

***Turning Out  
Yom Kippur Morning 5772  
Jewish Congregation of Brookville***

On Rosh Hashanah we spoke about our congregation. This morning I wish to speak about our country. The question is the same for our country as it is for our congregation. Where are we going? Where should we be going?

Our nation faces two great challenges. #1 The economy. #2 9-11 and its continued aftermath. Although these are manifestly different, our response should be the same. Let me explain. First 9-11 and the threat of terrorism.

I continue to carry with me a searing memory of driving my children home from school on that day. As I drove I kept looking in the rear view mirror at their faces. I continue to hear their questions, "What happened? I don't understand. Someone drove a plane into a building?" I still hear my inadequate answers. Even ten years later we are still fumbling for answers. And yet some things remain absolutely clear.

Let us state this categorically. We do indeed have enemies. We appear unwilling to speak the words. There are people who are bent on our destruction. They are Islamic fundamentalists.

We appear so afraid of offending that we shy away from this awful truth. I have no quarrel with Islam. We should have no quarrel with Islam. We should however take issue with the far too many Muslims who stand silent before what their co-religionists do in their name. We should as well take issue with the far too many Muslims who celebrate these murders committed in their tradition's name. I do not know how we might foster those Muslims who truly love their tradition and love peace to do battle with their co-religionists who continue to defame their religion.

And so this is my singular hope for the Arab Spring. I of course have many fears about these revolts. There might very well be great traumas as we watch democracy struggling to emerge. Such changes bring great uncertainty. But the solution to the poisonous hatred that attacked our very own New York lies in fostering more democracy and more freedom in the Middle East. The more democracy gained the more Muslims might be able to root this evil from their midst and the better off the entire world will be. Until then we must continue to strike out at those who threaten us.

I believe with all my heart that freedom and democracy are God given rights that all people should come to enjoy. We must help the world to realize this vision. President Bush was right about this dream.

But the dream was only applied in selected pockets. It was applied in Iraq but not in Saudi Arabia. In Afghanistan but not in Pakistan. We are still unable to say loudly how

many of our so-called allies support our enemies and suppress democratic freedoms. Our continued dependence on Mideast oil and therefore our dependence on Mideast dictators defame the memory of 9-11. It should be a matter of national security that we wean ourselves of oil. It should not only be in the name of the environment but also in the name of freedom that we reduce our consumption of oil and gas.

President Obama is also wrong, or perhaps naïve, in believing that a speech, especially a speech he delivers, can change the future of the Middle East. It requires daily effort and resolve. Pursue peace each and every day. 9-11 should have taught us this.

Terror and fear worm their way into our hearts and souls. They distort our vision. We must always see clearly what this country means. We must always proudly declare the values our country stands for. Moreover we should celebrate exactly what our enemies most hate because it is these very values that have made this nation great.

We live in a country that revels in difference. That is strengthened by difference. We are an overwhelmingly religious people, but never a country where one religion must be chosen over another.

Our enemies want a world that is only like them. Our world that is absent of Jews and Christians, gays and lesbians, a world where women are veiled and science is labeled as blasphemy. I want none of that. I want a world where science and religion can learn from each other. I want a world where my faith is a source of strength and inspiration. And science is a source of knowledge and curiosity. Where differences are celebrated and cause for new learning. Ten years later my resolve is only stronger. I pray, let my resolve never grow weaker. Let terror and fear never find their way into my soul.

More recently we have added to these fears those about our economy. We worry about our financial security. 9% are officially unemployed in our country. We sense the numbers are far greater. Job security is not what it once was. Will there be enough for retirement, for college? Will there be enough for the basic necessities? Such reasonable worries might turn us inward. Combined with the fear of terror we risk become increasingly insular. We turn away from those who are different than ourselves because of fears of terrorism. We turn away from helping those in need because we worry that there will not be enough for ourselves.

And so I have resolved that I must do more, we must do more. We have an obligation to those in need. We are commanded to feed the hungry. We must hear this command with renewed force.

Here are some sobering facts about hunger and poverty. In our very own country, over 50 million people lived in food-insecure households, including over 16 million children. One third of the world's population experience days when they are unsure where their next meal will come from. Six million children die of hunger every year; that amounts to

17,000 every day. To be sure we cannot save every child, we cannot save every person who suffers from hunger, we cannot cure all the world's ills. But we have a responsibility to begin somewhere. We must begin here—here on Long Island.

Sometimes such statistics are numbing. The numbers appear so insurmountable that we give up before even trying. On our very own Long Island 300,000 rely on food pantries, soup kitchens or other emergency food programs.

Here in the small pocket we call home we can drive from our houses to school, mall to supermarket, hairdresser to gym, bike shop to country club, restaurant to theatre, synagogue to office and remain completely unaware that 10% of our fellow Long Islanders go hungry and 165,000 live below the poverty line. We ignore the suffering around us. We build shtetls to insulate us. But as Jews we cannot turn aside. We must not turn aside. We cannot remain indifferent.

