

Rosh Hashana – First Day – 2007

All of you who know me know that I love words. I love to study words, to write them and to speak them. In many ways words constitute the central pillar around which all of my most cherished activities revolve. However, being a word-addicted person has its drawbacks. And I choose the term addiction knowingly. Like any addiction this one can function as an escape. It can represent the surrender to a seductive promise of intoxication. And intoxication in all of its many forms always implies an avoidance of responsibility. Sometimes it is possible to substitute words for responsibility: To talk or write oneself out of being held accountable. In fact, great writing or speaking, great and sensitive use of words by masters, almost always recognizes that, in fact, words will ultimately fail to express the truth of insight or the accuracy of fact that the author wants to convey. I have tried to be sensitive to this in my approach to Scripture and my love of poetry. But almost no one who uses words as much as I do can avoid the pitfalls of word intoxication.

Of course, at this point it would make sense for me to stop using words, to stop talking. No such luck. I am in the ironic but unavoidable position of having to use words today to talk about my dissatisfaction with words. So be it. Life is filled with paradox. But it is just this paradox that I'd like to highlight. We are often drowning in a sea of words. And I don't mean out there, in television and World Wide Web-land only. Rather right here, inundated with words of prayer and scripture; we go through the motions, we say the words, we allow the words to shelter us from the meaning of the words. Not that these words don't have a meaning; not that they aren't supposed to move us to action, but that's just the point. By substituting words for action we betray the words themselves and, more importantly, betray the meaning behind the words and therefore betray ourselves and our own possibility of transformation.

You may have already read in the Shofar that my aim is to speak about transformation this season. But as I begin that process I want to make it clear that I've spoken about transformation many times in the past. That's just the problem. Speaking about transformation, hearing me speak about transformation, ends up sheltering us from actually engaging in the process of transformation. It is that problem that I am more

interested in today than simply waxing eloquent about transformation. So I am not going to talk about transformation (which you might remember from my Shofar article I have suggested is a more contemporary rendering of the Hebrew word *teshuvah* that is so ubiquitous in our liturgy at this season.) Rather I am going to speak about my transformation. I am going to risk exposing myself in an effort to get you to expose yourself to yourself and to your obligations to yourself and to others. I am not going to quote a lot of texts to you, as I've been known to do; or take you through labyrinths of philosophic or theological or even literary corridors. I am going to talk about myself as I have not done in the past. I am going to do this because I believe that that is my responsibility. Because I believe I am commanded and weighted with the responsibility of teaching and leading a community; because I am getting older and I have spoken from this Bima on these High Holy Days for 20 years and will only speak from this Bima after this year for seven more years and therefore time feels like it is running out. And because I am desperately concerned that, in fact, time may well be running out in a much larger sense as I watch a world and a culture participate in an orgy of potential self-destruction.

So, characteristically, I will address you along the contour of a theme. The rest of my remarks today will concern my own personal transformation over the course of the last year or so that many of you have commented on. The physical manifestation of this transformation is my noticeable weight loss. It goes much deeper and I will return to that in a moment. Tomorrow I will talk about the transformation in my personal relationships to help model the possibility of such transformations in others. I will talk to you candidly about my son's upcoming marriage to someone who is not Jewish and who very likely will never consider becoming Jewish. At Kol Nidre I will speak to you about how these personal transformations have emboldened me to consider whether a culture, a society like our contemporary American society, can confront the grievous mistakes it has made and act together to correct those mistakes. More specifically I will talk about the environmental issues that are close to my heart and the hand that each of us has in the evolution and solution of those issues. Finally, on Yom Kippur day I will talk about the possibility and processes that we are putting into place to transform this community: the specific culture and structure of the Temple Beth Zion-Beth Israel community. These

sermons will not rival others by me or by my colleagues in the community in erudition. I am determined not to prolong my addiction to erudition anymore.

Some of you know the beginning of this story. In early May of 2006 Annie and I went for a walk along the Schuylkill banks in the newly completed park there. It was a beautiful Spring Shabbat afternoon. Not being much of a walker, when we got there I suggested we sit on a bench for awhile. As we sat there we watched the people going by, specifically the large number of them riding bicycles. I was particularly struck by the number of couples riding together and the number of them that fell into the category of “older” couples. A category I guess I had to put myself into. I mentioned to Annie that it looked like fun. And when she agreed and we talked about it some more the idea began to take form that we should get a couple of bikes and give it a try. We were actually excited that we might even find a hobby that we could both do together. I had never been able to get Annie to come out on the golf course, and she had never gotten me on any of the work-out machines we had at home. The idea “marinated” for awhile. We knew nothing about bikes and didn’t know anyone we could ask about them. My first foray into a bicycle shop was off-putting on various levels. I was blown away by the prices and the superciliousness of the sales people. Then a friend suggested we could buy used bikes on Craig’s list. So I looked there and indeed found two bikes. Two totally wrong bikes. They were the wrong size; they had no gears because we were afraid of gears; they had foot breaks because we remembered foot brakes from when we were kids. And the first time we rode I lost my balance, tried to reach out to use Annie to stop myself and took us both down with Annie absorbing the brunt of the fall. Needless to say our ride was over.

