

Rosh Hashanah 5767 – September 23, 2006

I want to begin my remarks this morning by giving you a bit of a program, a sort of coming attractions, regarding my themes for this year's holiday services. A major part of my remarks will be concerned with explaining in more detail my understanding and vision of the implications of contemporary Mussar practice. That is, a practice of integrating Jewish ethical norms into the habits of everyday life. I know that I have mentioned Mussar before, and you should know that I have been invited to various congregations and Jewish gatherings around the country to discuss this subject. I've spoken in congregations here in Philadelphia, in Seattle, in Connecticut and was invited to teach six sessions at the annual conference on alternatives in Jewish education, and will be the keynote speaker at the annual convention of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, in each case addressing the growing interest in Mussar. Of course, we now have some 34 people enrolled in the Philadelphia Mussar Institute at BZBI and I am teaching a two year program in Mussar spirituality at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College as well as having been asked by the senior Rabbinical/Cantorial class at JTS to work with them in preparing a Mussar themed study program for their siyyum, the study session they lead on the day of their ordination. Most importantly, we have received a major grant from the Wexner Legacy-Heritage foundation in New York to create materials and implement programs aimed at transforming the culture of a contemporary synagogue community utilizing Mussar themes and practices. A congregational steering committee has been working from before we received the grant to envision and then develop specific programs that will begin to foster these values into the life of our congregation. In an effort to properly introduce these plans and in light of the fact that while I have sometimes referred to Mussar I have never taken the opportunity to do here at BZBI what I do in other venues, to really explain why and how I came to study and practice Mussar and what I think it can mean for a contemporary Jewish life, and also to review the history of Mussar and the Mussar Movement and describe both its traditional theological structure and the changes in that structure that I have suggested in order to make it a viable option for contemporary Jews, at Kol Nidre services I will share with you that exposition and on Yom Kippur morning I will detail the exciting programs that

we are anticipating in what we are calling Project Mitchadeshet/Renewing and Sustaining Community. However, this morning I am going to speak about something seemingly unrelated to Mussar, something very close to our hearts and minds this year, and that is the State of Israel, our continuing relationship to Israel and the events of this past summer. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, tomorrow, I will speak about another topic seemingly unrelated to Mussar, the threat of terrorism confronting the United States. But perhaps these are not entirely unrelated to Mussar either. So anticipating a fuller exposition next week let me share with you two very important Mussar terms and define them and apply them to our current international situation as Jews. Those terms are *Yetzer HaTov* and *Yetzer HaRa*. They are traditionally defined as the “good urge” and the “evil urge.” One of the first things I teach my Mussar students is not to define them in that way, but rather the *Yetzer HaRa* should be defined as the “material force” and the *Yetzer HaTov* as the “spiritual force.” This is based on the Rabbinic teaching that each of us, each human being is endowed with both a *Yetzer HaRa* and a *Yetzer HaTov*. It is not possible that we would be innately endowed with an out and out evil urge. Rather, the Rabbis teach that were it not for the *Yetzer HaRa*, no one would marry, have children, build a house, keep a job, etc. In other words, it is the material force, the force that we are imbued with that is necessary for our persisting in life; the force for material survival. Granted, this absolutely necessary force, by virtue of the strength it requires to in fact confront the difficulties of material survival can become so strong as to overwhelm the opposite fundamental force of human existence, the *Yetzer HaTov*, the spiritual force, the force for good, and the force for the other instead of the self. Mussar is concerned with learning how to strengthen the *Yetzer HaTov* and ultimately using it to transform the *Yetzer HaRa*. But we will talk more about that next week. I share these definitions with you this morning so that we may put in perspective the events of this past summer in Israel and the responses to those events around the world.

Certainly, it would be appropriate to use Mussar as a critique of Israeli culture as well as Jewish religion and the Jewish community in general. In the critique of Judaism we are primarily concerned with making sure that we do not lose sight of the fact that observance – *halacha* – is instrumental. That is, that our goal is not to create observant

