

**KOL NIDRE**  
**Friday, October 7, 2011**

Stealing was very popular in certain circles.

Composers did it all the time in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Aaron Copland based many of his most popular pieces on American folk songs. So did Bela Bartok, Anton Dvorak and Max Bruch, the composer of the poignant and heart rending Kol Nidre, which we just heard so beautifully played by Paolo and Alberto.

Max Bruch himself wrote that his piece was never intended for synagogue use. It was to be another one of his concertos for orchestra and cello. Bruch was a Protestant, who lived in Berlin. Yes, he was friendly with a number of Jewish musicians, but he had no intention of writing a synagogue piece.

And yet, the folk melody, which Bruch uses, has become, for some, the quintessential piece of Jewish music known to the world.

Even more curious is the text to which Bruch set his music. It is a rather legalistic formula, which is devoid of any poetry. Listen to the words again:

“Let all our vows and oaths, all promises we make and the obligations we incur to You, O God, between this Yom Kippur and the next, be null and void should we, after honest effort, find ourselves unable to fulfill them. Then may we be absolved of them.”

Not very poetic. But they are interesting for another reason. They capture the future-looking aspect of this service. Yom Kippur looks to the past, to be sure. We ask God to forgive our sins from the past. But we are reminded that we are in charge of our own destiny. We have the capacity to change and to alter our unacceptable behavior from years past.

Even though we have the potential to succeed, it is a realistic possibility that we may fail. Essentially, we are confronted with a very real view of the world, and our own humanness.

- HOPE, AN ESSENTIAL JEWISH DOCTRINE.

The Bible and the later rabbinic literature are filled with the notion of hope, the future for which we yearn. The assumption here is that we are dissatisfied with the status quo. There are things in our world that do not satisfy us. We seek their correction. There are things in our personal lives that we feel need correction, or improvement.

Hope is to be seen, by the biblical writer, to a very large extent, as symbolized by two separate mountains.

Jon Levenson, who teaches Jewish studies at Harvard, among others, reads the Mount Zion covenant about political and collective redemption, about the restoration of the Temple Mount and the re-institution of ritual. The second is Mount Sinai, focusing on personal and individual fulfillment of our own futures.

The Mount Zion vision of the future is what motivates many people in the Jewish world today. It is about the restoration of the Temple of David, with all its trappings. I became aware of a significant movement of Jews and Christians to restore the Temple.

While I was living in Houston, during my first retirement, I served a small but vibrant congregation in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

There was an interesting couple, who allied themselves with the congregation. They were born Catholics, of Italian roots, who lived in Lake Charles most of their lives. They came to talk to me soon after my arrival. They both wanted to convert to Judaism. Their path to Judaism was an interesting one.

They were followers of a group who sought to restore the Temple on Mount Zion. They were strong believers in the idea that only when the Temple is rebuilt, will there be peace in the world.

Their international organization was active in re-creating all the holy vessels of the Temple as described in the biblical Books of Leviticus and Numbers. I confess to you today that my five years at the Hebrew Union College, we spent scant time on these books. So, I forced myself to read Leviticus and Numbers. I immersed myself in how the Temple sacrifices were to be conducted. This was tough going, because the instructions are not very clear. Some scholars

have even suggested that instead of a description of what had occurred, as some people suggest that it is a prescription of what might happen in the future. They say it was all a fantasy.

That restoration movement is made up of many Christians, for whom the restoration of the Temple is a prerequisite for the Second Coming of Jesus. They have created all the vessels and vestments as described in the Bible.

When the couple came to me seeking to convert to Judaism, it was apparent that they had passed through several other religions by this point. I was quite reluctant to convert them, at least without greater study of mainstream Judaism. They ultimately bypassed me, and flew to New York for a quickie conversion on the Lower East Side, buttressing the notion that you can get anything you want for a price.

By the way, I understand that they have made aliya.

Of course, there is a small problem about Temple restoration. The site, where the Temple once stood, is now occupied by the Dome of the Rock and Al Aksa Mosque.

The other mountain used by Professor Levenson is Mount Sinai. Sinai is the place of covenant between God and the Jewish people, where Moses received the Torah for all of us. Its focus is on personal responsibility and fulfillment under the laws of the Torah. It is about my fulfillment of my personal goals to becoming more humane, more responsible for my own actions.

