

Rabbi Leonard Rosenthal
Tifereth Israel Synagogue
Erev Rosh Hashana 5768

GOING GREEN

I know this comes across as narcissistic or paranoid, but most congregants seem to notice when I get a new car. I can't wait for the license plates to arrive so it doesn't seem so obvious. ("Oh, the car? I got that a while ago.")

I was planning on keeping my old car a little longer since there was nothing wrong with it, but when Adam and Sarah moved from New York to Northern California they needed to buy two cars. Since I had decided to replace mine within the coming year Judy and I decided to sell it to them now, and at very good price, I might add!

Shopping for a replacement did not require a lot of test drives. Several months ago Judy and I decided that our next vehicle was going to be a hybrid. When I first learned about hybrids I was hesitant. While they save gas they cost more to buy. I wasn't sure I would save enough on gas to justify the additional cost of the vehicle.

When it came time to make a purchase, while the rising price of gasoline was a consideration, it was not definitive. Our primary concerns were our responsibility to reduce our use of fossil fuel, the world's reserves of which grow smaller each day, and to halt global warming, which is caused by the release of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Last year we rented the Al Gore documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth" and it frightened us. "An Inconvenient Truth" is a filmed version of the presentation that Gore has been making throughout the world for the last thirty years. He documents the rising levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and how their exponential increase has led to global warming and climate change.

I am sure all of you heard this week that the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicted a loss of two-thirds of the earth's polar bear population within fifty years due to the melting of their icy habitats. Well, Gore has been teaching for several years about melting snow caps and glaciers and how their demise will affect polar wildlife. He shows how melting ice is filling the oceans with additional water and raising the sea level, which is of particular concern to coastal populations such as ours. Gore also documents the increase in mean temperatures throughout the world and how the increased heat affects life everywhere.

Now I know that some people reject out of hand anything Al Gore says and believe that his presentation is politically motivated. I urge them to see this documentary, especially if they don't want to. While there may be quibbles over specific

statistics the phenomenon of global warming has been corroborated by innumerable scientists. As time passes the naysayers are diminishing in number.

The U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change now uses the word “unequivocal” to describe the warming of the climate system. And the committee is highly confident that human activities, from burning fossil fuels to the cutting down of forests, are contributing to the warming. (IPCC website)

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says that :

“Scientists know with virtual certainty that:

1. Human activities are changing the composition of Earth's atmosphere. Increasing levels of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere since pre-industrial times are well-documented and understood.

2. The atmospheric buildup of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases is largely the result of human activities such as the burning of fossil fuels.

3. An ‘unequivocal’ warming trend of about 1.0 to 1.7°F occurred from 1906-2005. Warming occurred in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, and over the oceans (IPCC, 2007).

4. The major greenhouse gases emitted by human activities remain in the atmosphere for periods ranging from decades to centuries. It is therefore virtually certain that atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases will continue to rise over the next few decades.

5. Increasing greenhouse gas concentrations tend to warm the planet.”

And finally, these are the words of a noted American:

“The issue of climate change respects no border. Its effects cannot be reined in by an army nor advanced by any ideology. Climate change, with its potential to impact every corner of the world, is an issue that must be addressed by the world.

“There is a natural greenhouse effect that contributes to warming. Greenhouse gases trap heat, and thus warm the earth because they prevent a significant proportion of infrared radiation from escaping into space. Concentration of greenhouse gases, especially CO₂, have increased substantially since the beginning of the industrial revolution. And the National Academy of Sciences indicate that the increase is due in large part to human activity.

“By increasing conservation and energy efficiency and aggressively using these clean energy technologies, we can reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by significant amounts in the coming years. We can make great progress in reducing emissions, and we will. Yet, even that isn't enough.”

This last quotation was not the words of some tree hugging environmentalist. They were the words of our current president, George W. Bush, in a speech he gave on June 11, 2007. I do not think there is any question that President Bush is politically conservative yet he, too, is concerned about global warming and is urging our country and the world to confront the problem

While there is debate on the degree to which human activity affects climate change and how best to fight it, the negative effects that human activity has on the world's climate is a scientific fact.

I am not sure exactly why, perhaps it is the birth of my first grandchild and worry about the world which he will inherit, but in the last year I have become increasingly concerned about the effect we humans have on the environment. My concern not only embraces global warming but other critical environmental issues such as our reliance and the consumption of fossil fuels, the continued pollution of the atmosphere and water, the destruction of the rain forests, the over logging of forests, the over fishing of the seas, and even the number of plastic beverage containers and paper and plastic bags we utilize each year.

I have already said that many people reject Al Gore's conclusions out of hand, because they think he is politically motivated. Some may also suggest that my speaking on these issues is a reflection of my politics. Let me assure you it is not. My concern with these issues and my sharing them with you has nothing to do with politics and everything to do with Judaism; our faith, our relationship with God, our relationship with each other, and our relationship with the earth upon which we live.

To understand how Judaism feels about our responsibilities to the world in which we live, one must consult Jewish sources. The second chapter of Genesis is an excellent place to start. According to the Torah, God created humans in order for us to be caretakers of the world God had fashioned:

“And the LORD God planted a garden eastward, in Eden; and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.” (Gen. 2:8-15)

According to Genesis 2, God first created plants and animals before creating human beings. God created Adam with a specific objective in mind: Adam was “to dress

and keep” the world. Human beings were to be God’s caretakers of Creation.

According to Judaism, the earth and all that is upon it belongs to God. [quote] We are allowed to benefit from the gifts of nature with which God has blessed us, but we may not abuse them. They are lent to us, we do not own them. The earth belongs to the Master of the Universe, and the Torah and the rabbis constantly remind us that we are only sojourners here. [quote] One day we will die, future generations will continue to benefit from God’s gift.

One well known Jewish reminder that the earth belongs to God is the *Shemita* or Sabbatical year ordained in the Bible. Every seven years the land was not to be planted, worked, or systematically harvested. Israelites were to eat only what they had stored away from past harvests or produce which grew on its own. Although the *Shemita* year provided ecological benefits, i.e., the regeneration of minerals in the unworked soil, this was not the Torah’s primary concern. The Torah says that the land belongs God and just as human beings are to rest every seven days so is the land to rest every seven years. The *Shemita* year reminds us that we do not have full dominion over the land. We are only its temporary caretakers. The earth belongs to God.

There are literally hundreds of other Jewish sources about caring for the environment, but I will suffice with just one more example. The Torah says that when you besiege a city you may not cut down fruit bearing trees to make siege works or defensive structures. [quote]. Fruit bearing trees were sources of nutrition and life therefore they could not be harmed, even during times of duress.

The rabbis extended this Biblical law against cutting down fruit trees into a general prohibition against needless destruction of any natural resource. They called this mitzvah *ba’al tashchit* - you shall not destroy.

Rabbi Moses Maimonides, who lived in the 12th century and was one of the greatest Jewish scholars of all time, wrote: “Not only one who cuts down food trees, but also one who smashes household goods, tears cloths, demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or destroys food on purpose violates the command: *You must not destroy.*” (Mishne Torah, Book of Judges, Laws of Kings and Wars 6:10)

And Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady, the founder of the Chabad Chassidic movement taught: “This Biblical command [*ba’al tashchit*, You must not destroy...!] prohibits the spoiling of any object from which humankind may benefit (Shulchan Aruch ha-Rav, Choshen Mishpat, Hukkot Shemirat Haguf va’Nefesh 14)

Anytime we are engaged in a wasteful or harmful activity that destroys the environment we are violating the *mitzvah* of *ba’al tashchit*, “you shall not destroy.” This is when we toss litter in a public park, throw recyclables in the trash, run our showers too long, or take needless trips to the grocery. Every time we waste or harm a natural

resource we are being negligent of our duty to “dress and keep” the world.