Jews but Jews who lead a Holy life and the *mitzvot* function to interrupt our egoism, remind us of our obligations to others and the Other. Similarly this critique naturally extends to Israeli culture and politics. However, it is not possible to engage the *Yetzer HaTov* – the force for good – for purposes of this critique unless it presupposes an appropriately functioning *Yetzer HaRa*. Without establishing unequivocally the right and necessity of the Jewish people to live in our ancestral homeland – questions of our obligation to create a holy society become moot. This war unfolded in a new and vastly more dangerous environment than the previous wars in Israel that I have seen over the course of my life. The events leading up to this war and the responses of many around the world to its onset attempted to create an international consensus in which questioning this right, our right to Israel, became legitimate. In previous times, from before the establishment of the State of Israel, the Arab world has refused to recognize our right to the land. That this continues to the profound detriment of the economic and political advancement of the people of the Arab world is sad but not surprising. That their claim of Israeli illegitimacy begins to gain currency in the world media and in world capitals is more ominous. If in the year 2006 the head of state of a major Arab country can boldly assert that the goal of his national foreign policy is the extermination of the people of the Jewish State we are perhaps not shocked. That this same head of state can attempt to implement this threat under the cover of a proxy force, that Iran could supply and goad Hezbollah into war with Israel within the sight of the entire world and then he can be welcomed in diplomatic circles around the globe and can be allowed to address the United Nations is unfathomable and unforgivable. Why should there not finally be minimal standards of human decency that the world community is prepared to enforce when confronted by yet another incarnation of a Hitler type figure? No one can stop the President of Iran from saying what he will, but no one is required to accept his statements and behavior as being within the standards of acceptable discourse. Let there finally be consequences for using Jews as the instruments of political rhetoric for demagogues! Let the world finally articulate collectively its refusal to meekly follow along with the canards of Jew hatred in any form! There is no reason that it should be allowed to be acceptable. No more acceptable than those perceived anti-Muslim cartoons or the poorly chosen remarks of the Pope. But where are the apologies for anti-Semitic language? For

the continuing spread of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion throughout the Arab world? Again, it is not the appearance of such anti-Semitism amongst Israel's sworn enemies that is either surprising or shocking. It is the acquiescence to the rhetoric of these enemies within the civilized community of nations. The rhetoric in which Israel is assimilated into the category of Western imperialism, instead of the truth that Zionism and its expression in the State of Israel is a national liberation movement – a movement resulting in repudiating the forces of foreign conquerors and oppressors spanning two thousand uniquely bloody years at the hands of the nations that pride themselves most in the greatness of their civilization, is itself the continuing act of oppression. Instead of recognizing and celebrating the restored dignity of national sovereignty – without that recognition, absent that certainty of material survival, the questions of what kind of society we Jews should want to create within the State are of no relevance. The material survival of the entity, whether state or person – powered by the appropriate expression of the *Yetzer HaRa*, the material force, is the sine quo non to having the opportunity to strengthen the *Yetzer HaTov* through arguments of what constitutes the goal of a holy people in their land.

Just as I will argue that our obligation to the other has profound implications about how we live our lives as Jews vis-à-vis the synagogue and Jewish community next week, so I will argue today that our obligations to ourselves, to our very survival, also has profound implications for our relationship to Israel. Among those obligations is first and foremost one that we almost never mention in polite American Jewish society anymore, the obligation of *Aliya*. The obligation to live in the land, contribute to its development and defend its physical and spiritual integrity. I sincerely believe that we must again raise this obligation amongst us. It is not an obligation that all or most of us can meet, but not meeting obligations has never argued for eliminating consciousness of those obligations. If it meant that what would even bring us together at this holiday season? We are well aware of all the obligations we do not meet and there may even be good reason for such failures, but that does not remove the ideal of those obligations from before our eyes. Obviously, for a myriad of reasons we have not made the universal commitment to *aliya* that is incumbent on us. On practical and even political grounds it may be argued that it is

better for Israel and the Jewish people that we don't. Even if this is true it does not lift the obligation in an ideal world, an expression of messianic obligation, and we should allow ourselves to feel the weight of the gap between the real and the ideal.

Such reflection, however, does not lessen the other obligation we have for our survival even before we argue over the inner spirit of what we do with our survival: to support unstintingly those who do live in the land, contribute to its development and defend its integrity on our behalf. This summer we learned as never before how inextricably bound together we Jews still are in the eyes of our enemies from Seattle to Haifa. But as these events fade from the front pages, we go on with our everyday lives, often as though nothing has happened, as though nothing has changed. We forget that those who fought this war for us, the community in Seattle that I have been in frequent touch with for obvious reasons and most especially our family in Israel, the battles still go on. Internally in their psyches and souls, externally in the massive re-building that is required. To address these needs the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia along with the world-wide Federation movement has established the Israel Emergency Fund. We are obligated to support it! It is part of our legitimate action for self-preservation. That it is also *tzedakka* and therefore a classical Mussar value might be argued by some. I disagree. This is not *tzedaka* but survival. If you do not give it is as if you refused to put food on your own tables, refused to provide shelter and clothing to your own family. We do not do these things because they are righteous but because without them we cannot worry about what is righteous. Similarly, the Jewish National Fund has worked above and beyond the call of duty on our behalf. During the war itself JNF was involved in providing emergency fire-fighting equipment for fire brigades in the North; They moved hundreds of youngsters out of harm's way in the North and into temporary summer camps to provide some respite from the terrors of war; and they have similarly committed themselves to helping restore the infrastructure of the North, expanding its recreational and tourist capabilities in order to establish it as one of the most thriving areas of Israel. As the ushers hand out the pledge forms for the Israel Emergency Fund and the Jewish National Fund do not confuse this with either charity or with the Israel Bond Appeal that

