



Ideas Before Actions!
Yom Kippur 5770 Sermon
Presented 9/27/09
Temple Beth El Great Neck, NY

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I. HERZL – ONE GRAND IDEA

Theodore Herzl was the champion of an outrageous idea, an idea that changed the course of modern Jewish history. One idea defined Herzl’s life and that idea inspired 100,000’s of people and 100’s Millions of dollars.

Mr. Herzl wrote in his diary a statement that people have been reading for many years:

“If not in 5 then in 50 years there will be a Jewish state.” That was in 1897.

In 1947, in the 50th year after Herzl’s diary entry, the United Nations voted to create a Jewish and an Arab state. A virtually impossible idea became reality: On the 50th year Herzl’s dream became international law.

On this day of Yom Kippur, I’m wondering about our diaries. On this day, Herzl raises the question for us all: what grand idea or lofty dream will we record in our sacred journals, in our Book of Life?

II. GERSHWIND – IDEA OR ACTION

At a recent funeral, a Beth-El member reflected on his father’s life. He framed his reflections around an essay question from his college application many years earlier. I want us to think about this essay question. *“Would you rather write something worth reading, or do something worth writing about?”*

First, let’s be clear about the choice presented here. It highlights two very different realms of human existence. *“Writing something worth reading”*, points to the exploration of ideas, the craving for understanding, the striving for insights about life. Writing, here, points us inward, to our questions, our dreams, and our sense of wonder.

Doing something worth writing about, however, points us in the opposite direction. It points outward, to the fulfillment of our needs, the achievement of our goals. It points to the efforts necessary for our dreams to become realized in the world.

So, the question is: What do we value more: the ideas we reflect upon or the deeds we perform, the inner essence of something, or its outer impact?

Today, I want to be something of a contrarian. I know that actions speak louder than words. I understand that words are cheap. I am quite aware that ideas are often not as enticing or as glamorous, as great plans of action. But I submit that the year 5770 should not be, primarily, an outward-looking time. This should be a year for learning, reflection, and serious soul-searching. Even more than great deeds, this year should be a time to articulate a truly important idea, a vision that inspires our efforts for the future.



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III. OUR CHILDREN – THE POWER OF IDEAS

I’m thinking about our children. I sometimes watch our kids, Gavi and Adina, when they’re playing. Whether with their paper cut-outs or dolls or roboticals, or in running the bases after slugging one of abba’s fast balls, their minds create entire worlds. At any moment they can imagine into being a completely new reality. They can travel the world, entirely with their minds. One idea, one creative spark, one glorious, divine ray of light, can take our children anywhere in the galaxy.

As adults, it is so easy to forget the power of ideas. We run from one task to another, from one email, text message, airplane, Starbucks to another. Almost everything goes into our I-Phone. One thing usually does not. Monday from 8-9am. Soul-searching. Tuesday, 7-7:30pm. Asking the question that inspires me the most. Wed., 10-11am. Reminding myself of the injustice in the community that keeps me up at night.

None of our Blackberries will have these entries. We do not allocate time to think, explore or ponder. We rarely speak about the ideas that point to the essence of our lives. We rarely get to the most basic building block of change – the idea that can inspire new insights and new commitments. I can’t tell you how many people say to me: “Wow, Rabbi it’s been so long since I had such a meaningful conversation.”

Ashrei yoshvei veitakha we read in Psalm 145. Happiness and fulfillment come to those who sit in the house of ideas, of questions, of mystery. Psalm 145, over 2000 years old, teaches us what we already know. Change and transformation begin in our minds, in the inner lives that we create for ourselves.

I want to share a conversation I had last Monday evening with our 11th and 12th graders. We spoke about one of the most difficult subjects – God. With others nodding their heads, one of the students said something like: “It’s a challenge to believe in God. Faith is a major problem for me. Sometimes I feel that I don’t belong here, because its so hard for me to feel any faith in God.”

We studied a famous rabbinic legend. The legend is about Abraham, and it seeks to answer a basic but important question. What was so special about Abraham? Why in the world did God choose Abraham to be the father of Judaism?

Here’s the legend. After hearing God say: Lech lecha, go from this land to a land that I will show you, Abraham leaves home and travels from village to village. He uses a road that many others have used. In the distance, he sees a house. He notices that the house is on fire. As he



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approaches the burning house, he poses a question, "Is there an owner of the house?" And from within the house, a voice says: "Yes. I am the owner."

The teens and I spoke for nearly an hour about this tiny little story. Immediately they understood the symbolism. The *house* symbolizes the world, the *fire* symbolizes the evil and cruelty in the world, and the *owner* watching the house burn, well, that's God.

For the first 10 minutes the students asked, with plenty of righteous indignation: How could God just sit there? Why doesn't God put out the fire? **This** explains why I don't believe in God," or, as another said, "With a God like this, why does it even **matter** if I believe?"

