

Yom Kippur Sermon 2018 / 5779
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For the past couple of years, prior to the start of school, I have been blessed with the opportunity to be a part of the orientation for the collective staff of our JCC Preschools in Marin. And I tell them what I'm about to tell you now, which is that, since I've been involved in Jewish education – which has been over 20 years – I have taught formally at nearly every level – from preschool through graduate school – and by far the hardest level I have experienced as a teacher, is preschool. I just have tons of respect for preschool teachers for a lot of reasons, but mostly because they have to deal with these small kids. I mean they constantly interrupt you – it's just so rude! ☺

The year I taught preschool actually *was* the hardest teaching for me and, during that year, there were times I saw children playing – 3 and 4 year-olds – and, a few times within the year, there was a child who would turn any little toy – a block of wood, a plastic piece of anything – and turn it into a gun. And when I saw this, I wanted to say, “Where did you learn to do this?” Where? But before I could form the words, I would suddenly realize – Where do you think they learned it? Where else?

Everywhere we look we can see how violence pervades our everyday lives. Violence is rooted in a divided life; it's embedded in a fault line that lies within us, that cracks each of us open and then becomes a dividing line between us and others. It's everywhere. It's inside of me; it's inside of you. Violence is as much of a staple of our lives as anything we can really imagine. In fact, violence is so pervasive that when we see it or hear about it, we sort of write it off as, “Oh well, that's just normal.” We seem to be incredibly adept at normalizing what should be outrageous. It's normal to walk down the street, into shopping centers, and see video games with not just guns, but fully coordinated acts of war, ruthless carnage and gore. It's normal to watch commercials during all hours of the day, and on every station, and see violence. It's broadcasted into our homes; it's all over the Internet; it's in our living rooms; it's everywhere we look.

But there is a more insidious, deeper violence. There is a violence that is done to children when parents insult and shame them, when teachers demean their own students, when supervisors treat their employees as a disposable means to an economic end, when online trolls bully and humiliate others, when people condemn gays and lesbians in the name of God, or when racists live with the belief that others are less than human just because of a different skin color.

And just as physical violence may lead to physical death, spiritual violence causes death in other ways: death of a sense of self, death of trust in others, death of risk-taking on behalf of creativity, and death of commitment to the common good. If obituaries were written of this kind, there would not be enough paper and ink to record them.

So, the bad news today, on this holiest of days, is that violence in one form or another is pervasive. The good news is that we can do something about it. Namely, each and every one of us, we all can choose to act non-violently. We can choose to think non-violently, we can choose to speak non-violently, and nonviolence, as the great sociologist and educator, Parker Palmer suggests, has one fundamental habit of the heart and that is “learning to hold the tension of opposites. Trusting that the tension itself will pull our hearts and minds open to what he calls “a third way.” A third way. A way that is not polarized, not comprised of eithers & ors, but a third way of thinking, and a third way of acting in the world.

More specifically we must learn to hold the reality of the moment together with the possibility that something better might emerge. That’s the greatest tension! Holding the reality of the moment against the possibility of what yet might emerge. That is, if you will, the “yoga” of non-violence. The posture of the non-violent heart and mind is to hold that tension and to stand in that breach.

That space is what we might call “the tragic gap” – the gap between what is possible, what might be, and what is really as it is. Or, as Abraham Joshua Heschel referred to it: the difference between “ought and is” – what ought to be and the way it is.

I harbor no illusions about the difficulty of what we’re talking about here. It is not easy to stand in this tragic gap; it isn’t easy to bear the power of presence and simply be a witness – we are all way more sensitive than we tend to admit. To hold that space in-between, to see both what is and what ought to be simultaneously, can be agonizing. And so, we need to ask ourselves: why? Why is living like this so difficult?

If we were to take a moment, or a few moments, and do some self-reflection and introspection – if we did some honest and gritty *teshuvah* – we would see that at the heart of all of those tense moments in our lives, that what motivates our impulses and thinking is fear. Fear, which beneath all of our

angers, resentments, insecurity, and blame, is fear – that four-letter word that can be a corroding thread shooting across the fabric of our lives.