Two days later Annie went in for a routine CAT scan for precautionary testing as part of a physical exam. She had a catastrophic reaction to the dye, went into anaphylactic shock and almost died. She was in Intensive Care on a respirator for almost a week and spent many more weeks in recovering; in fact months until she was fully recovered. Just before we left for our vacation in the country some weeks later, we decided we were ready to get back on the bikes, but needed to buy real bikes, new bikes with gears and hand brakes and that actually fit. We did so.

Riding a mile on a bicycle seemed an incredible journey. I huffed and puffed my way up my first hill. In the country we were on a five mile long loop that circled from our

house, around the development and back. It took me two weeks to work up to riding those five miles and it took riding a little bit more every day, sometimes twice a day. I rode because I could. I rode because I was so thankful that Annie could ride with me. And little by little I rode because I could feel myself feeling better than I had in years. I wasn't even aware of my weight loss until I returned to the city. And when I did and realized that going back to work, the need to be at morning minyan by 7:45 each day would be the perfect excuse to stop riding, I couldn't. So we set our alarm to 4:45 AM and were out on the Schuylkill trail at 5:45. We rode two miles; Then four miles; Then eight miles; Then ten miles; Then the entire loop of thirteen miles which we've continued to ride almost everyday since then, twice on Sundays and on my day off, when Annie goes to be with our granddaughter in New Jersey I now ride 40 to 60 miles out say to Valley Forge and beyond. Near the beginning of our riding together we learned of a specifically Jewish context in which we could ride. Hazon, the organization promoting environmental consciousness in the Jewish Community and supporting an array of environmental projects across the country and in Israel, sponsored a week-end Shabbaton on these issues followed by a ride from the Isabella Freedman Retreat Center in Falls River Connecticut to the JCC on the West Side of Manhattan, about 110 miles over two days, the Sunday and Monday of Labor Day Weekend. We knew one of our congregants who participated in that ride last year, and we set it as our goal for this year. We met our goal and had what can only be called a transformative experience in doing so. I will talk a little more about the visions of Hazon (which means vision) next week. And I could continue talking about cycling today for hours. But as Lance Armstrong said, writing about his recovery from cancer and going on to win the Tour De France: "it's not about the bike." It's not about the bike. I lost over 50 pounds; I changed what I ate not because I was following a diet, but because the regular exercise propelled me almost magically to want to try more and healthier foods. Because I couldn't stand to put any of the pollutants that had made up my diet into my body: no more coke, or M&M's or daily Salami sandwiches. But it's not about the bike and it's not about the weight loss and it's not about the diet. It's about the manifestation of God's trace that powers all successful transformation. It is about the inevitable failure to make changes in our lives when all we have to support us is what is conventionally called will power. Will power may be an

expression of our desire to change. It may express our intellectual acknowledgement of the need for change, but it cannot by itself sustain change. Only the power of interruption, the weight of responsibility that we recognize in the faces of those who we are responsible for, when squarely gazed upon and taken into our souls, can sustain the changes we all need to make in our lives. We come together and talk of repentance. We know that repentance implies the acknowledgement of a need to do better in some area of our lives. For me it may have been about the bike and weight and diet on the surface; but below the surface it was about acknowledging the gift of life and the obligation to care for it; it was about acknowledging the fleetingness of life and learning to be truly grateful for the love and presence of my wife and therefore also acknowledging my obligation to be there for her, for our children and for our grandchildren. These obligations impinge upon the self. They struggle with the self at 4:45 in the morning when the self wants to sleep. They struggle with the self when the self wants to block them out despite the fact that doing so impoverishes that very self. These obligations stand outside me and above me and command me. They are the very word of God, the breath of God on my neck, breathing down my back rather than the God invoked tamely in prayer books and holy texts. It is this God who not only demands transformation, but supports it. It is this God to whom the prayer books and holy texts attempt to turn us when we are able not simply to read or say the words, but to understand that the words are pointing beyond themselves to a living reality. That living reality stands before us, too often blocked by our rationalizations and self absorption, at every moment. It is for that reason that *teshuva* is not limited in our tradition to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, only highlighted, as it were. The possibility of doing *teshuva* reaches out to us, calls out to us, everyday. Whether it comes in the form of a bicycle, a diet, an exercise program, reducing our time at work or for that matter our involvement in hobbies. But we cannot do *teshuva* on our own. In conventional, pietistic language we need God's help. Indeed we do. But the help God gives to us is precisely not some surge of supernatural strength. It is carried on the love which frees our hearts of the hard case that too often grows around it, a love which precisely means, we are grateful for what we are obligated to give to those depending upon us.

All of us have people depending upon us. Either close to us or further away; either family or friend; individual or group; community or concentric communities to which we belong. Meeting the obligations these people explicitly and implicitly represent is at the heart of transformation, of *teshuva*. The ability to do *teshuva* comes from the joy we receive back from meeting those obligations, difficult as it is to sometimes surpass our selves in doing so. And all of us will need to be involved in doing *teshuva* beyond Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. No one of us gets it all done on one day no matter how much effort we put into it. For me, just as I bathed in the pride of having precipitated some transformation in my life, having “done *teshuva* seemingly successfully I had to come to grips with a deeper strata of obligations and emotions, one where again words, prayers and texts would not suffice to guide me, that I will talk about tomorrow.