Open your eyes. Look around you. Just south of the train tracks in my Huntington lies squalor and poverty. I can remain close to the shore and the Sound's waves and ride my bike along North Shore's picturesque roads. I can drive to the office along Northern Boulevard and remain blissfully unaware of the hunger and homelessness just around the corner. Or I can open my eyes and see the suffering around me. I can resolve to make a difference and never again to remain indifferent.

Some might think, I thought Yom Kippur is supposed to be about inner, spiritual concerns. On the surface this is correct. But the purpose of the fast is to turn in so that we can turn out—to others. This morning we read an extraordinary Haftarah, from the Book of Isaiah: "Do you call that a fast,/ A day when the Lord finds favor?/ No, this is the fast I desire:/ To unlock the fetters of wickedness,/ And untie the cords of the yoke/ To let the oppressed go free;/ To break off every yoke./ It is to share your bread with the hungry,/ And to take the wretched poor into your home;/ When you see the naked, to clothe him,/ And not to ignore your own kin./ Then shall your light burst through like the dawn/ And your healing spring up quickly/...Then, when you call, the Lord will answer;/ When you cry, God will say: Here I am." (Isaiah 58)

We must fight the tendency to turn inward. Sometimes I think that the economy turned us more inward than even 9-11. The purpose of today's fast is not to refocus on the inner life, to remove the everyday concerns from our frenetic lives. It is instead to redouble our efforts to reach out beyond ourselves, not to allow the solitary self to become our primary concern.

Imagine this. You know that pang of hunger that you are feeling now. Soon, by this evening, it will be sated. That growling in your stomach will in a few short hours be relieved. You have this confidence. You can go home, open the fridge and find food, perhaps not always your favorite food. But you can go home and find food in your pantry.

Imagine this this as well. Only a few short miles from where we now sit there are people who do not have any food. When they feel that same pang of hunger they say where is my next meal going to come from. They don't say in a few short hours I will eat.

On Rosh Hashanah morning we read the story of Hagar and Ishmael. It is a story about many things. It is also a story about hunger. Hagar and Ishmael soon run out of food and water after Abraham and Sarah banish them and send them into the desert with meager supplies. Hagar places her son Ishmael under a tree and moves far enough away so that she might not watch him die of hunger and thirst. How many mothers must still, today, turn aside from the cries of their children?

How many millions are not saved by the appearance of a miraculous well? How many days have I acted too much like Abraham and Sarah?

We have countless blessings. Our kitchens are filled with bountiful pantries. We must share our blessings. We can always do more for others. There are far too many hungry and homeless. There are far too many who need our help.

Our congregation has supported the INN, the Interfaith Nutrition Network, and will continue to do so. The INN's 19 soup kitchens serve 7,500 people every week. This December we will also staff a soup kitchen in Huntington Station on Sunday, December 4<sup>th</sup>. We need people during every hour of that afternoon. Squeeze it in between activities if need be. All ages are welcome to help out.

We will collect leftovers from shiva homes—I pray, may this be infrequent. I also pray, may this small gesture help the hungry. Although some people think it is taboo to take food from a shiva home we will do so in order to make a difference on Long Island. I never understood this belief. Why not take the leftovers to a soup kitchen?

The amount of food that we throw out such occasions and parties could help to feed the hungry. Tell your caterer to pack up the leftovers and call Island Harvest. If your caterer accuses you of being a nudge and a pain about packing up the food, well then, good. We should all be a nudge to help feed the hungry. You don't have to be Isaiah. But you should not take no for an answer when the caterer refuses to pack up the food. You should never take "no" when you are certain you can do more.

We can make a difference. We must not ignore the troubles around us. We must do more for those in need on our Long Island.

One of the most fascinating commandments in the Torah deals with a bird's nest. It remains one of my favorite verses and mitzvahs. "If, along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young. Let

the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life.” (Deuteronomy 22:6-7) What a strange and curious mitzvah. We are commanded to shoo the mother bird away before taking the young. We cannot take the young and their mother. We cannot have everything. Even that which is permitted must be regulated. Our freedoms are always framed by compassion. Long life is assured when we reach out to other creatures with compassion. That is the plain meaning.

The bird’s nest is also a metaphor. Hatchlings are of course blind. They are hidden and shielded from the dangers of the world by their parents. It seems obvious but staying in the nest they will never learn to fly. When they fly they may very well succumb to other, greater dangers.

We have learned from 9-11 and now the economy that staying in the nest does not shield us from all harm. Many died, many were murdered, for the simple act of going to work, or walking down the street, or going on vacation, or getting a cup of coffee. Many went to all the right schools and had all the greatest of achievements only to see them stripped away by economic travails.

So we can choose to be blind like the hatchlings in this bird’s nest or we can choose to fly. 9-11 should have taught us that blindness is no safer than flying. Our economic trials should teach us that our souls are not made richer by giving only to ourselves.