Now, fear, of course, is important; we wouldn't want to do away with it entirely. Fear has saved many of our lives. It has saved us from drifting too far from the shore in the ocean; it has stopped us from getting in a car with someone who we probably shouldn't be driving with. Fear is an emotional tool to help us learn and discern things; it's essential to our health and survival. It's just not a good way to live your life. A fear-driven life slams the door on hope. Fear makes us small and self-absorbed; fear stunts our spiritual growth and crushes our ability to dream and hold the space for possibility.

The Torah, wisely, gives us many examples of how fear keeps us from holding the space for hope and living in this third way. When Moses comes to the Israelites in Egypt and says to them: Look, God is going to save you; you will be freed and redeemed and enter a new land, the Torah says that people simply could not hear Moses or believe him, for their spirits were *kotzer ru'ach*, their spirits were literally cut, divided. They were cut off from hope, only able to imagine the present reality of Pharaoh. And later, after they were freed and after years of being fed by miraculous manna in the desert, the spies who scouted the land of Israel came back and said: It's impossible! We will never be able to enter the land that is promised to us because the people there are *anakim*, giants and we are but insects compared to them.

The 19th century Hasidic genius known as the *Sefat Emet*, critically commenting on these episodes, raises Abraham as a counter example to fear, division – to *kotzer ru'ach*. He asks: Is it really impossible to be free and to live in hope? Really? What do you think Abraham did when he left his homeland and father's house? Do you think he only thought of the ways it could go wrong? Because there were a lot of ways it could have gone wrong. Or do you think that he thought of the wonderful possibilities that could go right? Of course, he thought of both – just like we all do. But before he left on his journey, Abraham asked himself one question: What kind of God do I serve? What is the nature of my faith?? Do I serve the God of fear and worry, or do I serve the God of infinite possibility?

The future is unknown, the *Sefat Emet* reasons, so he says we need to empty our proverbial cups of all of those fears and worries – “let go of your past” he says, let go of your old assumptions about life and open yourself to what could be possible. For if we don't, we're still just slaves to Pharaoh; if we don't, we continue to imprison ourselves in our own self-made exile. We

actually cling to and worship the Pharaoh rather than the God of Infinite Possibility.

What is the nature of your faith? What kind of God do I serve? What kind God do you serve? The truth is, whether you believe in God or not, we are all serving and worshipping something – whether it's nationalism, the free market economy, or our own individualism, we all believe and bind ourselves to something to frame the purpose of our lives. We have to – it's a part of how we motivate ourselves to get up in the morning and make a life in this world. As the great American thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote: "The Gods we worship write their names on our faces; be sure of that. And a man will worship something ... That which dominates will determine his life and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming."

Let me say that again: "What we are worshipping we are becoming" ...

In my own personal life ... many of you know my story, it's no secret; I'm not hiding it. I had a lot going for me at a relatively young age. I mean this descriptively, not immodestly. I had two graduate degrees, 3 post-graduate degrees and writing my dissertation, nearly had a fourth. I had a wife and 3 kids. A big house with a pool in Los Angeles, California. I had published 4 books, one which actually won the National Jewish Book Award. I was a rabbi in a large, flagship synagogue; I served as chair of the Education Committee of the Pacific Southwest Region of the Conservative Movement, and was a keynote speaker at conferences around the country – all by the age of 34. And then one day, in the course of 30 minutes, it was all gone, extinguished from the record. Turned to dust, *havel*, nothingness. The next morning, I woke up in a treatment facility, sick in body, mind, and spirit from work-aholism and alcoholism. Everything I worked so hard for wasn't worth a thing anymore and, utterly paralyzed by shame, I thought I might as well die; I should relieve the planet of my fraudulent existence.

I remember a few weeks later lamenting about all of this to a friend, Rabbi Mark Borovitz from Beit T'Shuvah, "I was on my way. I was going to be a 'power rabbi.'" And then, awkwardly trying to bring some humor – as I do – and I quoted Marlon Brando from *On the Waterfront*, "I could have been somebody, I could've been a contender," to which he instantly said, "Yeah, but you were just a pretender."

He was right. I was a pretender. Sure, I got a lot of things done and even did many good things for many people, but I wasn't living *my life* because all I was

doing was just running, running from what I was afraid of. I was trying to control life, trying to play God and “run the show” – controlling how others perceived me. I wasn’t being me, I was trying to be a version of what I thought I should be. I didn’t seem to be a part of the “somebody” I had become – sort of like the way comedian Lilly Tomlin put it when she said, “I grew up always wanting to be somebody, but as I got older I realized that I should’ve been more specific.”