A couple of weeks ago I was speaking with a colleague and friend about my sermons for the holy days. I shared today’s theme with him and his immediate comment was: “I hope that you are not advocating any type of government intervention. That would be extremely political.” I told him no. I am not advocating any particular political point of view. What I am advocating is that each of us takes greater responsibility to preserve our natural resources and reduce pollution and climate change.

Over the years Tifereth Israel, acting as a responsible Jewish institution, has become increasingly energy and ecologically conscious. We began about seven years when we noticed the amount of waste paper we were generating, though I know some congregants may not agree on our definition of “waste paper!”. We decided to install recycling bins in our offices. We had one for white waste paper, a second for colored paper, and a third for bottles and cans. We dutifully separated our recyclables into these containers for about six months...until we discovered that each and every bin was being emptied into the same dumpster in the back! We belatedly found out that Waste Management, the company that picks up our garbage, does not have a recycling program for their business customers, even though the City of San Diego provides recycle bins for homes. Hopefully, a program will be instituted for businesses soon. We have decreased our use of paper, as I am sure you have noticed from our ubiquitous emails, but the amount of waste paper we generate continues to be problematic.

So we haven’t done so well on the paper recycling front, but we have been successful in many other areas. Several years ago we installed energy efficient lighting in all of our fluorescent fixtures. More recently, all of our remodeling projects, the Goodman Chapel and Cohen Social Hall, as well as our newly re-landscaped entryway, have utilized energy efficient lighting where feasible. Although we were not thrilled about installing new air conditioning units in the Cohen Social Hall and in our sanctuary, the new units use much less electricity than the old ones, particularly when we keep the temperature warmer than everyone likes. Although it has proven to be a very difficult job, we have repaired our outdoor irrigation systems and monitor them constantly. Many of us are also on constant patrol, closing doors and turning off lights when our rooms are not in use. We even explored putting up a solar electrical generation system on our roof, which one of our members generously offered to finance, only to find out that it is not practical given the specifics of our electrical usage.

The kinds of adjustments I just outlined were not difficult nor grandiose. Most were relatively simple ways of decreasing our consumption of electricity and other natural resources, and not coincidentally, saving money. Any of us as individuals are capable of making the same kinds of changes in our lives. There are countless ways that all of us can conserve and reduce the amount of energy and water we waste and trash we generate.

Let me share with you a few simple suggestions: when you run errands, plan your route in advance so that you minimize the amount of fuel you use running from place to place. When you replace your lighting consider fluorescent and other energy saving fixtures where possible. When you purchase your next vehicle, look for a hybrid or at least a car or truck which gets good gas mileage. Consider installing solar power in your homes to generate electricity or warm your pool or spa. S.D.G. & E. has a program in which they install equipment on your air conditioning compressor which allows them to switch it off for a few minutes each hour when power consumption is high. This not only saves fuel, but helps eliminate the need for increased power generating facilities while causing minimal discomfort. Recycle your paper, your plastic, your glass, and everything you can. It has gotten to the point where I feel guilty if I am tempted to throw the plastic newspaper bag in the trash instead of the recycling bin.

One green innovation which I particularly love is actually a throwback to the past. Many markets, including Trader Joes, Keils, and Costco, have begun selling reusable grocery bags for 99¢ each. We even picked one up in Israel. Printed on it is: []“Super Sol’s Green Bag.” We wanted to bring some more home with us but they sold out immediately. Judy and I keep these in bags in our car and *shlep* them in to every market we shop in. Taking in your own shopping bag is a small inconvenience, but highly significant. When 1 ton of paper bags is reused or recycled, 3 cubic meters of landfill space is saved and 13 - 17 trees are spared! In 1997, 955,000 tons of paper bags were used in the United States. When 1 ton of plastic bags is reused or recycled, the energy equivalent of 11 barrels of oil is saved. (Sierra Club)

Not every suggestion will be possible or practical for every family. But that does not free us from the obligation of reducing our energy use and preserving our natural resources. We have to start somewhere.

According to our tradition and in the words found in our in our Mahzor, *hayom harat olam*. Today is the birthday of the world. Rosh Hashana does not only mark the beginning of the Days of Awe, it celebrates the birthday of the world.

On this day it is not only our responsibility to change ourselves, but to change the world. Up to now we have done a pretty good job of changing the physical world in which we live, but in ways which are not always so beneficial. This year I am asking that one of your Rosh Hashana resolutions will be to save our planet by taking steps to reduce emissions, save electricity and water, and curb pollution.

What better birthday gift could we give to our planet than to begin to heal its wounds from the damage we have done? What better legacy can we bequeath to our children and grandchildren and future generations than a world filled with clean air, fresh water, glaciers, and polar bears? It is not too late to turn back the tide of planetary damage.

I close with a selection from Midrash Rabbah on Ecclesiastes 7:13 which teaches a lesson worth heeding today.

The *midrash* describes God giving Adam, the first human being, a tour of the Garden of Eden. He shows Adam everything, the grass, the trees, the animals, fish, fowl, and insects. Then God says to Adam: "See how beautiful all My creations are, all this has been created for your sake. So reflect on this, and take care not to foul or destroy my world.

For if you do, there will be none to repair it after you."

Rabbi Leonard Rosenthal
Tifereth Israel Synagogue
Rosh Hashana Day 1

ISRAEL

This summer I read a fascinating book that is much deeper than it appears at face value. The book is “The Yiddish Policeman’s Union” by noted novelist Michael Chabon (“Shay-bon”). Chabon had previously won the Pulitzer Prize for “The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay.” “Kavalier and Clay” was a fictionalized tale of the golden age of comic books in the United States. There was a strong Jewish undercurrent in its story line. This is to be expected considering that some of the earliest inventors of our most enduring comic book legends, such as Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, creators of Superman, were Jewish.

“The Yiddish Policeman’s Union,” which presents as a police detective-murder mystery novel, is steeped in Jewish culture, custom, law, and lore. While I imagine that someone who is not Jewish or not familiar with Jewish issues can enjoy it as a police novel, they will miss much of its richness and darker undertones.

The story is set in a culture and society that is jarring to modern Jewish sensibilities. In “The Yiddish Policeman’s Union” the brave Jews of Palestine who fought to establish the State of Israel in 1948 were overwhelmed by the Arab forces, lost the battle, and were driven into the sea. Those who survived, as well as the Jews of Europe who survived the Holocaust, had nowhere to go. The United State’s Congress reluctantly created the Federal District of Sitka in Alaska and gave it to the Jewish exiles as a homeland. The U.S. Congress allowed them to establish their own government and institutions in Sitka. *Yiddish* was instituted as the local language, as opposed to “American” which was spoken in the United States. Chabon makes sly use of *Yiddish* in his tale. A gun, for example, is a *scholem*, or it might have called in the old west, a “peace maker.”

But, alas, the District of Sitka was only a temporary solution to the Jewish problem. As the book opens, sovereignty over Sitka is going to soon pass from the Jews back to the state of Alaska. As “Reversion” looms ahead, the Jews of Sitka ponder whether they will be able to receive the legal papers which will allow them to stay or where they will go once they are homeless again.

