

YOM KIPPUR MORNING

September 28, 2009

It was certainly easy to get depressed this year. For many of us, the widespread fallout from the world recession impacted us all. There is hardly anyone among us who has not suffered in one way or another.

For months, the news reports on the economy were horrible. Unemployment rising to 10%. Housing prices and housing sales tanking. Vaunted banks and corporations needed bailing out. Who could have imagined such conditions in America? Who, except those chronically depressed people, would even think about a repeat of the Great Depression of the 1930's.

Now, it is the common wisdom that a greater disaster was narrowly averted by clever management by the U.S. Government.

But in all this darkness, there were several bright spots. For decades, we have striven to make equality a reality in this country. To a very great extent - though not to the pleasure of everyone - many of our goals for America have been fulfilled.

It is no longer a given in this country that only those of privilege can serve our country. Indeed, both President Obama and Justice Sotomayor are excellent examples of those who were able to rise above their low positions at birth.

So, in spite of the rampant bad news, there is some very good news. Indeed, it is this good news which underlines Judaism's optimistic spirit. If you need evidence that we can choose to do better, to be better, this is it.

This is not to say that everyone can be a Supreme Court justice or President of the United States. But each one of us can choose the direction of our lives. Judaism teaches us that in spite of the darkness that often surrounds us, we must have hope that we can do better; that we can be better.

I. WAITING FOR THE MESSIAH

For many centuries, Jews prayed for the coming of the messiah, who would relieve them of their many burdens, who would free them from worldly cares, and restore them to the Jewish homeland.

The idea of the messiah gave them hope to continue, to go on, during periods of great darkness and sorrow. The words of Maimonides in his articles of faith were set to music. *Ani maanin b'viat hamashiach, ani maamin*. "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the messiah, though he may tarry, I still believe." As Jews marched to their death in concentration camps, they chanted these words.

But it was in an earlier time, in a quieter, more serene age, in a more salubrious place, that Jews took a different stance. Reform Judaism, in its earliest years in Germany, reflecting the ideas of the Enlightenment, articulated the notion that it is only **through our own efforts** will the messiah come.

I believe that this early Reform Jewish articulation was caused by many factors. First, that there was little evidence that a messiah would ultimately come. In spite of all the prayers uttered, there was not yet a messiah. Judaism has many examples of false messiahs - really lunatics. So, the early leaders of Reform argued, the notion of a savior who would change the world was perhaps a vain hope that would never be fulfilled. Perhaps, they reasoned, this was a vain point of view.

Second, I believe that this was a "dig" at Christianity. Their messiah, Jesus, had already come. Redemption, whatever that may mean, did not arrive with Jesus.

Now, a second coming was anticipated, but because people were too sinful, he tarried.

Third, especially in optimistic America at the end of the 19th century, efforts to bring about a messianic age fit in very nicely with the notion of social action as an important Jewish value. Christians called it “the social gospel.”

I believe that the idea of social justice was reinforced by another Jewish movement, Zionism. For centuries, traditional Jews believed that it was only the messiah who would be able to restore Jews to their homeland. Along came the Zionists at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century who worked with great intensity toward the establishment of a Jewish state in ancient Palestine.

Most Orthodox Jews then, and many Orthodox Jews today, believed that a secular state in the Middle East is a sacrilege without divine intervention. In fact, some chasidic sects to this day do not recognize the legitimacy of the modern State of Israel. The Zionist movement said: If we don’t do it, no one will.

So, the coalition of history, Enlightenment philosophy, Christian social justice movements and Zionism led us to this day. The idea of personal responsibility rests at the very center of modern Jewish thinking. “You shall choose life!” And the emphasis is on the very idea of choice.

II. CALVINIST THINKING

One of the great arguments among Christian thinkers revolves around the issue of pre-destination. Or to put it differently, the issue of FREE WILL.

From the earliest days of Christianity, the issue of free will has occupied theologians. There were two enormous controversies, one between St. Augustine and Pelagius. Pelagius argued for free will, while Augustine asserted that our destiny is in the hands of God, and that we have little to say about our own destiny. The Augustine approach was adopted by both Luther and Calvin.