I continue to believe that the greatest danger of terrorism and this great recession are not external but internal. We must shut out our fears and continue flying. We must reach out to others. Insularity will not protect us. It serves no noble purpose.

The concern of our tradition is improving our world. We begin with the small and seemingly insignificant. We begin even with a bird’s nest. And from there reach out to the world at large.

No nest is forever safe. My only choice is to reach out to the world, and to struggle to better and improve the world. My life is made better, and yes more assured and even more secure, by my reaching out to the world. That is the only response we should focus on. The same response is called upon us by 9-11 and the economy.

I am convinced that the spirit is fed by reaching outside of ourselves, to learning from those who are different, and even from those who might evoke fear. The soul is nourished by reaching out to those in need.

On this Yom Kippur I confess that I stand guilty. When looking back on this year I know that I shied away from differences. I know could have spent less on me. I should have spent more on those who are truly in need and less on what I falsely believed I needed.

There is a Hasidic story about a wealthy man who approached the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, and asked if he could meet Elijah the Prophet, the messenger of God who rose to heaven in a chariot of fire. The man had heard rumors that Elijah wanders the earth to bless people in need of his help. The wealthy man had achieved great success and counted many accomplishments to his name. Everything he ever wanted, he was able to acquire. (This version is based on Naomi Levy's retelling.)

At first the Baal Shem Tov insisted he didn't know how to find Elijah. And then one day the Baal Shem Tov said to the man, "You can meet Elijah this Shabbat. Here is what you must do: Fill up your coach with a Shabbat feast. Pack bread, wine, chicken and vegetables. Pack cakes and fruit and delicacies and bring it all to a certain hut in the forest and ask if you can spend the Shabbat there."

On Friday afternoon the wealthy man rode his coach along a winding forest trail until he came upon the hut the Baal Shem Tov had told him about. He knocked on the door and a poor woman in tattered clothes answered. The wealthy man asked if he could spend the Shabbat with her family.

The husband and his wife were overjoyed to have a Shabbat guest even though there was barely enough food to go around. Their emaciated children giggled with excitement. Then the wealthy man showed them the feast he had brought. For a moment they froze at the sight of such abundance. And then the children cheered, the wife wept with joy, and her husband comforted her.

That Shabbat eve was like no other this family had ever experienced. They ate well, drank well, sang, prayed. The wealthy man kept staring at the poor father. Could this be Elijah? He asked the poor man to teach him Torah, but the man was illiterate. The father ate until his belly was full, he drank and burped and picked his teeth. This couldn't be Elijah. All through that night and the next day the wealthy man waited impatiently for Elijah to appear. But there was no sign of the holy prophet anywhere.

On Saturday night, as Shabbat came to an end, the wealthy man was fuming. "The Baal Shem Tov deceived me. He made a fool of me." And then he said his goodbyes to the family and raced outside in a huff. As he was stomping away, the wealthy man's boot got stuck in the mud. As he leaned down to pick it up he overhead sounds of rejoicing coming from inside the window. The children were jumping up and down and squealing with joy over the most wonderful Shabbat they had ever seen.

The wife said to her husband, "Who was that man who brought us all that food?" Her husband replied, "Don't you see? It was Elijah the Prophet who came to bless us."

Suddenly the wealthy man saw who Elijah was. "Elijah is me," he said to himself. "Elijah is me."

Whether we believe we are Elijah or not, we can be Elijah. We can make a difference in the world. We can make a difference on Long Island. During such times and in the near future we will feel the pull to turn inward, to stockpile our wealth and to shut out differences, to hide in the bird's nest. But we must open our eyes to the suffering around us; we must not turn away. We must resolve to repair our world. There is an abundance of food that can make a difference in someone's life. It can begin with leftovers. It can begin with working at a soup kitchen on one Sunday afternoon.

The greatest danger is to use difficult times as an excuse to turn inward. Let us resolve to make a difference not only in our own lives but in the community at large.

We have an obligation to reach outside of ourselves and heal the world's brokenness. We might want to retreat to our inner selves. That might appear to guarantee greater safety.

We can save our dollars and cents. That might guarantee greater wealth. But the world needs us to be Elijah.

Our job is not only to feed ourselves and our children, to clothe ourselves and our children. Our sacred task is to care for the world. To clothe the naked and feed the hungry these as well are our responsibilities.

I sense that we will be tested in the coming years. We will feel a strong pull to withdraw and turn inward. We must fight this tendency to turn inward and turn instead out to our neighbors. The response to 9-11 and the economy is the same. It is the opposite of where our feelings direct us. It is never to turn in—and only to turn out.

We can do more. We must help those in need. Let that be our most lasting contribution. Let that be our greatest success. Our country needs us. Our neighbors need us. Our souls depend on it. More importantly other people's lives may depend on it.

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