When Judy and I were in Israel earlier this summer before I read the novel I read a critique of “The Yiddish Policeman’s Union” in the Jerusalem Post. In his opinion piece Samuel Freedman wrote: “One of the running gags of the novel is the absurdity of *shtetl* life transplanted into Alaska. Yiddish-language newspapers, Slivovitz toasts, a hotel named for Einstein and a street for Nordau - all are meant to laughably underscore how inorganic, how extrinsic Jews are to this land. The unspoken inference

is that it is just as unnatural for Jews to have plopped themselves down in a Middle Eastern desert. And when Chabon refers to the Sitka Jews having pushed out the indigenous Tlingit Indians, his metaphor needs no footnote to be understood.”

Freedman points out that Chabon’s wife, novelist Ayelet Waldman, is staunchly anti-Israel and anti-Zionist and that Chabon must share her positions. He writes that Chabon negates the idea of a Jewish homeland and romanticizes landlessness and wandering. The villains of the story are *Verbovers*, fictitious corrupt Chassidic Jews whose fantasy is to perform a terrorist act. They scheme to blow up the Dome of the Rock and El Aqsa mosque on Jerusalem’s Temple Mount and hasten the advent of the Messiah.

Freedman says that Chabon is similar to Anne Roiphe and Philip Roth in his critique of Israel and her policies. However, he concludes, “Roughly two generations younger, apparently imbued with the belief that Israel is a colonial imperialistic oppressor, Chabon has found joy in, at least on paper, making it cease to exist.” (Jerusalem Post, Samuel Freedman, Opinion, July 13, 2007)

As I have already said, I read Freedman’s opinion piece before I read Chabon’s novel. Admittedly, I dove into it with a chip on my shoulder. I was looking for anti-Israel and anti-Zionist themes, ready to reach the same conclusion as Freedman, that for Chabon establishing a Jewish homeland in the District of Sitka in Alaska is no more absurd than establishing one in the Middle East.

I do not know where Chabon stands on the question of Israel nor do I think it is reasonable or fair to ascribe to him the same opinions as his wife. As one who has been married for many years, I can safely say that husbands and wives don’t always agree on everything!

However, after reading the “Yiddish Policeman’s Union” I reached a completely opposite opinion about the modern State of Israel than Freedman ascribes to Chabon. At the end of the novel I did not feel a warm nostalgia and longing for Jewish homelessness and wandering, nor do I think that Chabon’s characters did either. Instead, I felt anxiety, despair, and insecurity. Although there were no pogroms in Sitka, nor were there guns pointed at its Jews, the Jews still had to leave what had been their home for sixty years and go back into exile. The age old questions were again raised: Where are we to go? Who wants us? How will we start all over again? and: How many more years will go by before we are forced into exile again?

At the end of the novel I was grateful that the Jewish District of Sitka and the upcoming “Reversion” were the figments of a writer’s imagination and not reality. When I finished the novel I offered a prayer of thanksgiving that Jews are homeless no more. We are not in exile nor will we be forced into exile once again. Since 1948 we have had a homeland to call our own: *Medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel, whose sixtieth birthday

we celebrate this year.

In 1948 the Jews of Palestine were not pushed into the sea after the Arab states rejected the U.N. Partition Plan. Instead, after fighting a long and bloody battle, they established the first Jewish State since the before the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Jews who could no longer live in Europe after the *Shoah* were welcomed with open arms and found refuge. So, too, were the Jews from Yemen and other Arab lands, and more recently Jews from Ethiopia, the former Soviet Union, and Jews who seek to escape the anti-Semitism of Argentina and France.

At long last the Jewish people not only has a place to go to escape oppression, but it also has a homeland in which Judaism and Jewish culture can flourish once again.

I am unsure whether or not Chabon, as Freedman claims, “uses the absurdity of a Jewish autonomous region in Alaska...to laughably underscore how inorganic, how extrinsic Jews are to *Eretz Yisrael*,” but if he does, it is a perverted analogy. Plopping Jews down in Alaska is illogical and incongruous. What do Jews know of glaciers, dog sledding, caribou and polar bears? *Gornisht!* Jews love air conditioning not igloos!

But *Eretz Yisrael* is not Alaska. Even the name by which we refer to the land points to our centuries old link and association with it. Jews have always called this swatch of land alongside the Mediterranean Ocean *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel; the land, according to the Bible, that was promised by God to *Avraham*, *Yitzchak*, *Ya'akov* and their descendants. This is the land in which the Twelve Tribes of Israel settled, in which our Jewish ancestors lived their lives and built the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Temple, in Jerusalem. While Jews were repeatedly exiled from *Eretz Yisrael*, there were always Jews who managed to live there and there always Jews who made pilgrimages to walk on its holy sand. Throughout the centuries we Jews never lost our memories and connection to the land. We spoke of and prayed for our return to Zion, the rebuilding of the Temple, and for a universal message of peace and God's sovereignty to go forth from Jerusalem.

When Theodore Herzl convened the First Zionist Conference in Basil, Switzerland there was at first some sentiment to establish a Jewish State in Uganda. It did not take much persuading for the Conference to instead endorse the position: “Zionism seeks for the Jewish people a publicly recognized legally secured homeland in Palestine.” The reason is obvious. Jews have a long historical and cultural connection to the land of Israel. Creating a Jewish homeland in Uganda makes about as much sense as placing it in Alaska. But creating a new Jewish State in *Eretz Yisrael* makes perfect sense.

While I have always felt drawn to Israel, I have traveled there more times than I can count, and I feel that it is my second home, this last summer I had revelations

about why Israel is so important to me and other Jews.

The first revelation took place during a *Shabbat* service at Congregation *V'Ahavta*, the *Masorti-Conservativi* congregation in Zichron Ya'akov. Israeli born *Masorti* Rabbi Elisha Wolfin, who was brought up as a secular *Kibbutznik*, was speaking about the transition in leadership that took place before the Children of Israel entered the Promised Land. Moses was soon going to die and he was to appoint Joshua to take his place. Rabbi Wolfin said that it must have been very difficult for Moses to entrust his successor with the duties and responsibilities that heretofore had been his. He had to pull back and give Joshua the space not only to forge his own path, but to make his own mistakes. Moses had to let go in order for Joshua to succeed.

The rabbi went on to talk about the current leadership of the State of Israel. Up to now Israeli leaders have been predominantly elder statesmen. Some have been in leadership roles since the establishment of the State. Rabbi Wolfin said that it must be difficult for the old guard to pass the baton of leadership on to a younger generation. But it must be done in order for the State to flourish in the years to come. He said that the older generation, just like Moses, must learn to let go, and give the new generation the opportunity to learn, grow, and make its own mistakes.

It was a very nice lesson and a *D'var Torah* that any rabbi could give, no matter where they lived. But here is what struck me about Rabbi Wolfin's words: when he used the weekly *parsha* to make a point about the government of the State of Israel, there was a direct and organic connection between Moses and today's leaders of the Jewish State. That is, all Jews are direct descendants of Moses and the generation that fled Egypt. We are all part of the same continuous narrative. When a rabbi in Israel uses the Bible to talk about the modern State, there is a direct connection between these two far flung generations.

This is not so for rabbis in the United States and elsewhere who may give the same *D'var Torah*. There is no organic, historical, and cultural link between the Torah and other modern governments. When we use the Torah's lesson to teach a lesson about modern life outside of Israel, we are using a Jewish source to say something about the non Jewish world. But to teach such a lesson is, in a sense, comparing apples to oranges. Why should there even be a suggestion, much less an expectation, that the government of the United States or other countries should conduct themselves according to Biblical precedent or Jewish values?