we will conduct as usual next week. The former is a misuse of the term and the later is not charity either, but an investment in Israel's ongoing infrastructure needs that pays you back with interest. It is certainly important and you will be urged to make such an investment if you are able. But this is neither charity nor investment and only someone bent on national suicide could refuse. The Federation pledge cards, you will notice list the lowest contribution as \$180 because of the very substantial need on Israel's part. But if you cannot make such a gift, feel free to take the card home and write in whatever gift you can afford. Do not think that whatever your financial situation is you are absolved from this responsibility. As the ushers distribute the pledge cards, allow me to conclude my remarks by reading a letter from Rabbi Mauricio Balter, one of our Masorti Rabbis in Israel.

Dear friends,

After the war, life goes on, the question is: How does life go on? We have all made an effort to establish to a routine, to attune our lives to a known rhythm that allows us to "control" what surrounds us. As you know, next Sunday the school year begins here in Israel. At the end of last year, I agreed to facilitate a session during staff week at the local Tali school of which I am the rabbi. I arrived at 10:00 this morning at the assigned classroom where 34 teachers, the headmaster and the school psychologist were sitting in a circle. The school psychologist coordinated a discussion about the war where each person spoke about his/her experiences of the war and how they felt about returning to school. Each of us had a personal story.

It was a moving and special experience. During this discussion, I learned that we all lived the same war and at the same time each of us had his or her private war. One of the teachers told us about the difficult times during the beginning of the war and how she lived the moment when her husband was called as reservist to fight in Lebanon. She described the expression on his face and the worry (he was called the moment after many reservists died in Kfar Guiladi). Her face showed the anguish she went through weeks ago and the hardship of not having any news during the day about him. Sitting next to her was another teacher who told us her husband was with her during the war all the time and how it provoked conflicts in the couple. One day during the war they arrived at the Kotel and their children put a note in the Wall. When the parents asked the kids about their wish, they asked that "mum and dad stop arguing".

Yet another teacher remarked that she was always afraid of everything but the war taught her she could be very strong indeed and support all her family. On the other hand, there was a teacher who thought of herself as brave but discovered herself totally afraid. One of the teachers reported about how a missile fell as she was leaving her house and she saw a

column of smoke going up from what she thought was her son's house. She felt desperate until she found out that everything was OK.

One of our teachers who speaks Russian told about the experiences of the children who had just arrived in Israel and asked what they should do when the first siren sounded. The music teacher told the group how she used music to ease the fears of her grandchildren. A very young teacher related her experience when she was traveling in the car and sandwiched between two lorries at the traffic lights. All of a sudden, the red light came on and one of the sirens started to sound. She knew there was nowhere to hide and time to wait for the light to change so she pulled over to the side and started to look for shelter. At this point her little daughters asked, "What do we do, mum?". She put the music very high and told them "now we sing altogether with all our strength".

Someone else told about how during the first siren, the family nervously ran down the stairs to the shelter. When the second one sounded, she told her daughter that if her hysterical neighbor was there, she would not remain in the shelter. When she arrived, the neighbor had a big smile on her face and wanted to know why she was so distant. When the first neighbor explained she replied, "yesterday when we went down to the shelter you were so nervous that you didn't realize that the siren caught me in bed and without clothes, so I had to go down wearing just a sheet".

I must related the story of one of our teachers who abhors the notion that we actually daven in school – a real hiloni. She told us that while she was on the road with her daughter, a siren sounded. They got out of the car desperately looking for shelter which they did not find. They stood behind a bush holding each other tightly and when her, at that moment her daughter asked what could they do under these circumstances, she answered "just pray". During the meeting this morning, we cried with anguish and laughed with stories that now look ridiculous, but the intensity of the moment was poignant. Life goes on and these teachers, as thousands of others in Israel prepare to receive their pupils next Sunday. Today we shared stories about individuals. There is also the collective reality of the war and its military and political ramifications for our daily lives. This reality is one we will have to process very slowly. Life goes on thank God. The month of Elul invites us to review it in all its dimensions. This is the right moment to think how we want to continue our lives. Personally I learned a lot during this war. No doubt, I appreciate life more than ever and I believe more deeply in the People of Israel and in God. While listening to the teachers between tears and laughter, I discovered wonderful people who want to live life to the fullest. In their eyes and in their expressions I could perceive God and His presence which gives us strength to continue.

Baruj Hashem shlomenu tov, and we will go on. Here we are, this is our land and we have the right to live on it in peace and normally. Ose Shalom bimromaiv hu iaase shalom aleinu ve al kol Israel ve al kol ioshei Tevel, veimru amen. My best regards,  
Shalom Rabbi Mauricio Balter