

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS MOST
--2nd Day RoshHashanah
October 2, 2008-5759

Dear Friends:

What a wonderful country we live in. In our Senate of 100 members· there are 13 who are Jewish, or 13%. In our House of Representatives of 435 members, there are 30 who are Jewish, or just under 7%. And yet, in the midst of one of the most crucial efforts to shore up our threatened economy, both Houses closed shop for our two day Rosh Hashanah. I don't know if 100% of the Jews in greater Los Angeles observed these two Holy Days with the same piety as our Congress. What a country!

But I digress. Monday night Erev Rosh Hashanah I admonished our worshippers to eliminate all discussion of politics for the Ten Days of Penitence, and here I am talking about Congress. Oh well.

But it is not merely Congress about which I want to speak this day. It is about the whole world. And it is not our usual Torah readings of these two days about which I wish to speak, but the fact I take issue with the choice of those readings as not being what I would have chosen .. At my age, let. them do me something.

We revere our patriarchs and our matriarchs. Every time we begin the Amidah, the *Shemoneh Esrei*, the silent devotional prayer, we direct our prayers to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.

The rabbis who arranged the Torah portions we read on Monday, Thursday, .Shabbat and Holidays, chose the passages we read yesterday and today. They are all about Abraham, and Sarah, and her son, Isaac and her servant Hagar, and her son Ishmael. In my humble opinion these passages are the wrong choice for Rosh Hashanah and I will tell you why I think so.

Yesterday we read that Sarah, at the age of ninety, and Abraham at the age of one hundred were blessed with a son Isaac. Wonderful! It is very encouraging for those of us who are a little advanced in age. Maybe it could happen to us!? But then we read that Sarah made Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael to the desert to die there. That upsets me. Why read that on Rosh Hashanah?

And then today we read that the Lord said to Abraham:

Take thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, Isaac, and get thee to the land of Moriah, and offer him there in sacrifice."

I cannot read these two passages without a shudder, without embarrassment. Abraham is ready to send one son, Ishmael, into the wilderness to die there, and to slaughter one son, Isaac, on the altar in the misguided belief that this is what God wants!

All right, they are in our Sefer Torah, but they do not bespeak the Abraham whom I revere as an ancestor. They are reactions to the kind of religious fanaticism which misinterprets God's win for man, and allows for the shameful treatment I have been describing. So the Lord had to smack Abraham's wrist and say, "That is not what I want."

No, I would rather choose for these days two passages which preceded these two: namely Chapters 18 and 19 in the Book of Genesis. In Chapter 18 we find Abraham sitting in his tent on a hot day, recuperating from circumcision which he had undergone at the age of 99, would you believe it! With a flint stone, without an anesthetic? Ouch •. Suddenly, three strangers appear there. What does Abraham do, still smarting from his bris? He starts running. We read, “And he ran to get water for them to wash their dusty feet. And we read: “And Abraham ran into the tent to Sarah and said, ‘make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it and make cakes.” And we read: “And Abraham ran unto the herd and fetched a calf tender and good,” and he had it prepared for them. And we read – and we’ll have to discuss this some time, - we read: “And he took curd and milk and the lamb which had prepared and set it before them.”

So much running for an old man, right after surgery, in the broiling hot desert! Why? Hospitality! Concern for others above self. Love for fellowman. That is my patriarch Abraham.

This is followed immediately by the intention of the Lord to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham proceeds to plead with God to spare the city if there are at least fifty righteous people in it, arguing, “Far be it from You to slay the wicked with the righteous. Far be it from you!” And then, you all know the story, how he said, “Suppose there are only forty-five? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten?” And, apparently there were not even ten, because we read, “And the Lord caused to rain upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire: and they were destroyed. Only Abraham’s nephew Lot escaped with his wife, who, unfortunately looked back and lingered and was turned into a pillar of salt.

Now here we read of an Abraham concerned for others, practicing extraordinary hospitality for strangers, and ready to risk God’s wrath by arguing him down to save the wicked of the city for the sake of the righteous.

This raises the question in my mind: if Abraham was so ready to welcome the stranger...how could he have sent Hagar, with whom he had sired a son, Ishmael, sent them both away to die? How could he have dared to raise a knife over the bound body of his beloved son Isaac? It can only be out of the misguided fanaticism which some people confuse with Piety, with religiosity.

No, my Father Abraham is the man who cared for his fellow man, ran to help him, and argued with the Lord himself to save the life of strangers.

Well, why am I telling you these stories which you already know? It is because I want of myself, and you and all my fellow Jews to be children of the Abraham who cared for his fellow man. I want it for all the human race.

This past year has seen so much human misery. You read the papers and watch the TV and you read about the Sunnis and the Shiites killing one another, and the unabated genocide in Darfur, and the earthquakes and cyclones, and tornado and fires and floods and those who rush to help the helpless victims and those who interfere with that help, and exploit and capitalize on those needs. This planet is festering with the diseases of hatred and greed.

Fortunately we have the basic Jewish tradition of *V’ahavta l’reikha kamokha*...Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. And it is reinforced for me when I read of extraordinary examples of

that love expressing itself in the common man.