Sinai is my personal choice for my hope in the future. Its message is about my living as a Jew in relation to the problems of our time.

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### **THE MESSIANIC WAY**

How are we to fulfill these differing visions of the future? How are we to get to the fulfillment of the vision?

Whether the choice is the more institutional future, or the more personal

future, the road is riddled with potholes. So difficult is the task that many people, who ponder the challenges in front of us, have given up. Their position is that we need an external force to bring us to our goals. That external force is variously described as God, or in another way, the messiah.

For many people, we human beings are so flawed, so sinful, that there is no way that we can achieve the future we so desire without intervention from an outside force.

That view is essentially a Christian view of life and the world in which we live. The view of Calvin was enough to depress anyone. His view was that there is nothing that we, as individuals, can do about our flawed condition. We can only hope, through God's grace, that we will find ourselves in a better place in the afterlife.

While there are certainly messianic streams of thought in Judaism, none of these has been in the mainstream. Even in the darkest periods of Jewish history, redemption by a messiah never occupied a central role in Jewish life.

Perhaps Jews are too practical. Could we conceive of a messiah visiting King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella and causing them to stop a campaign of ridding Spain of Jews? Or a similar intervention with Hitler and his followers?

The view of those who identify themselves as evangelical Christians is that the correction of the world, the fulfillment of biblical desires for peace and harmony can only come about through the acceptance of Jesus as the messiah. It is he, through external intervention, will bring about the hope for which we all seek.

For some evangelicals, Jews are crucial to the arrival of Jesus the redeemer. They believe that only when all Jews come to believe in Jesus, then he will be ready to come. This is a view articulated by many Southern Baptists, in their churches or in larger, more public venues.

It seems gratuitous to say that this is not the Jewish way.

We do not believe that we are insufficiently capable of fulfilling age old dreams with their messages of hope for harmony and peace.

Indeed, we Jews believe that we, and all people, have the capacities to do anything that we choose to do. Here and now.

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## **TIKUN OLAM**

The Jewish idea of our own human capacities is expressed in the Hebrew phrase “tikun olam,” loosely translated as the idea of “repair of the world.”

Now tikun olam is an oft repeated phrase. It has almost become a cliché for every project that has ever come to any Jewish mind. Some even think it is a new, kitschy thing, something created by New York liberals, or East Coast liberals, if you wish, to justify and validate more of the money we send to Washington.

I beg to differ.

Tikun Olam is not about a welfare state, nor is it about spending someone else’s money on pet projects. Tikun Olam is not about legislation for my home town, designed to assure my re-election as a Senator or Member of Congress.

Tikun Olam is about how we think, and how we behave as individuals living in a society.

Tikun Olam is about a do-it-yourself style of living in every town and city in this country. Tikun Olam is about feeling a sense of responsibility for every other human being.

Tikun Olam is about marching with Martin Luther King, Jr., in Selma, Alabama. Tikun Olam is about rallying on behalf of imprisoned Soviet Jewry in Washington, D. C. Tikun Olam is about Project Head Start, and assisting the elderly on the Upper West Side.

Tikun Olam is about not leaving it to bureaucrats in Washington to change the world.

Tikun Olam is about standing up against libelous language and behavior to American Muslims, who suffer from the same plight as Catholics and Jews, when we were new immigrants to America.

So central is Tikun Olam to Jewish thinking and living that if I were to have to trade off coming to the synagogue and behaving righteously, I would opt for behaving righteously.

Indeed, this is what Hope, that key Jewish doctrine is all about. Hope for us Jews is about responsible, ethical behavior.

## **CONCLUSION**

Yes, one of the essential ideas of Judaism is HOPE. Hope that the world can be made a better place. Hope that tomorrow will be better for our children and our grandchildren and our great grandchildren.

Hope is what keeps us going, what keeps us alive.

But hope is a static concept. Hope can only be turned into reality, no matter how small, but a reality none the less. And that reality, for us Jews, is about tikun olam. Changing the world, little by little, jot by jot, tittle by tittle.

No outside force will perform that action, while we sit by and speculate. No messiah will present himself and fulfill the dreams that we all share.

It is only through our own action, through each step in perfecting the world will our hopes be fulfilled.

Our rabbis called it Tikun Olam. Tikun Olam moves us to action, and so may we be moved in the new year. Amen.