

"Restoring Your Faith In Humanity"
דרשה (sermon) for the First Day of Rosh Hashanah 5769
September 30, 2008

One day, Abe, a local store owner came into the Rabbi's office. "Rabbi, I have an ethical dilemma." He said. The Rabbi listened intently as Abe went on: "Yesterday, one of my good customers came into the store to buy a couple of things. The bill was ten dollars, and so she paid me and left the store. After she left, I looked at the bill she gave me, and it turned out that rather than giving me ten dollars, she had given me a one hundred dollar bill. Now, here's the ethical question Rabbi. . . . Do I have to tell my partner?"

This joke tells the story of a real life situation that I think we've all been in. Each one of us has had a time where a person gave us too much money, perhaps when buying something from us, or perhaps when receiving change from a purchase. The truth is, there is no "ethical dilemma" here. What we should do is quite clear.

Recently, I had a conversation with someone who gone shopping and left a bag of her purchases at the store. When she called the store the next day, she was surprised that the janitor had turned in her purchases, and that she was able to go back to the store and pick them up. We discussed how likely it was that things would turn out right. She thought it was a really long shot that she could recover that bag. I was not nearly as surprised.

What's interesting is, I think most of us believe that if we were the ones to find that bag, we would have turned it in. And I imagine that each one of us could think back to an experience where a lost item was returned to us, or a store clerk returned the excess money we had accidentally paid. So why do we have so little trust in others? I would like to suggest that it is about time that we change our expectations, and that we change the way we look at others. As we gather here today, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, and affirm our faith in our creator, let us also affirm our faith in humanity, which is, after all, God's greatest creation.

In the Torah, we learn that even our great patriarch Abraham had his doubts about humanity. When Abraham and Sarah went to Gerar, Abraham was afraid that people might decide to kill him in order to take Sarah as a wife. Therefore, Abraham said that Sarah was his sister.¹ King Avimelech took Sarah for himself, but before he did anything God appeared to Avimelech in a dream to tell him that Sarah is Abraham's wife. Avimelech confronted Abraham: "How could you do this to me. You almost caused me to commit a grave sin." Abraham explains: *וְהָרְגוּנִי עַל דְּבַר אִשְׁתִּי* for *I said "there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me for my wife."*²

¹ Technically speaking, this was partially true, as Abraham explains in Genesis 20:12.

² Gen. 20:11.

I think it is very significant that immediately following the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Avimelech comes the beginning of today's Torah reading, which begins by telling us וְה' פָּקַד אֶת שָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר *The LORD remembered Sarah as he had promised*³ - and that Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to Isaac. Perhaps the juxtaposition of these stories tells us that only after they had been taught to have faith in the decency of the people around them, could Abraham and Sarah bring our next Patriarch, Isaac, into the world. Our forebearers had the privilege of bringing the nation of Israel into this world, a nation that would strive to serve as an אור לגוים *a light unto the nations*.⁴ How could the people Israel expect to enlighten the world with the message of holiness, goodness, and justice, were they not able to see that there were people in the world ready to hear that message?! And so, only when Sarah and Abraham became aware of the יראי א-להים, *the fearers of God* around them, were they blessed to bring Isaac into this world.

And yet one may ask, is faith in humanity well founded? We have wars and famine. We have cheats and scoundrels. We have terrorists and murderers. But the answer is YES! Of course we have reason to have faith. Because we also have people who give charity and volunteer their time. We have people who fight for the poor and the destitute. And while we have 19 men would fly airplanes into buildings, we have hundreds of sanctified souls who charged up into those same burning buildings to help save others. And we have that wonderful bag of clothing, left behind at the store, recovered a day later after the janitor turned it in. So, yes, while many deeds perpetrated by humans cause us to have doubts, there are even more wonderful deeds that should always remind us that there is good reason to have abiding faith in humanity. The Torah tells us as much with the majestic words that introduce humanity into the world: וְעָשָׂה אֱדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ *let us make man in our image and likeness*.⁵ Humanity, each of its members, has a spark of the divine, that, when properly guided, leads to goodness and justice.