And I pressed them. "Guys, slow down. What's the point of this owner doing nothing? With this legend, an entirely new and different kind of faith, comes to humanity. It's a revolution, that still today, is monumentally incomplete." Soon, a new insight began to percolate.

"Oh, Rabbi Meir, I think I get it. I get why the owner is doing nothing. The owner is relying on us to heal this world. It's our job to do the work of *tikkun olam*. So often, Rabbi Meir, we blame God. Even though we believe that repairing the world is our job, so often we put it on God."

Another interrupted and said: "It's like our parents who try to teach us that we have the ability to take care of our problems."

"Wow, this is kind of cool." Said yet another. "It's as if God has faith in us, and that turns the whole idea of faith upside down. We started off speaking about our faith in God, and now we're speaking about God's faith in us. I think," she continued, "this legend is about hope, a hope that we can carry with us every day. With this, there is so much reason to feel hope, in ourselves and in the world."

"Rabbi: I now get it why God chose Abraham. Having faith means hearing the voice speaking from within the fire. There are so many who just walk on by. I know I do it too, Rabbi Meir. Jewish faith is about seeing evil and injustice, and hearing the voice from within. This kind of faith is so different from what I've always understood."

"Yeah! I think this is incredible: (came the last comment). Every time we ask the question, "is there an owner of the house", "is there a God", we are asking the first question of faith. This is amazing Rabbi Meir. **I** ask that question all the time. But, I still have to try harder to hear the voice from within the fire."



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IV. THE FIRE IN THIS HOUSE

I believe that there is a fire in this house too. Many suggest the obvious: the fire of demographics. Yes, there are very real challenges beyond these doors. But I say, let’s first look inward, for surely we provide our own kindling to this dangerous fire.

So many of us enter this building only twice a year. But this home, like every home, needs much more than our money. This home, like every home, longs for love, for passion, for learning and for conversation. It longs for meals that we share together on a very regular basis.

But why? Why do we spend so little time in our spiritual home? No doubt there are lots of reasons. I’ll raise a big one. I submit that God is one of those reasons. Our youth said it all at the beginning.

“I don’t believe in God. I don’t see why it matters to believe in God.” “Visiting this place throughout the year won’t help me feel more hope, more optimism. It won’t make me feel better about my life.” “I have so many questions. This place though is for people who believe, for people who don’t need to question!”

Unlike our high schoolers, many of us never get beyond our 7th grade understanding of God. Too often, our Jewish spiritual journey stops at age 13. But, one profound idea, we know, can change the lives of our youth.

And not just the youth. One profound idea can change the lives of every person in this room. As Rabbi Rudin stated on Yom Kippur in 1965: “It has been said that Jews are the caretakers of an irreplaceable idea. We are the defenders of a significant way of life. It would be a consummate tragedy if that way of life were to die in a world that needs it very, very much.”¹

IV. SHALOM HARTMAN INSTITUTE – DR. ALICK ISAACS

As many of you know, the Feldmans lived in Jerusalem for 15 months, before arriving in Great Neck. Tara and I spent much of our ‘professional’ time at the Shalom Hartman Institute, which, in our opinion is the academic and intellectual center of the Jewish world. BTW, we will visit the Hartman Institute in our Temple Beth-El trip to Israel trip next summer.

We spent a lot of time with one of the Hartman scholars, Dr. Alick Isaacs. [And Tara and I continue to work with Dr. Isaacs on a peace project between Jews and Muslims.]

In one conversation, Alick shared a very important idea, an idea that was totally obvious, and at the same time, completely new and original. Here’s what he said: “You are rabbis, not

¹ Very Truly Yours, 188



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politicians or social activists. As rabbis, you are people of ideas. Your job, first and foremost, is to shape how people see the world. Your calling is to provide the lens through which people will create meaning in their lives.”

Dr. Isaacs is right. No matter how much I want for us to change the world, social activist is not my professional calling. It’s, of course, crucial for us to “do” in the world. But our doing must be a product of our learning, an expression of our spiritual calling. “Don’t be ashamed,” Alick explained, “that your life is primarily about ideas. Every transformation of humanity, every renaissance of an institution, Begins with a big idea.”

V. BUBER – ETERNITY DEPENDS UPON TRANSCENDENT PURPOSE

MARTIN Buber, a great interpreter of Jewish History and Jewish idea, wrote extensively about Zionism before the founding of the Jewish state. I believe that what he said about a Jewish state, applies to every synagogue around the world.

According to Buber, the very survival of a Jewish state, depends upon her sense of mission, her lofty calling. A Jewish state, he suggested, will not survive without a transcendent purpose.

“According to [many] Zionists, all that is needed is to establish the conditions for a normal national life . . . [to be a nation like all others]. This is fatal error. . . “If we want to be nothing but normal, we shall soon cease to be at all.”²

Buber teaches us that our future does not depend on whether the stock, housing or commodity markets come back. Our future does not depend on how many members our synagogue counts today, or even the color of our balance sheet.