But when we speak about a life in a Jewish State we do expect that the government will conduct itself not only in consonance with Western democratic values, but with Jewish values as well. The Prime Minister, President, and other governmental leaders in Israel are modern descendants of Moses, the prophets, and the kings of Israel in a very direct way, and they have an obligation to follow in their footsteps.

Which brings me to my second revelation about Israel this summer. During our past visits Judy and I were centered in Jerusalem. While we have not in recent years taken city buses, it is fairly easy to get around Jerusalem on foot or by taxi. We have rented cars but only for short excursions out of the city.

This summer we spent three weeks in the north of Israel, in Zichron Ya'akov. In Zichron Ya'akov an automobile is a must. After our Tifereth Israel tour group returned to San Diego, we rented a car. Although both of us were listed on the rental agreement, Judy refused to drive and for good reason; Israeli drivers are nuts. Far too many Israeli drivers speed or drive recklessly or erratically. While its always a good idea to drive defensively, in Israel one's life depends upon it!

As I drove the highways I found myself fuming whenever a driver sped past me or cut me off. I had a visceral response to the lack of courtesy and the failure to yield or allow one to change lanes. Upon reflection my anger was probably not proportional to the offense. San Diego drivers are far from perfect and often commit the same offenses. But here I am more likely to be slightly annoyed and shrug it off. In Israel I was angry. Why, I asked myself, was I more upset with Israeli than California drivers?

And then it struck me. *Kavod Habriot*, respect for human beings, and *Pikuach Nefesh*, respect for human safety and life, are central tenants of Judaism, and Jewish thought and culture. Someone passing you on a two lane highway at 160 kilometers an hour and then cutting back into your lane so abruptly that it forces you to slam on your brakes is a violation of both *Kavod Habriot* and *Pikuach Nefesh*.

Quite simply, because the majority of them are Jews I have higher expectation of Israeli drivers. As Jews I expect them to conduct themselves in consonance with Jewish traditions and values.

Now I realize, of course, that this is a completely unreasonable and absurd expectation. But I, as well as many others, do have a higher expectations of Israelis because they are part of a religion and culture which celebrates life, abhors injustice, and urges all human beings to walk in Godly ways and recognize the *Tzelem Elohim*, the image of God in themselves and in others around them. When individual Israelis, governmental leaders, or representatives of the society or state violate Jewish principles we often feel that the offense is greater than when committed by those who are not Jewish.

One example: when former Israeli President Moshe Katzav was accused of rape and sexual harassment, the offense was more deeply felt because, not only was he the President of the State of Israel, he is also an Orthodox Jew.

It is not only Israel's drivers that annoy me. There are many other things about Israel that drive me crazy. My irritations go all the way from exasperation with

government policies, to the increasing number of people living in poverty, to my irritation with the lack of sufficient newspaper recycling bins in the cities.

But there is more to my sensitivity to what happens in Israel and to Israelis than my love of Jewish values. I am more emotional about what Israel and Israelis do than others because they are family, and no one can drive you crazy the way members of your own family can. You always have higher expectations of those you love, and no one can annoy, frustrate, and anger you more than the people you care about.

What happens to and in Israel affects me in a very personal way. When Israelis do something stupid, it embarrasses me. I feel their actions reflect on me and all Jews. But on the other hand, when Israel and Israelis do good things, which far and above outnumber the bad things, I am thrilled and proud.

I am a member of the generation that lived through the Six Day War in 1967. I remember the fear we felt when Israel's very survival was at stake when she was threatened and attacked by all the surrounding Arab states. I recall rallying with other Jews in Los Angeles' Hollywood Bowl and calling upon our fellow Americans to support Israel. I, and hundreds of thousands of others, contributed vitally needed funds. I also remember my relief when Israel pushed back its enemies and the Old City of Jerusalem and Temple Mount were once again in our hands.

I was, and continue to be proud, of Israel's will to survive. She is a model of Jewish heroism and courage. She guarantees refuge to Jews who seek escape from persecution, violence, and hatred. Her citizens make countless contributions to the world, from medical discoveries, to computer processors, to the solar electrical generation system that will soon to be installed the Mojave desert.

Unfortunately, most younger Jews do not share my feelings. Their knowledge of and relationship to Israel is far different. They have not lived through the same events and what they know about Israel has often been learned from the biased and negative reports on television and in newspaper articles. They hear the words "apartheid" and "oppressors" and "occupiers" describing Israel and Israelis and barring any knowledge to the contrary, they accept these libelous accusations as fact.

One of my great frustrations as a rabbi and as a Jew is convincing other Jews, especially younger ones, to share my love of Israel. I was excited when Ira Sherbak, our new Torah School Director, told me that in the coming year Israel will be our Torah School's central theme and that our relationship to Israel will be the focus of many of the lessons and activities. Educating our children about Israel's role in the life of the Jewish People and Jewish history is critical. Yet, education can only go so far.

It is one thing to know about Israel, it is quite another to love Israel, the land, the State, and the people. But how can one teach love? Love cannot be taught nor can it

be forced. Love can only be felt, experienced, and lived.

It had been many years since Judy and I had taken a group of our congregants to Israel. Perhaps because of this, I was particularly struck by the effect that seeing the land and the people of Israel had on those who traveled with us. I was struck not only by the surprise and wonder of those who visited, but by their emotions as well. In Israel they saw where our ancestors journeyed, where the Temple stood, and that our people are thriving today.

Their emotional connection was particularly strong at Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust Museum and Memorial. Touring Yad Vashem brought clarity to the role Israel played in providing refuge for the survivors of the Holocaust, in memorializing its victims, and celebrating the resisters of Nazi oppression. Seeing the daily life of Israelis casts a new light on the harsh television images which makes it seem as though Israelis spent all of their waking hours in bomb shelters. Standing at the Conservative Kotel during a Bat Mitzvah, next to the huge stone blocks that the Romans threw off the Temple Mount, brought to life the tragedies of Jewish history and the failure of our enemies to extinguish the Jewish flame. Touring Masada, our travelers recognized and connected with Jewish bravery and heroism in the face of insurmountable odds. Watching the streets of Jerusalem grow silent on Friday afternoon they sensed the true meaning of *Shabbat Shalom*, Sabbath peace. More than one traveler said, "I now know what it is like to live in a Jewish majority, where everyone shares the same history, nationality, and cultural traditions."

I can speak about Israel for hours, and I can employ every hyperbole in the book to tell you how wonderful it is, but the only way for you to fall in love with Israel is for you to visit Israel. Although it is possible to have an affinity and affection for her on some theoretical level without ever going there, it is only when one visits and has personal engagement with the land and her citizens that one begin to form an emotional and spiritual bond.

As you know, I am a strong advocate for programs that send young people to Israel for the summer, such as U.S.Y. Israel Pilgrimage, Camp Ramah Israel Seminar, and the San Diego Scott Stone Mission. I also urge our youth to spend a year of high school or college study there, be it on U.S.Y.'s Nativ, the Conservative Yeshiva, Young Judea's Year Course, Junior Year Abroad programs, and the large number of other opportunities that exist to bring young people to the land. I am glad that so many of our kids have gone, but it is only a small percentage of those who could go.

I am also a big fan of Birthright, or as it is called in Hebrew, *Taglit*. Birthright is an outreach program that takes thousands of college age young adults to Israel each year. They return not only with knowledge and stronger ties to Israel but to Judaism as well.

