

Yom Kippur talk

by Stanley N. Katz

Conservative Service

Princeton University Center for Jewish Life

25 September 2004

Anniversaries are bitter-sweet. They remind us both of what we are and what we are not. They contrast what and where we are now with what and where we were at some point in the past.

This year we celebrate the 350th anniversary of the arrival of Jews in North America. Our arrival was deeply contested within the Dutch community at New Amsterdam, but this nevertheless seems an altogether positive sort of remembrance. On the other hand, we have just commemorated the 3rd anniversary of the attacks on September 11th. And there are also trivial but meaningful anniversaries. I experienced my seventieth birthday last spring. Some of you in this congregation are my age or older, and I wonder if you do not share my bewilderment at the incredible range and diversity of the historical narrative we have experienced over the course of our lives. We have seen the heights and glimpsed the depths.

The heights have been remarkable. I wonder whether any generation has experienced such tangible human progress? We have lived through two of the most breathtakingly

creative revolutions in the history of natural science, witnessing the unlocking of the atom and the decoding of the human cell – the birth of modern physics and of molecular biology. Lewis Thomas, for whom Princeton’s molecular biology building is named, once claimed that more had been learned about biomedicine in his lifetime than had been discovered in the entire previous history of mankind. A combination of scientific advance and technology have produced advances in medicine that have substantially increased the quality and length of life.

Innovation has been just as rapid and astonishing in technology. My generation grew up with the telephone, radio and automobile, but now we have experienced the introduction of nuclear energy, television, space travel, electronic computing, wireless technology and the Internet. And much more. We have also witnessed some remarkable progress in world affairs – the victory of the democratic alliance against the despotisms of Europe and East Asia in World War II, decolonization, the fall of authoritarian state socialism. Despite the current and past horrors of local and regional wars in the last decade, we must not forget that the period since 1945 is the longest sustained period without major international warfare in several centuries. We truly have seen wonders in our times.

But Jeremiah always lurks. We have also witnessed the depths, horrors that defy human imagination: the Shoah; Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the Gulag; the annihilation of the Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge, East Timor, Rwanda, Darfur. We have seen man’s inhumanity to man, displayed on a scale previously unknown. But we have also experienced the tragedies of HIV/AIDS, famine, poverty and other horrors that might

have been averted. We have witnessed things too terrible to comprehend. We struggle not to lose sight of them, lest they reoccur. Never forget.

And that brings me to my point, a very personal one that not all of you will share. I ask how I can understand my personal responsibility during the Days of Awe in what seems to me this terrible year of 2004/5764? What is my responsibility in a year of widespread fear, sorrow and devastation? What should I repent for as a Jew and as an American?

Although it is not our text for today, I recall the story of Job. After the Holy One, Blessed be He, had smitten Job with “sore boils from the sole of his foot even unto his crown,” Job’s first response was to curse his birth – “Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night wherein it was said: ‘a manchild is brought forth.’” He was overtaken by fear: “. . . the thing which I did fear is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of hath overtaken me.” He fears being abandoned by God: “Lo, He goeth by me, and I see Him not. He passeth on also, but I perceive Him not.” But we know the strength of Job’s faith in God: “Only do not two things unto me, then will I not hide myself from Thee: Withdraw Thy hand far from me; and let not Thy terror make me afraid.” Job will not “rebel against the light,” for he is determined, despite all, to “abide in the paths” of the Lord. And in the end, Job is “righteous in his own eyes,” and he is rewarded by God for his faith: “And the Lord changed the fortune of Job, when he prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.”

The story of Job has always seemed to me profoundly troubling (in some ways not unlike the story of Abraham and Issac that we contemplated in last week's Torah portion). A man of profound faith deliberately tested by God in what seems a profoundly unjust way; a man who meets that test and then some; a man who is rewarded for his faith. But who among us can compare himself or herself to Job? I cannot. I think we were tested in a terrible way during this past year, but the tests were created by men, not God in response to Satan. Many of them were, in my view, created by our leaders. This is inevitably a political statement, and I am aware that some in this congregation will feel quite differently about our country's role in the world. Fair enough.

I am trying to articulate only my personal ethical dilemma in order to rise to the challenge of Yom Kippur -- to get right not only with God, but with the world as an American Jew. But as a Jew in particular. So much of our common history is double – the simultaneous history of victimization and of the advocacy of social justice. Precisely because we have been victims we feel we have an obligation to champion the justice of a merciful God, of Job's God. And yet here we are confronting the Days of Awe in a country that eighteen months ago proclaimed that it would create "Shock and Awe" in Baghdad. Was this not blasphemy? We as Jews know that God's judgment alone can create genuine awe. So how should we think and act if we are literally the source of such injustice. That is my dilemma on this Day of Repentance.

