

Heshbon Nefesh HaOlam: An Accounting of the Soul of the World
Yom Kippur 5767

Rabbi Sharon Brous

A couple of weeks ago, Frank Rich wrote about the abrupt return to normalcy after 9/11 and the general air of complacency in America. He made reference to a photograph by Thomas Hoepker taken in Brooklyn on September 11, 2001, which shows a “disorientingly tranquil and schizophrenic scene: a handful of young people, as if on a [picnic] or taking a breather from a bike ride,” chatting idly as “cascades of smoke [from the collapsed World Trade Center] engulf Lower Manhattan” in the background. Literally, schmoozing as “catastrophe looms in the distance.”¹

Since Rich’s column was printed, several of the subjects in the picture have come forward to publicly describe the shock and dismay they said they actually experienced at the destruction that day. But what is so important about this photo is not the judgement of these five particular individuals, but rather the truth that it reveals about all of us.

This photograph evokes, vividly, the dangers of spiritual escapism -- the ability that we all have to assume that the monumental tragedies unfolding before our eyes are somehow less interesting or important than our plans for the weekend. I have kept the photograph on my desktop for the past several weeks as I prepared for these holidays -- looking at it periodically as a reminder of just how spiritually and morally anorexic our society has become, and how deeply in need we are of a wake up call to our responsibilities in a world that is turning and burning directly in front of us.

We began the High Holy Days this year with an Accounting of the Soul, an unequivocal assertion that the individual matters, that the ways that we live our lives, interact with our neighbors, colleagues, friends and family members have ultimate significance in our world. Last night we explored the Soul of the Jewish People, considering what needs to happen for Judaism to remain a vital, compelling force in the world. Let us now take a couple of moments to address the Soul of our World:²

How many people here today have children under five years old? There are 2.2 billion children in the world. Half of them live in poverty, which kills 11 million children each year. That means that during the course of this sermon, more than 300 kids will die, either from treatable illnesses or lack of food and drinking water.

The amount of money that Americans and Europeans spend on perfume each year (\$12 billion) is *twice* the total cost of basic education for all the world’s people (\$6 billion). Americans and

1 New York Times, 9/10/06; www.watchingtheworldchange.com

2 most stats culled from globalissues.org.

Europeans spend twice as much money on pet food each year (\$17 billion) than it would cost to provide water and sanitation for all the people of the world (\$9 billion).

- As Koffi Anan said: “Almost half the world’s population lives on less than two dollars a day, yet even this statistic fails to capture the humiliation, powerlessness and brutal hardship that is the daily lot of the world’s poor.”³

Despite the fact that ongoing brutal conflicts in Africa hardly attract media attention, tens of millions of Africans have been killed in civil and cross-border wars, and there are now 10 million African refugees. “If this scale of destruction and fighting was in Europe, [there is no doubt that] people would be calling it World War III.”⁴ It has been 2 years since the US called the atrocities in Darfur “genocide” and yet still there has been no robust international force sent to intervene.

Numerous nations currently possess, or have the means to procure, weapons of mass destruction, whether nuclear, chemical or biological.

In May 2003, Amnesty International claimed that “The ‘war on terror,’ far from making the world a safer place, had made it more dangerous... deepening divisions among people of different faiths and origins, [and] sowing the seeds for more conflict.”

The National Intelligence Estimate, reflecting a consensus of 16 American intelligence agencies -- written 6 months ago but made public only last week -- came to the same conclusions, saying that “the Iraq war had become a ‘cause célèbre’ for Islamic extremists,” that terrorists “are increasing in both number and geographic dispersion,” which will likely lead to “increasing attacks worldwide.”⁵

The vast majority of scientists agree that global warming is real, that it’s already happening and that it is the result of our activities rather than a natural occurrence. The evidence is overwhelming, and most experts agree that this may be one of the greatest threats facing the planet.⁶

There are over 40 million people currently living with HIV/ AIDS -- and 32 million have already died. The toll of this pandemic will far exceed all of the combined deaths from WWII.

- Effective immunization to measles costs just \$0.30 per person, and has been available for over 40 years, but nevertheless more than half a million people, mostly children, die from measles each year. Each of those lives could have been saved for less than the cost of a postage stamp.

3 International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, October 17, 2000.

4 globalissues.org.

5 New York Times, 9/28/06.

6 climatecrisis.net.

What kind of wake-up call would it take to force us to look up from our carpooling schedules, our busy work lives, our relationship dramas, to be present to the enormity of the global destruction we are facing?