Let me give an example of that Abrahamic love in the story of a neighbor of ours: Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky of Congregation B'nai David-Judea on Pico Boulevard.

Members of his synagogue have donated money to buy \$15 cards good for food at Ralph's Markets. The Rabbi stands in the door of the synagogue and hands these out to homeless people who live in Pico Robertson, some sleeping in the synagogue doorway, with a kind word and often a referral for them for other help. It is emotionally and physically draining on him, but he believes what we say on Yom Kippur: what God wants is for us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and house the homeless.

In these days when we have come off the political battlefield, and month after month of natural disasters, I believe the lesson I want to take from Abraham is the lesson of humanity. IN this I am heartened by some of the stories of heroism and humanity I have observed or heard.

About fifty years ago I had gone to the airport to pick up the late Rabbi Simon Greenberg, then President of the University of Judaism, who was flying in from the East and arriving at about 2:30 at night. I welcomed him and we started home to my house near Western Avenue. I drove from La Cienega to La Brea via Stocker Avenue, then a totally uninhabited dark road between the oil rigs on either side. Part way to La Brea, we spotted a car parked alongside the road with two black men waving at us. I was several years past them when Rabbi Greenberg said, "Stop. WE are going back to help those men." My heart in my mouth, I obeyed and we turned back to the parked car.

One man said, "We have a flat and we can't change it because we have no jack. Can you lend us one?"

"Sure," said Greenberg, and then to me: "Do we have a car jack?"

"I mumbled we did and got it out of my trunk and handed it to the man.

"We need the tire iron, too," he said. I gave him the tire iron and said to myself; I can't believe I am handing a tire iron to two black men at three o'clock in the morning on a totally dark road. Am I crazy or is Rabbi Greenberg?"

The men began to jack up the car and Greenberg took off his coat and helped them with the tire until it was replaced, my jack and tire iron were in my trunk and the men thanked us profusely and drove off, but not before Rabbi Greenberg had taught me a lesson: to trust my fellow man, and to be like Abraham who ran to do mitzvot.

Not long after, again I learned a lesson from a rabbi friend, Meyer Mereminsky, of blessed memory. Again we were in a car very late at night, driving west from downtown along Seventh Street. At about Alvarado, Mike who was driving, suddenly stopped the car, and said, "Jack look across the street. Next to the saloon there, two men are beating a third man in the alley alongside. Let's go help him!"

I had no choice but to behave as Mike made a U—turn, pulled up alongside the alley and got out just as the two attackers, blinded by our headlights, ran off, the man arose and staggered into the bar. Satisfied, Mike made another U-turn and headed west homeward. I looked at my dear friend, shorter and slighter than I, and I thought: "This is what Father Abraham would do."

These memories

These memories came to me out of the dim past the other night while watching a television report. Someone had set up a secret camera on a busy New York sidewalk. They had a small child, perhaps six or seven years, stand as if lost, and look pleadingly at the many pedestrians. I watched as perhaps thousands passed by, looking the other way, and not stopping to ask the child if he was lost or what. Eventually they had the child try to take the hand or tug at the clothing of the passers-by. Nobody stopped until late afternoon one woman did, and said, "Are you lost? Where's your mother?"

No children of Father Abraham here, alas.

Let me tell you some stories. Maybe you would consider them more proper for today if they were about Abraham and Isaac or Joseph or David, but they are no less religious tales even if they are about ordinary people like ourselves.

Earlier this year in that same tough, seemingly uncaring New York, at the subway station at Broadway and 137th Street, a few blocks from the Jewish Theological Seminary, a man named Cameron Hollopeter had a seizure and fell onto the subway tracks. Another man, a manual laborer named Wesley Autrey was standing there with his two children 8 and 6, saw Mr. Hollopeter fall onto the tracks, handed his children to a nearby lady and jumped onto the tracks. He could hear the train approaching, so he threw himself on top of the body of Mr. Hollopeter in the space between the tracks in order to shield him.. Five cars passed above the two men until it could be halted, five railway cars had passed just inches over Mr. Autrey's head leaving grease on his cap. The city later saluted him for his bravery but he said, "I am no hero. Anyone who was in my place would have done the same." Maybe, Now Wesley Autrey, who jumped onto the subway tracks, is a black man but for me this was a son of our Patriarch Abraham .

In May of this year a doctor who grew up in this congregation, the son of Adrienne and Nate Stock, Dr. Larry Stock, left his practice here to go for the n'th time overseas, this time to Myanmar, to work in the bare hospital tents to operate on bodies shattered by stepping on land mines, and teaching the locals how to do the same work when possible...leaves his family and a good practice and runs to Myanmar to work under the most difficult circumstance to heal people he doesn't know but loves. Why? Because he is a true son of Abraham our Patriarch.