So now, what do we do with our faith in humanity? What do we do with the realization that there is much good in humanity? Once we realize that humanity is capable of goodness, we have the solemn responsibility to expect humanity to do good and to be good. Rather than being surprised when we see good being done, we should do our best to recognize that good and support it through our own deeds. When we see an act of justice and of honesty, we must take the moment to realize that we are witnessing a reflection of God in human nature. Perhaps in the end we'll come to realize how these acts are not nearly as rare as we think.

When we see humanity fall short, let us not be resigned to these evils as if they cannot change. The Torah tells us: לֹא תִשְׂנֵא אֶת אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכַח תוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתֶךָ וְלֹא תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֶטְא, when an individual does something wrong, *do not just hate your brother in your heart - you should chastise your kinsman and not bare iniquity because of him*.⁶ The Torah emphatically tells us that we are responsible for the actions of others, and that we should have the courage and decency to correct their errant ways.

³ Genesis 21:1.

⁴ See e.g. Isaiah 22:6, 49:6.

⁵ Genesis 1:26.

⁶ Leviticus 19:17.

Ironically, it is when we have the courage to correct the misdeeds of others that we most emphatically demonstrate our abiding faith in humanity. To point out a misdeed is to tell the other that they are capable of better. Were the matter a "lost cause," we would simply not say a word. But our Torah warns us not to treat the moral wellbeing of others as a lost cause. That, after all, would be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Don't go on just hating the person for their misdeed, show your love to that person by telling them that you have faith that they can choose a more honorable course. By speaking out, by demanding better, we can take a moment of disappointment and turn it into our greatest expression of faith in humanity. And so I would ask you: the next time you hear your friend or relative disparaging another person, or taking advantage of a situation, don't be silent. Have faith. Speak up. Tell the person that you know that residing within him or her is the image and likeness of God, and that you know they are capable of reflecting that image.

This also is a message found in the relationship between Avimelech and Abraham in today's Torah reading. Some time after the incident with Sarah, we are told that Avimelech offers Abraham a peace treaty. Abraham immediately accepts the treaty, but he also discusses with Avimelech how his servants had stolen a well from Abraham.⁷ Some time ago, Abraham had hidden the identity of Sarah because he lacked faith in the human decency of Avimelech and his people. Now that Abraham knew that Avimelech was a descent person, Abraham could not remain silent Avimelech's misdeeds. Instead, Abraham seeks to correct what had gone wrong.

But there's one more thing that we need to do with our renewed faith in humanity. We must apply this faith to ourselves. Because just as we have every right to expect more of the world, we have an obligation to demand more of ourselves. Pope John Paul II is quoted as teaching: "Settle for nothing less than moral and spiritual greatness. That's what God created you for. Don't cheat yourself."⁸ It's a wonderful message. Don't sell yourself short. Have faith in yourself and know that you are capable of a greater existence.

During Rosh Hashanah, we recognize that God sits in judgment of us. But what's more important is that we sit in judgment ourselves. In fact, the translation of the word תפילה (*tefillah*, prayer) is "self judgment." And so, if we go through this holiday with being satisfied with ourselves, without the awareness that we are capable of more, and without the conviction to achieve more, we betray a profound lack of faith in ourselves.

⁷ Genesis 21:25.

⁸ See e.g. Reverend Richard John Neuhaus on Meet The Press, Easter Sunday Special, 2006, transcript at <http://southwestnomad.wordpress.com/2006/04/22/first-things/>

And so, I ask you this Rosh Hashanah, to summon up a greater sense of faith in humanity and faith in yourselves. Be certain that humanity is good, and is capable of better. Expect more of your friends and family. Most importantly, demand more of yourself. "Settle for nothing less than moral and spiritual greatness." Strengthen your bonds to your Judaism, and to Torah as your guide to achieving that spiritual greatness. Don't sell yourselves short. Be confident that you are capable of more. Demand of yourself that this year you will strengthen your spiritual bonds by praying more often. Demand of yourself that you make more of the sanctity of the Sabbath in your life. Demand of yourself that you seek further guidance toward a life of justice and kindness through study of Torah. Demand that this year be a year where you do more charity and volunteer more time. Demand that this year you will be more attentive to the needs of others. Have faith in yourself, and start a life long journey toward realizing your capabilities.

May this year, 5769, be a year of abiding faith in ourselves and in others. Let not that faith be from a satisfaction at who we are, but out of a drive to become even better than we are. May this year be a year of growth in our spirituality, and may our spiritual growth be matched by growth in our deeds.