Our future depends mostly on something else. It depends on the passion we cultivate for a cause much grander than us. What injustice keeps us up at night? What ultimate question of human existence calls to us from within? My hope is that 5770 will be for us, a year of pondering these questions, together.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the Rav, the great Orthodox thinker of the 20th century, taught a beautiful idea about change. Central to his teaching, is a radical reworking of time. Past, present, future should no longer be our understanding of time, teaches the Rav. For real change to occur, he says, time must travel like this: future, past, present. We begin with a vision of our future. With that vision, we can embrace the challenges of our past. And only then are we prepared to create the present that we want for ourselves.

² Nationalism and Zion, 252



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So here's the million dollar question. What is our transcendent purpose? As Reform Jews, what is the message that inspires our souls? As members of Temple Beth-El, what is the Jewish dream and the human dream that we hold for our children? As lovers of Great Neck, what is the calling that will strengthen our resolve?

In only 3 months time, sadly, we've already heard the pessimism, the deep worry. Just under the surface, we've already begun to feel, the deep fear that this may all come to an end. So, are we giving up on Great Neck? Are we giving up on Reform Judaism, on Temple Beth-El? Will we allow these extraordinary gifts of many decades, to disappear before our eyes?

Friends, the newcomers in town say: "Absolutely not!" Yes, we only arrived in July. But already we've met 100's of amazing people, incredible families, young and old. Tara and I say today, for our children and grandchildren, for our Judaism and [for] our community, this is no time to sit back and watch. This for sure is no time to quit.

We have every resource necessary to reclaim what we love, to raise it higher than its ever been. We can transform the fire, from a destructive flame, to a bright torch that illuminates our days and nights.

Right now let us think seriously about the source of light that is in our hands -- Our spiritual pledge cards. If Youth are your passion, you'll check box 9. If you're ready to study Torah to deepen your Jewish knowledge, that's box 4. If you want to work to improve our community, that's box 1.

You get the point. Make a spiritual pledge. Do it for yourself, your children and your community. Now, put the pledge card down.

In the refuge of the synagogue, each of us will encounter the idea and the question, the inspiration and the vision that can change our reality. I believe that it is time for each of us to be Abraham and to ask: "Is there an owner of this house?" And within moments, the light will shine. "Oh my God, this house is mine. I am the owner."

Our future depends on, the me. It depends on my physical presence and on my inner determination, to stoke the fire that burns within me. Our future depends on our chutzpa, on our certainty that we possess a unique and compelling insight to teach the Jews of Great Neck and the people of the world.

We are passionate and determined Jews who believe in sharing a meal with people of all faiths; we are passionate and determined Jews who believe that public schools are



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critical; we are passionate and determined Jews who believe that an authentic love of religion requires a genuine love of humanity.

Our future depends on not allowing others to define what it means to be a passionate Jew. As passionate and determined Jews, we believe that religion must be a force for peace in the world, and that our religion, our Judaism, is a vital and irreplaceable gift to mankind.

Our future depends on a few other things as well. It depends upon our humility: our willingness to acknowledge that we don't know enough, and we don't show up enough; on our thirst for Jewish wisdom and Jewish experiences; on our ravenous hunger for more joy, more depth, and more meaning.

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said: "Judaism is not a religious tranquilizer, its not religion as entertainment. . . Judaism is an answer to the ultimate questions of human existence."

CONCLUSION

I'm coming to the end. ***"Would you rather write something worth reading or do something worth writing about."***

I love this question for one last reason. We have only one choice in life. Greatness. We can write something great, or do something great. Mediocrity is not an option. For anyone who stands before the Holy One of Blessing, as on this day of Yom Kippur, greatness is the only option.

Now, a snapshot of greatness, not 50 years hence like Herzl, but 1 year from today. Its next Rosh Hashanah, 2010, 5771. 100 of us now attend Shabbat Torah study. We've discovered that Torah study on Saturday morning is more worthwhile than Starbucks or the mall, and as worthwhile as the gym. Every one of us attends services at least once a month. We've discovered that services are meaningful, contemplative and joyful. We now miss services when we can't attend."

80 of us went to Israel together during the summer of 2010. For first-timers, it changed our lives. For those who had been, we feel more inspired than in many years.

613 of us have sought to fulfill our spiritual pledge throughout 5770. 613 of us are ready to go even deeper.

I conclude with 2 guarantees. First, Temple Beth-El will soar again. Greatness will be her future, just as it has been her past. Second, every person who fulfills a spiritual



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pledge will feel greater peace next year than this. So, let's write something worth reading about. Write a spiritual pledge.

Shana tova and gmar chatimah tova. May you have a wonderful year and may we all write ourselves into the Book of Life.