If you love Israel, one of the most important things you can do to support her is

to encourage your children and grandchildren to visit. You should not only encourage them to participate in one of the many programs that are available, but offer to pay for them as well. What better Bar or Bat Mitzvah gift could there be for a youngster than to give them a fund to be used to travel to Israel when they are in high school or college? Or, you could take them there on a family mission of your own so that everyone shares the experience.

Many have often thought that it would be wonderful if a “Birthright” program existed for Jewish adults, but Birthright is very expensive to run. Participants basically pay only for their own discretionary spending, although the cost of the program per person is around \$2,400. Since its inception well over 200 million dollars has been invested in the program by generous donors and the government of Israel to subsidize more than 123,000 young adults from 51 countries.

With these kinds of costs, it is unlikely that a Birthright program for adults will be established in the near future. Therefore, it is up to every Jew to find the funds necessary to visit Israel at least once in their lifetime on their own. One cannot truly love anyone or anything without forging a personal relationship first. Visiting Israel is a transformative experience. Once you walk the land yourself, you will not feel the same about her again. I am convinced that you will love her as much as I and the tens of thousands of other Jews who have traveled there. I also promise you that when you depart you will leave a piece of yourself there, and that you will hardly be able to wait until the next time you can visit and once again feel spiritually whole and fulfilled as a Jew and as a human being.

Rabbi Leonard Rosenthal
Tifereth Israel Synagogue
Kol Nidre 5768

RELIGION AND POLITICS

Although I know that there are those who would disagree, I have consciously worked to refrain from addressing divisive political issues from the *bimah*. This is not to say that I do not have my own opinions, but I felt that it was inappropriate to use my position as rabbi of the congregation to further a partisan political cause. Additionally, if I as the rabbi of Tifereth Israel Synagogue, or the synagogue board endorsed a political candidate it would endanger our tax exempt status.

Something that happened last year, however, pushed me to reflect on the relationship between Judaism, the synagogue, and political discourse. I began to wonder if, in our quest to have *shalom* amongst the diverse members of our congregational community, we have driven the wedge between religion and politics too deep.

Two years ago, after a long hiatus, we organized a Second Night Passover Seder in our Cohen Social Hall. From my past experiences with congregational *Sedarim* I knew how tiresome they could be. I decided that if we were going to have a congregational *Seder* it could not be the “same old thing.” I divided the Haggadah into several sections and assigned parts in advance to those who would attend. When I gave out assignments I included very specific and exacting instructions: “Dear Friend: At this year’s Tifereth Israel Synagogue *Seder* your assignment will be the Four Questions. Please present your topic in any way you see fit. Please be as creative as possible. Sincerely, Rabbi Rosenthal”

Several people called and tried to get more specific information or advice. “Sorry,” I said. “This is your problem, not mine.” Believe me, it led to a very diverse *Seder* experience.

The first year’s *Seder* was so successful that I utilized the same technique last year. I passed out assignments and encouraged everyone to be as creative as possible.

Everything went along swimmingly until we reached the Four Children: the wise child, the wicked child, the naive child, and the one who is too young to ask.

I will not mention anyone’s name, but I did receive permission from the presenter to share her introduction to the Four Children.

She began with the wise child. As she explained why the wise child was wise she reached into her bag of props and brought out a sign with an old outdated photo of yours truly. Everyone was amused and laughed with delight....until she continued on to the wicked child.

As she began speaking about the wicked child, she reached into her bag and brought out a photo of President George W. Bush. This time not everyone was amused. Several people were audibly and visibly angry as she explained the characteristics of

the wicked child while holding our president's picture aloft.

In all fairness, she was not singularly partisan, because she raised photos of Rudolph Giuliani to demonstrate the naive child and Barak Obama as the one who is too young to ask. But her comments on President Bush were what caught everyone's attention.

During the Seder several congregants approached me and I received several phone calls afterwards. People were not only disturbed about the specific comments about the president, they were also upset that: one, partisan political comments were uttered during a sacred religious celebration, and two, that I did nothing to stop it.

I have to admit that I, too, was uncomfortable during the presentation, but I defended the congregant's right to express her political opinion at the *Seder*. I also felt it was inappropriate for me or anyone else to prevent a member from expressing their personal political opinion. Despite the negative feedback I received and having had several months to reflect on the events of that night I feel the same way today.

It seems to me that there are micro and macro issues that need to be considered. The micro issues are: what topics and discussions are appropriate and which are inappropriate for a Passover Seder and for that matter any other religious celebration, and what should one's expectations be when attending one? The larger issue is: what place, if any, does political discussion have in a house of worship in general and in a synagogue in particular?

In an early section of the Hagaddah, one which most of us get to before we begin drifting off after the second cup of wine, we read:

וְאִפִּילוּ בְּלִנּוּ חֲכָמִים, בְּלִנּוּ נְבוֹנִים, בְּלִנּוּ זְקֵנִים, בְּלִנּוּ יוֹדְעִים אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה, מִצָּוָה עָלֵינוּ לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרָיִם. וְכָל הַמְרַבֵּה לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרָיִם, הָרִי זֶה מִשְׁבַּח:

“Even if all of us were wise, all of us discerning, all of us veteran scholars, and all of us knowledgeable in the Torah, it would still be a *mitzvah* for us to retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

“The more and the longer one expands and embellishes the story, the more commendable.”

The Passover Seder celebration was never intended to be a rote recitation of the printed word. The printed text of the Haggadah is not the end but rather the beginning of the discussion. Its words are a springboard to the larger issues of Jewish history, God's saving power, and the ongoing journey from slavery to freedom.

During the Seder we are to imagine ourselves living in the time and circumstances of Egyptian bondage, to feel and suffer the pain of servitude, and the hope and fear engendered by our midnight escape and new found freedom.

The Passover story itself is a political story. God's presence is not only felt in the miracle of the burning bush and plagues rained down upon Egypt, but also in the yearning of the Israelites to burst their chains, throw off their yokes, and march towards

a new life. The Passover story is a story of the human capacity to cause pain in suffering in others, of righteous rebellion against oppression, and of the power of good to triumph over evil.

If one looks at any Haggadah one quickly realizes how the Passover story has been used by diverse groups of Jews and non-Jews to support what many would consider to be political opinions.

One ancient example is the Haggadah's story of the five rabbis who gathered in B'nei B'rak and spent all night discussing the Passover story. While at face value it appears to be a story of how one should lose oneself in *Seder* discussions, many commentators believe that this tale is the Haggadah's coded way of telling us that these great community leaders were secretly meeting to discuss the Bar Kochba revolt against the Romans.

A more modern example of contemporizing the Haggadah is the inclusion of the African American spiritual: "Go Down Moses" in many Haggadot. ("When Israel was in Egypt Land, Let my people go!") "Go Down Moses" was the African American slaves' way of anchoring their own fight for freedom in the struggles of the Biblical Israelites in Egypt.

Although many would argue that the African American slaves' fight for freedom was an assertion of their moral rights and a reflection of universal moral values, if one studies this country's attitudes towards African Americans and slavery in the late 1700's and early 1800's, one quickly sees that not everyone in those days would agree. In the South slavery was seen as just, right, and moral, while in the North it was an anathema. What some saw as a moral dispute was also a political dispute. So political was the disagreement that it led to a split between the Northern and Southern states and to the Civil War. The inclusion of "Go Down Moses" in the Haggadah is a political, as well as religious statement, one which at one time was highly partisan and divisive.