I have been sharing tales of heroic deeds with you, and I want to add another example of the enormous humanity required in the rearing of children. On your TV screen you may have seen the story of one Dick Hoyt and his son Rick. Rick was born strangled by the umbilical cord and was left brain damaged. When he was nine months old the doctors told Dick and his wife Judy that their son would always be a vegetable and should be placed in an institution. They kept him home. When he was eleven they took him to Tuft's School of Engineering to see if there was any mechanical way of his expressing himself. They were told, "No way. There is nothing going on in his brain." They said, "Tell him a joke," and Rick laughed .. A computer was rigged for him to touch with his head to type out words. His first message was, "Go Bruins."

When a high school classmate was paralyzed in an accident and the school organized a charity run for him, Rick pecked, "I want to do that."

Father Dick, who had never run a mile in his life" ran the five miles, pushing Rick's carriage and, he says, almost died. But his boy typed out, "Dad, when we were running, I felt like I wasn't disabled anymore."

That sentence changed father Dick's life. He got in perfect shape, Dad pushed Rick in his carriage 26.2 miles in marathon races until they were meeting the qualifying time. They were told, why not try the Triathlon?"

Dick, who had never learned to swim and hadn't ridden a bike since he was six, entered the Triathlon in which you run the 26.2 miles, swim 2.4 miles, and then pedal a bike 112 miles, all in the same day. "Well, Dick did it. He ran hauling his now 110 pound son in his carriage, then swam, tugging his son who was in a little boat in the water, sometimes passing other swimmers; then pedaled the 112 miles with Dick in a seat on the handlebars. They have done 212 triathlons, including four grueling "Ironmans" in Hawaii.

This year at ages 65 and 43 Dick and Rick finished their 24th Boston Marathon, in five thousandth place out of 20,000 starters. Rick typed out, "My dad is the Father of the Century. The thing I'd like best is that my dad sit in my chair and I push him once."

Can anyone dispute that father Dick is a son of Abraham our Patriarch, the one who isn't ready to sacrifice his son!

Now I am telling you these modern stories instead of confining myself to Biblical texts because in these current depressing times we have to be reminded any way we can of the enormous potential for nobility in the soul of every human being, in your soul and mine. I say this knowing there are some people here carrying the crushing burden of grudges against someone, usually someone close. I am speaking to people we cannot sit next to one another at some benefit or family party because they don't talk to one another for reasons which in retrospect are so foolish. I am speaking to some families divided, business partners separated and now hating each other, children punishing parents for some ridiculous reason by withholding from their parents the one thing they crave -- love; people once deeply in love with each other now separated and nursing festering grudges. I am saying the most important thing, the simplest thing I can say to measure up to the purpose of these Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe is: Love thy neighbor as thyself.

While I am quoting characters not in our Bible, let me quote the folk-singer, Pete Seeger. At 89 he has published a new album and he talks between songs, and he says of the whole wide world "We will love or we will perish " Whether he knows it or not, he is quoting the ancient warning of the Talmud, in Ta-anit, "We will love or we will perish." That is the choice for this planet.

When I observe how mean people can be to the ones they should love I am reminded of a tale of twin brothers. Yankel ben Moishe and Shmuel ben Moishe born in a little shtetl in Poland, who used to fight as little boys do, until the day the Nazis overwhelmed their shtetl and marched them to the railroad to go to one of the concentration camps. There they managed to stay together, they

memorized each other's tattooed arm numbers, but eventually they were separated, each one forced to a different death camp.

Somehow Yankel survived, was liberated, came to America, settled in New York, worked hard and married, grew old and became the Gabbai in his Schul, where he called out Yaamod Shlishi and so on.. One Shabbat he had gotten to shishi, the sixth Aliyah, looked around for an honoree and spied a stranger in the last row. He stared, because the stranger, beard and all, looked familiar, somehow. Suddenly his heart stood still. He wanted to call up that man but he couldn't breathe, couldn't get the words out, until suddenly he blurted out, "Yaamod 10027403!" The man ran down the aisle to the Bima and cried, "Du bist Yankel?" And Yankel whispered, "Du, Shmuel?" and they embraced. Love had endured for sixty years. Love is stronger than death, says the Bible.

So, dear friends, if somebody asks you: ' I just couldn't get there. What did Pressman say on Rosh Hashanah?' You can tell them: "Well, he gave us a picture of the man who started us all, Father Abraham, only it was a little different picture: of a man who gave us the example of the virtue of true hospitality, even to strangers; and of a man who loved justice, and even dared to argue with God: to be just and not punish the wicked but save the righteous, and that the basic emotion behind it all is called 'love'"

And if they ask, "Is that all?" you can tell them: "He told us some stories about how ordinary people, like us, even rabbis, can perform extraordinary acts of selflessness and love, and asked that we try to live our lives that way starting with the people closest to us, because in this world so troubled by wars, and earthquakes and floods and fires, and political fighting, so much causeless hatred of one another, living our lives ,,if love is the only way to turn things around for the better even if in the tiniest way. And he gave us the one teaching of our Torah which tells us in three words what we must do to make our prayers here mean something: Love your neighbor as you love yourself, and, would you believe it? he ended it with a song which says it all ::

What th,e world needs now Is love, sweet love, It's the only thing That there's just too little of. What the world needs now Is love, sweet love No, not just for some.._ But for every, every one.