detail, a powerful action plan. Imagine if 1000 Temple members crafted a vision to confront just one of today’s great problems.

Judaism is not a choice of **either** observance or ethical action, deed OR creed. Judaism is a creed, an observance, a life practice, the whole purpose of which is to remake the world. Jews gather together in prayer, so that we can dream and work together to solve the ultimate problems of human existence. Its that simple.

GREAT CONSPIRACY

There is a menacing and silent conspiracy in this land. Our problems are too big.



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Each of us feels too small to make a difference. And in the presence of this conspiracy, our deepest passions, our most heartfelt concerns often do not govern our decisions. There's no one in this Sanctuary who cares more about the Tigers, or Grizzlies, than we care about environmental degradation, poor education and health care, homelessness and hunger, the outrageous sexualizing of our youth, to name a few.

Why do we mostly remain silent? Why aren't 1,000's/millions of people screaming from the rooftops? Everyone cares. One answer. Because we feel too small, too helpless. Simply put, we feel inadequate, incapable of making a difference.

But here's the truth: we're only too small to address our greatest challenges if we gather only twice a year. We can't begin to tackle our problems, if we're together as a community only on RH and YOM KIPPUR.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Speaking to 1000's in 1957, before the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. Martin Luther King sought to inspire his community to dream great dreams, Listen to his words:

"I say to you this afternoon: Keep moving. . . Move on with dignity and honor and respectability. Keep moving amid every obstacle and every mounting of opposition."

He continues. "If you will do that, when the history books are written . . . , the historians will look back and say, "There lived a great people. A people with fleecy locks and black complexion,' but a people who injected new meaning into the veins of civilization; a people which stood up with dignity and honor and saved Western civilization in her darkest hour; a people that gave new integrity and a new dimension of love to our civilization."

Imagine that: inspiring the dream that a fairly powerless people can change the world, that a poor and discriminated-against people can be the saviors of a great, but possibly failing civilization. That's a dream worthy of Yom Kippur. That's why we're here.

Someone famous once said, I think it was Woody Allen, that 80% of success is showing up. We must show up. Showing up can change this world. We're only too small if we gather together twice a year. As a community, building bridges between communities, we are not too small. Imagine the bridges we can build, with 100's of Reform congregations around the country, with other churches in this city and beyond. If 1000 of us pray, learn, cry, sing, dance and reflect together every



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Shabbat . . . let me tell you what will happen. We will become a different kind of community. For this community, our religious life will become the engine for the important change we want to make in this world.

Let me make something entirely clear. There is no shortage of desire here. The desire is enormous. After Katrina, so many people called and emailed. And they all said the same thing. "I, we, want to help." So many sitting here are ready to make a difference.

We need the vision, the confidence, and the courage of King and Heschel. What's been lacking most is our vision. But, our vision is growing, deepening and expanding. There is a sleeping giant in this country. We are part of that sleeping giant. There is a hurricane-sized swell of concern, commitment and care, ready to be invigorated, ready to be awakened.

Let's dream big. Let's commit ourselves to a great dream.

Let's plan to be here on 5767, next HIGH HOLY DAYS, and celebrate something spectacular.

May it be a sweet year and may 5766, be a year in which we see each other often.

And let us say: Amen.