Multiple other examples abound: the additions to the Haggadah which speak about the oppression of Jews in the former Soviet Union, the destruction of European Jewry and the evil of the Nazis during *Shoah*, the creation of the State of Israel, and even the lines about Miriam's Cup, which asserts that the contributions of women to Jewish history and life may no longer be diminished. All of these moral topics also have political dimensions.

Utilizing the Haggadah as a springboard to talk about the issues of modern American life follows precedent. The lessons of our Jewish past can be used to consider the issues of the day. The congregant who used the four children to speak about American politics stood on solid historical foundation.

Nevertheless, should contemporary politics be incorporated into a congregational *Seder*? The question of the spiritual atmosphere we want to create and the expectations of those who attend is a valid concern. When Jews gather in synagogues for religious celebrations they come to commune with God, to enjoy fellowship, and to celebrate with each other. There is a general expectation that they will have a peaceful spiritual experience. They want their synagogue to be a *Sukkat Shalom*, a Tent of Peace, in which they can find shelter from a chaotic and fragmented world and society. Political

statements and discussions infringe on that *shalom* and bring divisiveness and consternation into what many want and expect to be a tranquil setting.

While I understand and sympathize with these sentiments, my growing concern is that to isolate religious experience from the rigors and turmoil of “real life” will end up compartmentalizing and neutering it. Judaism and Jewish tradition has much wisdom which can inform contemporary life and its experiences and challenges. If we disconnect Judaism from the issues of the day it will lose its vibrancy, potency and ability to improve the world and human behavior. If we put Judaism in a box it may still provide a “nice” personal spiritual experience to its adherents but it will lose its transformative power.

The whole debate reminds me of the old joke about the new rabbi who comes to town. Before his first service the president sits down with the rabbi to give him some advice. “What do you plan on speaking about tonight?” asks the president. “Well,” says the rabbi, “I thought I would talk about prayer.” “Not a good idea,” says the president. “people will begin thinking about prayer in the public schools and that’s too political.” “What if,” continues the rabbi, “I talk about the importance of keeping Kosher.” “No,” says the president, “many of our members don’t keep Kosher and they will be offended.”

“How about if I talk about this week’s Torah portion?” asks the Rabbi. “Also not a good idea,” says the president. “Most of our members don’t read the Torah and you will make them feel uneducated and ignorant.”

Finally, in frustration the Rabbi asks the president, “What do you suggest I talk about this weekend?”

“Why rabbi,” says the president in surprise, “we want you to talk about Judaism!”

One cannot talk about Judaism in a vacuum, as if it were isolated and apart from the rest of human civilization. Judaism is not only a system of spiritual beliefs and practices, it is a way of looking at and living life in all its fullness, beauty, contradictions, and complexity.

Judaism has never made a distinction between the sacred and the secular. Although our sages distinguished between *mitzvot ben adam l’Makom*, between human beings and God, and *mitzvot ben adam l’chavero*, between human beings and their neighbors, an affront against a person is also an affront against God.

For example, in some systems laws against stealing and lying are understood as ways of insuring civil and just secular societies. Civil law is a necessary component of what the philosophers John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau called the “social contract.” If people are allowed to take what is not theirs or publish or speak falsehoods about others, it would be impossible for people to live and work together. Communities, by the mutual agreement of their members, create law in order for society to function.

However, from the Torah’s point of view, violations of many “civil laws” are offenses against God as well. When human beings wrong other human beings, they offend God as well. Between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur we make much of the need to use days to make peace with those we have harmed in the past year. But the

second step of *Teshuva* is just as critical: we then have to ask God to forgive us as well. We apologize to God and ask God to forgive us for harming God's children.

From the Jewish point of view the religious and secular realms are not disparate entities, they are one united whole. Our religious point of view provides a lens through which to consider and evaluate everything around us, including contemporary issues of the day.

Even the High Holy Day liturgy, which is primarily concerned with self assessment and personal improvement, is ripe with political overtones. Here is an example from Rosh Hashana:

תִּקַּע בְּשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל לְחַרוּתֵנוּ, וְשֵׂא נֶס לְקַבֵּץ גְּלִיּוֹתֵינוּ, וְקָרַב פְּזוּרֵינוּ מִבֵּין הַגּוֹיִם, וְנִפְּוֹצוֹתֵינוּ כְּנֶס מִיִּרְכְּתֵי אֲרָץ. וְהִבְיָאֵנוּ לְצִיּוֹן עִירְךָ בְּרִנָּה, וְלִירוּשָׁלַיִם בֵּית מִקְדָּשְׁךָ בְּשִׂמְחַת עוֹלָם.

“Our God and God of our ancestors, sound the great *Shofar* for our liberation and lift high a banner to gather our exiles...Lead us to Zion, Your city, with song, and to Jerusalem, the home of your ancient Temple, with everlasting joy.” And “Liberators shall ascend Mount Zion to bring judgment upon Mount Esau and God's kingship will be acknowledged in the world. The Lord shall be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be one and His name One.”

Today we not only pray for our own personal salvation, but for all Jews to return to Israel, the reestablishment of the Davidic monarchy there, and for the entire world to turn to God and give up its evil and misguided ways. Today we pray not only our own personal salvation, but for a new world order and system of government.

The prophet Samuel, whose birth we read about in the first day of Rosh Hashana's Haftarah, not only anointed Saul as the first King of Israel, but also removed him from office after he disobeyed God's instructions. The prophet Nathan did not hesitate to rebuke and condemn David, the greatest Jewish king of all time, after he engineered the death of Uriah in order to marry his wife, Bat Sheva. The rulers of ancient Israel were subject to the Word of God as transmitted by the religious leaders of the day.

The prophets of Israel not only railed against Israel's rulers, but against the people themselves. They condemned not only their lack of faith, disobedience to God, and their lusting after idols, they also condemned their failure to treat their fellow human beings with honesty, integrity, kindness, generosity, and respect.

The prophet Isaiah, whose words we read tomorrow, responds to those people who question God: “Why, when we fasted, did You not see; when we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?”

לְמָה צָמְנוּ וְלֹא רָאִיתָ עֲיִנֵינוּ נִפְּשָׁנוּ וְלֹא תָדַע הוּא בְּיוֹם צָמְכֶם תִּמְצְאוּ-חֲפָץ וְכָל-עַבְדֵיכֶם תִּנְגָּשׁוּ:

“Because on your fast day,” answers Isaiah, “you see to your business and oppress all your laborers! Because you fast in strife and contention, and you strike with

a wicked fist! Your fasting today is not such as to make your voice heard on high.” Appropriate ritual behavior is insufficient to please God, says Isaiah. God also wants us to live our daily lives and conduct our business affairs in ways which bring *kiddush Hashem*, the sanctification of God’s name.

I am not in any way suggesting that modern democracies should be governed by religious law (which, by the way, in and of itself is a political statement!). Democracies, while imperfect, are still the very best form of government. But one does need to recognize that from the Biblical and Rabbinic points of view, there is no such thing as separation of church and state, and that God is concerned with everything we do. There is no earthly act that is beyond God’s interest and concern.

While acknowledging and sympathizing with those who want their synagogue to be a place of quiet, solace, and spiritual refuge, that point of view is foreign to the prophetic and rabbinic traditions from which modern Judaism descends. The Talmud, one of the greatest compilations of Jewish wisdom of all time, is not a book of meditations and homilies. The Talmud contains the written record of the arguments and disagreements of some of the greatest Jewish thinkers of all time.

In order to remain relevant, important, and meaningful, Judaism and the synagogue must not be imprisoned in an ivory tower, untouchable, and unable to touch others. Judaism must speak to the burning issues of the day.