The truth is that I was committing idolatry, serving the god of a persona, an image of myself and I was dominated by a never-satisfied god of fear. It was exhausting and painful and dirty. It literally broke me – cut my spirit – because the violence I was committing was to myself – the constant self-induced barrage of “you’re not good enough, not smart enough, not good looking enough, not talented enough, old and wise enough, young and athletic enough,” was unbearable. I was living in a room full of self-constructed mirrors, and all I did was judge and humiliate myself, and when I wasn’t judging and humiliating myself, I projected it onto others, judging and comparing in my mind.

My pain and suffering grew from a divided life of either/or thinking. Either I was perfect or nothing. Either I was a success or garbage. I went from pole to pole, blame to shame, anger to self-pity, all a result of living a divided life, a life in fear. My god at that time incessantly judged me, telling me that if it wasn’t perfect, it didn’t matter. The god I was serving my ego and he was a jerk, unworthy of my service ... but that is honestly where I was.

And *that* is what causes violence – what causes violence is the binary thinking of either this or that, all or nothing, you’re a winner or a loser, which keeps us from taking risks and from forgiving ourselves, as well as others. And it starts with each one of us. How are we in either/or thinking today? What are we clinging to so strongly in our lives that it has become like a god? Are we trying to control something uncontrollable, even in our minds? Are we lost in procrastination for fear of dealing with the issue? There is a third way – a way to hold the difficulty of the moment, while also being hopeful. I had to lose everything to learn this lesson, but not everyone else does.

I can only tell you that the biggest difference between me now and me then is simply my relationship with my own mind. And so, this is what I want to leave us with. I want to leave us with a blessing of mind that opens us up to hope and possibility, while also not denying the struggle and reality as it is:

Each and every week, the Jewish tradition has us bless our children. This family blessing says: May God bless you and protect you; may God shine God's light upon you and be gracious to you; and may God lift up God's face to you and grant you peace. The apotheosis, its highest point, is its third line, it's third way: *yisa adonai panav elekha v'yasem lekha shalom*, may God, literally "lift up God's face," *panav*." I would like to give to you a new way to think about that: *yisa adonai panav elekha* means "may God give you God's face" – may God give you God's perspective, because *panav* doesn't just mean face, it also means perspective. *Yisa adonai panav*, may God give God's perspective, and then what do you have, *v'yasem lekha shalom*, and then you shall have peace. In other words, if you have God's perspective, you have peace.

Peace here isn't some conciliatory, bland, *pareve*, margarine that we spread over differences. It isn't the extinction of conflict. *Shalom*, say the Rabbis, is the nature of heaven and heaven is made of fire and ice – opposites. But God knows how to bring together opposites and holds them together as one; God's perspective holds all as one. And so, may you also have *Shalom Mind*, able to hold your right and your left, your inside and your outside, your up and your down, as one – may you have God's perspective. The Jewish mystics teach that there is a world above all our thoughts and our decisions, there is an elevated status called *shalom*. And it's a place, it's on the roof of your heart.

It's where Rumi spoke of when he wrote, "Out beyond ideas of right and wrong, there is a field and I will meet you there," the name of that field is *Shalom Field*. "When the soul lies down [there]," he writes, "in that grass, the world is too full to talk about. Ideas and language, even the phrase 'each other' doesn't make sense in that field."

And so, on this Yom Kippur, I want to bless us all with "Shalom mind." Shalom mind, is not apathy, it isn't cynicism, it isn't "who could care less; I don't need to make a decision," it isn't indifference, and it isn't undiagnosed ADHD. It is the space the Torah describes as between – between the *cherubim*, where Moses hears God's voice. It is the undivided space of the third way where we can hold tension and still remain compassionate, non-violent, and gentle with ourselves, and in turn, hopeful – realistic, yes – but always hopeful about the possibility of tomorrow. For as Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav said, "If tomorrow isn't better than today, well then what's the point of tomorrow?"

G'mar Chatimah Tovah – May we all be signed and sealed in the book of life, and dwell in the Field of Shalom.