In his magnum opus *Orot HaKodesh*, Rav Kook writes:

“*It is the great dreams that are the foundation of the world-*החלומות הגדולים יסוד העולם הם-”⁷

In other words, the whole world stands only because some people have the courage and capacity to dream great dreams.

What is *our* dream -- the Jewish dream?

The first of the ten commandments reads more like a statement than a commandment:

I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֶבֶד יָם: (Exodus 20:2).

This assertion holds the key to the revolutionary Jewish response to the world. From the experience of the Exodus, I read the foundational claims of the Jewish tradition:

That all people have innate dignity and worth, deserve to be free and can become free.

That God cares about human beings and desires justice in our world.

That God does not act alone, but demands human partnership in the work of redemption .

The Exodus story serves for all time as a potent *counter-testimony* to the reality of our world.

Imagine a people, enslaved and dehumanized for generation after generation, all hope of freedom and dignity beaten out of them. After hundreds of years, it seems manifestly clear that nothing will ever change. But then everything changes. Most of Jewish life and law is an attempt to discern the implications of the Exodus experience and to live in its light...⁸

-Rabbi Shai Held

The Jewish dream is a world in which human beings live with dignity in a world of justice and peace. It is this dream that has kept the Jewish people alive and given us the strength to survive years of deprivation and suffering -- because we believed at every moment that it was possible for the world to look different than it does. “This dream is the heart of Judaism.”⁹

Of course, the reality of our world, overrun with poverty, oppression, disease and discrimination, torture, terror and genocide, threatens to make a mockery of our dream, making

7 Rav Kook, *Orot haKodesh*, p. 218.

8 Rabbi Shai Held on Shemot.

9 Rabbi Yitz Greenberg Greenberg, p. 127.

it look instead like a childish fantasy. But our tradition teaches that “*the uninhibited dream, which is in revolt against reality and its limitations, is the most substantive truth of existence.*”¹⁰ In other words, the dream is *more true* than reality, because it reflects the best of who we are and who we can be. If we stop dreaming, if we accept that our world has to be as it is, we become spiritually dead. No -- our work is to dare to dream great dreams *despite* the fact that reality seems to belie those dreams. Rather than dwell in cynicism or despair, the Jewish covenant requires instead that the reality of suffering evokes within us an acute sense of responsibility to radically restructure our world. This, our tradition tells us, is what it means to be a religious person in the world.

That’s why the Prophet Isaiah simply could not tolerate religious ritual devoid of moral action. He excoriates the people:

*Is this the fast that I desire?
For you to starve your bodies?...
NO! This is the fast that I desire:
To separate yourself from wrongdoing...
To share your bread with the hungry,
and to take the poor and desperate into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to ignore his suffering...*

- Isaiah 58:5-7

What a profoundly subversive message in the middle of the observance of Yom Kippur, just as we begin to feel the pangs of our own fast: God rejects false acts of piety, devoid of conviction. God *demand*s of us justice, mercy and compassion, and will not abide the hypocrisy and vulgar passivity of empty religious gestures while the world burns.

Our Rabbis translate this sentiment into a forceful articulation of responsibility and accountability, teaching that “anyone who has the ability to protest against [the offenses of] the entire world, but does not protest, is held [personally] responsible for the actions of the entire world.”¹¹ In other words, we have an affirmative obligation to intercede in the face of oppression, injustice and suffering. And lest we think these are meant to be read as hollow sentiments, the Rabbis even go so far as to contemplate appropriate punishment should we neglect to act.

But most of us, when confronted by the global reality are so overwhelmed that we throw up our hands in dismay. It’s enough for me to get my kids to school on time, to get my work in by deadline. I have to now take responsibility for all of the problems of the world? I don’t have Buffet’s billions -- what can I really do anyway?

I understand this instinct. To truly be present to the massive destruction being wrought by AIDS, to the millions of women suffering from sexual abuse and degradation, the anguish of parents

¹⁰ Rav Kook -- Orot HaKodesh, p. 219.

¹¹ Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 54b

forced to watch their kids go hungry -- to see each and all of these as our personal responsibility, would indeed be paralyzing. But the fact that we cannot do everything must not stop us from doing something. We want our kids to feel loved, we want to be fulfilled by our work, we want to be in relationships that are continually stimulating. These needs and concerns are real, but they must not be all consuming. It would be a dangerous misstep to ignore our personal, particular needs and stories. But it would also be a treacherous betrayal of our shared humanity to ignore the universal. Our world, ravaged by violence, hatred, hunger and fear, will never begin to heal if we excuse ourselves from the global drama because the work is too big or we're just too busy.