Calvin asserted that we are pre-determined by God. He said that people have not choices in their lives. Choices are meaningless, by this sort of thinking.

Jews have always taken the view that people have free will, even though God in his infinite wisdom, knows what we will choose.

It is interesting to note that the question of Fate is a major issue in all religions, of the west as well as the east. Buddhism speaks of Karma, a word which we all know. In orthodox Islam, there is absolute pre-determination.

The consequences of pre-determination are far reaching, and of course, in a very large sense tend to limit personal freedom and behavior.

I think the Jewish world would be very much different if we just accepted our lot, as we perceived it given to us. Our ancestors in Eastern Europe at the end of the 19th century were faced with real choices - not theoretical ones. Pogroms became more rampant in Russia. The condition of the Jews in the Pale of Settlement was

dreadful. They were poor, and their sons were drafted into the Czar's army. They had a choice: to remain, waiting for the messiah, or to take destiny into their own hands.

Our grandparents or great-grandparents, took to bold step in emigrated to America. One third of all Eastern European Jewry left their homeland. They heard that the streets of America were paved with gold - a tad bit of an exaggeration. But they came by the hundred of thousands. Some didn't quite get here. They ended up in England or in places in Latin America, because the doors to America were not eternally open.

What was the fate of those who remained? Some landed in Palestine, believing Zionist ideology. A full third of Eastern European Jewry was killed by the Nazis.

The message is clear. Judaism has optimism built into our system of thought. Do not be afraid! You are not consumed in the hands of fate.

III. PLAN B AND BEYOND

In spite of our best laid plans, we frequently have little control over events that will befall us. Those things that we felt were certain and sure, frequently collapse. The Recession from which we are emerging has taught us lessons that we much try very hard to learn.

You know the truths: “Buy real estate. The market never goes down, only up.” “Stick with General Motors. A General Motors goes, so goes the nation.” “What’s good for General Motors is good for America.” “Stocks are secure.” And on and on.

We learned that we are more vulnerable. Our pension funds tanked. Secure retirement is no longer assured.

Yes, we learned that we need to be cautious about whom we entrust our money. We also learned that many of the values of America are ephemeral. Money does not buy happiness. Perhaps there are other values that should emerge for all of us.

The Recession should cause us to think about our values and our goals in life. The Recession should cause us to realize that creature comforts are not the end-all of our existence. Yachts in the Caribbean or the Mediterranean should not be our goal.

Family need to re-emerge to a central place in our lives. Friendships, true friendships, will sustain us.

But more than this, having alternate plans, Plan B, will be our salvation. Put differently, put not all your eggs in one basket. Think boldly, thinking wisely, and do not be sidetracked by ephemera.

If I have to characterize the world view, the thinking of both Obama and Sotomayor, it would be optimism. They operated on the premise that there is nothing that they could not accomplish in their lives, nothing that they could not achieve.

Some would call this approach to life foolhardy.

But, to a very large degree, optimism is essential to Judaism, to the attitudes that Judaism teaches. They very notion that I have choices. The very notion that I can do better, be a better person, is a manifestation of the optimism that is inherent in Judaism.

CONCLUSION

For centuries our liturgy has emphasized at this Holy Day season that we must choose: between good and evil, right and wrong. We are told that we are not destined for one fate or another.

We are told that we have control of our lives. While God may know what our choices are in advance, we still have free will.

This year, it would have been very easy to allow pessimism to take over our lives. The hand that we were dealt by the economy set the stage. The dire state that the previous administrative left to us might have led us to say, “Woe unto us. We cannot change the way the world is.”

And yet, we had hope. We looked forward to the future, and not only back at the past. There have been green shoots. Yes, we are not home free yet.

But we still have hope. We live with the notion that we can make things better; we have change the world; that tomorrow will be better and that we can be better.

Ken y’hi ratzon. May this new reality be fulfilled in the days to come. Amen.