Today is also a day of confession, for we must confess before we can repent. Our mood is captured by the *Vidui* passage which we repeated last night: “We are neither so brazen nor so arrogant to claim that we are righteous, without sin, for indeed we have sinned.”

And then comes the terrible list:

We abuse, we betray, we are cruel.

We destroy, we embitter, we falsify.

We gossip, we hate, we insult.

We jeer, we kill, we lie.

We mock, we neglect, we oppress.

We pervert, we quarrel, we rebel.

We steal, we transgress, we are unkind.

We are violent, we are wicked, we are xenophobic.

We yield to evil, we are zealots for bad causes.

We “yield to evil” and are “zealots for bad causes.” Hard words to say on the 25th of September, 2004, the 10th of Tishri, 5765. You will remember that the *Vidui* is preceded by a prayer for peace: “Grant true and lasting peace to Your people Israel and to all who dwell on earth, for you are the King of supreme peace.” Peace is the gift of God, we are told, but of course the burden is on men to achieve it. It is inevitably *our* problem. Job did not cause his boils; God did. But God did not create the war in Iraq; we did.

And that is the problem of the *Vidui*. It is an expression of group guilt. *We* have done all of those terrible things: “*We* are violent, *we* are wicked, *we* are xenophobic.” But we collectively do only what each of us individually does. It is easy to confess as a group, but we as Jews have not institutionalized individual confession. Are we saying in the *Vidui*, of each one of us personally: *I* am “cruel” and *I* “oppress”? Or is the intent of the *Vidui* be to let us off individually?

If you agree with my sense that the United States is currently responsible for the creation of immoral, that is evil, acts at this point in history – and I ask this only of those of you who share my disapproval of certain American policies – how do you understand your relationship to those acts? Are *you* responsible for what was done in the Abu Ghraib prison? Are *we* responsible? If not you and me, *who* is morally responsible – the noncoms who committed the specific acts? Their superiors? The elected and appointed officials who (implicitly or explicitly) appointed them? Who is responsible for the decision to attack communities like Najaf and Falluja with heavy weaponry in order to kill “insurgents” in the full knowledge that innocent bystanders will also be killed in every attack? Are we not again destroying villages to save them?

This is not asking the “is it good for the Jews?” question; it is asking the “what are we Jews good for?” question. It is asking if personal responsibility for public affairs matters? It is asking whether confession and repentance are enough in an increasingly terrifying world. As Jews, many of us had difficulty with the concept of “the good

German,” but is our best option now to become “good Americans”? Is that a Jewish option?

Put another way, the question is what we, as moral people, can and should put up with? And at what point must the moral person resist, if not rebel? Here my text is not Jewish at all, but rather the chapter in *The Brothers Karamazov* in which Ivan tries to test the Christian faith of his brother Alyosha, a young and naïve monk. Is Alyosha’s faith strong enough to accept the existence of hideous injustice to humans? The implication of Ivan’s argument is that if Alyosha can accept the simultaneous existence of God and injustice, his faith is secure. Ivan therefore taunts the pious Alyosha with a brutal narrative of the simultaneous existence of piety and suffering in the world, especially the suffering of children -- suffering which (like Job’s) is altogether and undeniably undeserved. He demands of him to know: “why this infamy must be and is permitted? Without it, I am told, man could not have existed on earth, for he could not have known good and evil. Why should he know that diabolical good and evil when it cost so much?”

For Ivan the suffering of children is incomprehensible unless it comes about because of the crimes of their fathers: “If all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have children to do with it?” Ivan does not believe that the religious vision of eternal harmony can justify unmerited suffering – “And while I am on earth, I make haste to take my own measures,” he says. He doubts whether:

. . . there is the whole world a being who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? I don't want harmony. From love for humanity I don't want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, *even if I were wrong*. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony . . . And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket. . . . It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only that I most respectfully return Him the ticket.

Alyosha responds, "that's rebellion."

And so it is. I do not recommend rebellion, for I cannot put myself in Ivan Karamazov's place anymore than I can put myself in Job's place. But I think that Ivan asks the right question of us today as we ask for forgiveness and redemption. It is not Jewish to think that we can pay for the ticket of redemption. Job knew that. But I think it is Jewish to situate ourselves in relation to what we perceive as suffering around us, and to consider what measures moral people might take to be inscribed in the Book of Life. If we are convinced of the existence of injustice, are we not compelled to act? How else are we to assuage our personal sense of guilt? This is the question I ask myself today.

May each of you and all of us have an easy fast; may each of you and all of us be inscribed in the Book of Life.