According to Jewish Law, the first thing we are to do after breaking the fast tonight is to lay a stake in the ground, to begin to build our Sukkot. The message could not be more clear: Yom Kippur is about dreaming great dreams. But the moment that the sun sets tonight, our obligation shifts to concretizing those dreams, our deepest commitments, in a way that will impact the world.

I challenge every single person in this room, in this holy community, to concretize the Jewish dream by doing three things tonight.

1. I have asked you to hold a blank check in your pocket throughout the holiday. Take that check, and before you break your fast, make a donation to Mazon -- www.mazon.org -- an organization that allocates donations from the Jewish community to prevent and alleviate hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds. We are all probably starting to feel hungry and dizzy from our fasts -- consider the fact that tens of millions of Americans, over a million Israelis, and over 850 million people in the world feel this hunger every single day -- but without the promise of a break fast come nightfall.

I often talk about AJWS -- the American Jewish World Service, an extraordinary international development organization dedicated to alleviating poverty, hunger and disease among the people of the developing world. When you go home tonight, go to www.AJWS.org and sign up for the AJWS Action Network -- which will give you weekly advocacy alerts on key global issues -- from the genocide in Darfur to the HIV/ AIDS crisis. The first way to respond to the crises of the world is to be awake to them -- to see them sitting in our inbox every morning. A *minyan* is a quorum -- a group of 10 people who come together with a shared purpose -- usually to pray and allow those who need to to say mourner's kaddish. Our tradition teaches that a *minyan* has the ability to bring the presence of Gd into our world. I am asking that each one of us gather a group of 10 friends/ colleagues/ family members, and create a *minyan tzedek* -- a *minyan* of justice. Invite this *minyan* to gather in your home for a house party -- and choose one specific topic of global concern -- be it environmental destruction, hunger, disease or the situation in Israel. Dream together about what the world would look like if we were able to address this issue meaningfully and effectively. And then figure out what your *minyan* can do -- maybe it's writing a big check together, maybe it's raising awareness, maybe it's bringing the issue to 10 more friends and colleagues who will each create their own *minyanei tzedek*, galvanizing a more substantial response.

We have a daunting task set before us -- how much easier would it be if we didn't need to hear the urgent call to look up from our lives and see the fire consuming the landscape of our world! And yet it is the audacious belief in the dignity of humanity, the uncompromising dream of a world redeemed that calls us to task. To be a Jew is to be an inheritor of a rich, challenging, nurturing tradition, but at the same time to never get too comfortable, because the Jewish heart must never stop aching as long as any of G-d's children suffer. We must never stop fighting for the world we dream of, because our very existence -- as a people plucked from the darkness of slavery and the fire of the crematoria¹² -- is testimony to possibility of miracles.

A couple of weeks ago I pulled out of the garage with my daughter, almost 3, in the backseat. The sky, for the first time in weeks was overcast and foreboding. Having just read Nicholas Kristof's piece about a 24 year old mother of 3 in Cameroon who died in childbirth because her family couldn't afford the \$100 it would cost to have an emergency c-section, I found myself relieved by the darkness in the sky -- it matched my mood.

"Ima look at the sky!" Eva shouted.

"Yeah, baby -- what color is that?"

"It's *blue* Ima!"

"No honey," I said to her. "It's grey. Dark grey."

"No, it's blue!" she insisted.

"Where do you see blue?" I asked her.

"Right *there*, Ima." She pointed out the window to a tiny crack of clear blue in the corner of the overcast sky -- so insignificant in the midst of the darkness that I hadn't even noticed. But to her in that moment, that small crack of light *was* the sky.

As people who carry the memory of *yetziat mitzrayim* emblazoned on our hearts, we must not abdicate our responsibility to work devotedly toward the realization of dignity for all of God's children. We, Jews and human beings of conscience, are a people of eternal unease. But the benchmarks of human history are defined not by the attainment of comfort, but by the pursuit of justice. No matter how deeply the world is saturated with grief, our work this Yom Kippur is to find the spiritual strength to dream and to *hope*, even in a world of anguish, to find a crack of blue sky in the darkness of our days. We need to have the audacity to believe that what Margaret Meade said is actually true: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." We need to believe that we can actually be agents of radical change in the world.

Let us leave here tonight taking concrete steps toward a world transformed.

¹² This is how Heschel described himself and his generation.