The difficulty, of course, is, how does one speak about real life issues in the synagogue knowing that a.) Judaism is not at all monolithic in its approach to anything, and b.) the members of our congregation are radically diverse in their political points of view. How does one avoid dismaying and alienating people who feel strongly about the issues of the day?

To begin with the first challenge, there is no question that a wide variety of beliefs legitimately fall within the religious system we call “Judaism.” It is usually just as easy to cite a Jewish source to oppose a particular point of view as it is to cite one to support it. One example I found this year was the disagreements between synagogues and Jewish communities in the North and South during the Civil War. Rabbis in the South cited the Bible and Talmud to justify slavery while those in the North found sources to condemn it.

Nevertheless, the fact that Judaism does allow for a multiplicity of beliefs makes the synagogue the perfect place to educate and discuss disparate points of view. We are members of a religious tradition that allows for argument, disagreement, contradiction, and multiple truths. We live with each other, respect, and celebrate with each other, despite the fact that no two of us understand God and Judaism in the same way. We do not have to agree on issues of the day. But we should *engage* in them together.

The second challenge is more difficult. Won’t engaging in education and discussion on controversial and divisive issues alienate our members? Won’t it change the synagogue from being being a *Sukkat Shalom*, a Tabernacle of Peace, to something more akin to a session of the Israeli *Knesset*?

Shortly after I came to Tifereth Israel I was invited to personally endorse a

candidate running for political office. I wasn't sure what to do so I called up one of our past presidents and asked for his advice.

"Rabbi," he said. "There will be plenty of reasons why people will not like you. Why give them another one?"

It was sound advice which, with rare exception, I have kept until this day. For the most part I have avoided publicly wading into what might be perceived as partisan political issues. I have avoided making public statements or soliciting comments on many divisive and controversial issues. But there has been a cost to this. I have lately begun to wonder if, in the name of *shalom bayit*, the synagogue has ceased to be a place where Judaism and "real life" intersect, inform, and challenge one another.

Without venturing a political opinion, let me share with you some areas of concern where Judaism does have something to say, and yet because they are "hot button" topics, we tend to avoid engaging in them as a congregation: a. the right to abortion versus the right to life debate. b. the immigration crisis and debate which currently roils our country, c. racism which still is an integral component of American society and the Jewish community, d. the cloning and stem cell debate, e. the gay and lesbian rights and marriage debate, f. and of course, the great granddaddy of all forbidden contemporary synagogue topics: the War in Iraq.

I am not advocating that Tifereth Israel or any synagogue or church should stake out positions on these topics, but the synagogue should be a place where these topics are debated and discussed. We should not be afraid to engage in discussion on the critical issues of the day and to learn how our centuries old tradition can clarify and perhaps help resolve them. By the same token, all of us should be open to learning from opposing points of view.

I know, of course, that after the holidays I will hear from members of the congregation who would have preferred that I speak about a more spiritual topic during the holidays and that I had refrained from talking politics. I do understand and respect this point of view.

But if we, as a religious community, are not prepared to address and engage in critical issues that affect our lives on a day to day basis, then what purpose does our gathering here today or any other day serve, other than to make us feel good or feel guilty?

On Rosh Hashana the *shofar* does not only call upon us to change ourselves, but to change the world.

And as Rabbi Hillel said ואם לא עכשיר, אימתו, "If not now, when?"

Rabbi Leonard Rosenthal
Tifereth Israel Synagogue
Yom Kippur - Yizkor - 5768

POSTERITY

When my son, Adam, announced his engagement to Sarah a few years ago people asked me how I felt about one of my children marrying. I told them that I was excited by the prospect of one day becoming a grandfather. It was the father-in-law thing that I couldn't quite get used to.

To my surprise, I quickly adjusted to having a married son and new daughter-in-law. However, I was caught completely by surprise when Adam and Sarah told me that Sarah was pregnant. I was totally unprepared for the flood of emotions that swept over me when I thought about the upcoming birth of my first grandchild. The preliminaries turned out to be minor, of course, compared with Neriya's birth.

Sarah went into labor in the middle of the night. We were woken up by the telephone around 3:00 a.m. California time. We groggily answered. It was Adam. He quickly and excitedly told us that our first grandson had just been born. A couple of seconds later my cell phone beeped and there on the screen was a photo of Neriya taken when he was about 15 minutes old. This was but one of the many things that have changed since Judy and I had our children.

After I hung up I lay in bed staring at the ceiling. I was not able to fall asleep. I just kept thinking "the birth of this child is surely one of God's greatest miracles and blessings."

I silently uttered the same prayer of thanksgiving when I held Neriya for the first time. I still remember births of my own children as if they were yesterday. I remember holding them and wheeling their strollers. I remember tucking them in their cribs and singing them lullabies. And now, in what seems like an instant later, I am holding in my arms the child of my child.

Like every other grandparent I looked at Neriya and tried to see who he resembled. Did he look more like my daughter-in-law or more like my son? From whom did he inherit the color of his eyes or the thickness and texture of his hair (hopefully not from me), whose personality would be most like his own, and what abilities and talents would he receive?

We all agreed, even Sarah, that Neriya looked like Adam when he was an infant. But we all knew that his looks would change over time, and that he would one day become a combination not only of his father and mother, but inherit characteristics from all who came before them. Within Neriya are the contributions of untold generations.

One of the most unsettling questions Jews ask is: “What do Jews believe happens after we die.” It is not so much that the question is unsettling, but the answer, or I should say “answers,” are. This question is asked most often when people are reflecting on the death or imminent death of a loved one, or on holidays such as Yom Kippur, when Yizkor is recited and we are asked to reflect on our own lives. We consider our own mortality and how we can best squeeze the most meaning and happiness out of every breath we take. The imagery of the “Book of Life” and “Book of Death” invariably leads to questions about reward and punishment and whether and how and if one’s this world behaviors reverberate in the world to come.

Many who ask questions about Jewish belief in an afterlife are dissatisfied when I answer that Judaism does not have a systematic or consistent approach to what happens to the essence of a human being, the *neshama*, the soul, after we die? Judaism has theories rather than answers. One stream of Jewish thought teaches that when the body dies, all that is human about it dies as well. When a human being dies there is no soul that continues on in some future existence. Another tradition teaches that after the human body dies the soul returns to God in heaven, where it is united eternally with all the souls that ever existed before. Still another Jewish tradition speaks of the resurrection of the human body at some future Messianic era at which time the soul will be returned to the body and all creation will live in eternal harmony. Jews who embrace mystical Jewish traditions may also believe in reincarnation.

While none of these beliefs is definitive, they are all authentically Jewish. One may accept them if they bring you comfort or reject them if they seem irrational.

There is, however, one understanding of immortality that I believe all of us can embrace. Even if we do not believe that there is some kind of corporeal immortality after death, we can agree that part of us continues to live on in those people we touch during our lives.

As I held my new grandson I thought not only about the possibilities his future might hold but about all the generations that contributed to his birth. This child is not only the product of his parents, but his genetic and spiritual heritage include the contributions of his grandparents, great-grandparents, and generations upon generations that came before them. Depending on how well families have kept their histories and genealogies, the names, birth dates, and birth places may be known and perhaps even some family history. What is impossible to know is how their lives and deeds were synthesized and transmitted by the generations that followed.

Who we are today is not only a product of our environment and free will choices, but also a synthesis of all the lives, personalities, histories, and values of those who preceded us. Sometimes it is possible to see these contributions directly when we look at babies, children, or adults, and say that they have their parents’ or grandparents’

eyes, nose, mouth, or tempers. But most of the time these generational gifts are subtle and hidden. It is often impossible to know the combinations of genetics and personality traits and transmitted values, hopes, and dreams that create each unique human being.

Last Yom Kippur I asked the question, “How do we want to be remembered?” Do we want to be remembered as a powerful or a generous human being? Do we want to be remembered as the one who accumulated the most wealth or gave away the most to worthy causes? As the one who received or gave away the most love? I suggested that we have the power to remake our lives and make our deeds reflect our values.

However, when confronted by the birth of my grandson I began to realize that in addition to those values we consciously communicate to the next generation, everything we do or say has an unquantifiable and unknowable effect on present and future creation.

In 1972 meteorologist Edward Lorenz presented a paper at the American Association for the Advancement of Science entitled: “Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?” Lorenz, a mathematician and meteorologist, had conducted experiments that led him to assert that very small actions can lead to unpredictable results. That is, in an interconnected world such as ours the flapping of butterfly’s wings could change the atmosphere in minute ways that might combine with other atmospheric variables to set off a chain reaction that might lead to the spawning of a tornado in another part of the world. This is known today as the “butterfly effect.” It is an aspect of what scientists call “Chaos theory.” “Chaos theory” holds that some systems are too complex and have too many variables to be completely predictable.

Planetary weather, for example, is one such complex system. The nearly infinite number of atmospheric variables makes it impossible for meteorologists to be 100% certain in their forecasting. There is a large margin of unpredictability in meteorology.

I think that the “butterfly effect” also applies to human moral behavior as well. That is, in a complex interconnected world, one never knows just how far reaching one’s words or behaviors may turn out to be. Any word we speak or deed we perform can literally change the world.

Although it is not exactly parallel to what I am discussing, I am reminded of the tale that explains the far reaching effects of indulging in *lashon hara*, gossip and slander.

In a European *shtetl* a prominent citizen once made extremely disparaging and libelous public comments about the town’s rabbi. The rabbi heard and summoned the man to his study. The rabbi confronted the man with his misdeeds, and the man immediately apologized and begged the rabbi’s forgiveness.

The rabbi said, "I will forgive you on one condition: that you go to your home and bring me one of your pillows." The man was puzzled but immediately complied. When he brought the pillow to the rabbi's study the rabbi ordered him to rip it open and let its feathers fly in the wind. The man was even more puzzled, but he did as ordered. The rabbi then said: "I will forgive you for speaking ill of me once you gather all of the feathers and stuff them back in the pillow."

The man was stunned. "But rabbi," he said, "the feathers are already spread over half of the *shtetl*, if not beyond. It is not possible to gather them all back!"

"So it is with your words," the rabbi concluded. "Once you let them out of your mouth there is no telling where they went and upon whose ears they will fall. Once you utter them there is no way to get them back."

The same holds true for everything thing we do. Once we act there is no way of telling who will ultimately be touched, and undoing that which has already been done. We never truly know what effect our acts will have on those around us and future generations.

The ultimate effect and influence we have on our children, grandchildren, loved ones, family, friends and society at large is largely ephemeral and impossible to quantify. But there can be no doubt that who we are, how we see the world, and the deeds we perform are like ripples in a pond, spreading ever outward from where they began.

While Lorenz's theory about the "butterfly effect" is useful in helping illustrate the unknown repercussions of our actions, I would not apply all of his conclusions about the physical world to the spiritual/religious world. Lorenz's theory states that minute differences in initial conditions can lead to grossly different outcomes. Since one can never know all of the variables, it makes it impossible to predict outcomes in complex systems.

While this may be acceptable and necessary in understanding the physical world, we must reject these conclusions in the religious and moral spheres. If we believe that there is unpredictability and chaos in the moral and spiritual realms, we would soon arrive the position of the Epicureans, whom I discussed last Rosh Hashana, who said, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." That is, if there is uncertainty over the ultimate effect of performing a good deed versus a bad deed, than why should we favor one over the other? If a good deed may ultimately lead to a bad result, and a bad deed may lead to a good result, why should we ever favor performing a *mitzvah* over performing an *aveirah*, a sin?

Theories that embrace unpredictability might be acceptable in the physical world but not in the religious world. From the Jewish point of view good and bad deeds do not lead to uncertain results. Judaism teaches that acting in Godly, moral, and beneficent

ways leads to a better world and life for all. Conversely, rejecting God, doing evil, and acting with unbridled selfishness destroys the earth and the lives of those living upon it.

Or as our sages put it: *mitzvah goreret mitzvah, v'aveirah goreret aveirah*—performing a *mitzvah* leads to performing another *mitzvah*, and acting sinfully leads to further sins. There is a direct connection. Good leads to good and evil leads to evil. There is no doubt about it.

Herein lies one of the basic differences between faith and science. To be science, a theory has to be provable through controlled repeatable experimentation. Once it is proved, it is fact. Faith is not subject to the same test. Faith is a matter of belief, of what our hearts and souls, as well as our minds, tell us to be true. Perhaps it is not quantifiable and scientifically unprovable, but I believe from the depths of my soul that God, no matter how one thinks of God, wants us to perform *mitzvot*, Divine commandments, and *gemilut chasadim*, acts of lovingkindness, and if we do, it will uplift not only us, but those around us, and future generations as well. Performing *mitzvot*, doing good deeds, acting kindly, and loving your neighbor will heal the world and bring it closer to perfection.

One of the most enduring images of the High Holy Days is that of the Books of Life and Death spread open before God. The *midrash* says that on Rosh Hashana God opens two books, the Book of Life and the Book of Death. *Tzaddikim*, righteous people are immediately inscribed into the Book of Life for the coming year and *Reshaim*, evil people, into the Book of Death. On Rosh Hashana most of us are suspended somewhere in the middle. We are neither *tzaddikim* nor *reshaim*. Since the books must be completed and closed by the end of Yom Kippur, we have ten days to pray, do *teshuvah*, repent, change our lives, and convince God that we should be inscribed in the Book of Life.

This *midrash* is elucidated and expanded in one of the most revered and awesome prayers of the liturgy: *Unetaneh Tokef*. In this prayer Rabbi Amnon of Mayence describes the scene in heaven on Judgement Day. All souls pass before God, as sheep before their shepherd, and God decides *mi yichye u'mi yamot*, “who shall live and who shall die.” The congregation solemnly chants *brosh hashana yikateivun u'v yom tzom kippur yichateimun*, “on Rosh Hashana it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed” as the *chazan* chants the terrible ways those inscribed in the Book of Death in the coming year will perish.

Last *Shabbat* I reviewed this prayer at services and asked those present: “Do you believe this *midrash* literally or metaphorically? That is, do you believe that God sits in heaven on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and ordains who will live and who will die in the coming year, or do you interpret the *midrash* of the Book of Life and the Book of Death in some other way?”

It was no surprise that not one person at the service took *Unetaneh Tokef* literally. No one believed that their future is determined during the High Holy Days and that they have no opportunity to change their fate once the Books are “sealed.” They, for the most part, asserted that human beings have free will, control much of their own fates, and believe that illness and death are no more punishments for evil behavior, than power, glory, and riches are rewards for those who do good.

I want to suggest this morning that even if we do not take the heavenly Books of Life and Death literally, we can still find the imagery meaningful.

Rabbi Kass Abelson, whose writings I often use at funeral services wrote: “... the phrase *b’sefer ha-chayim* - usually translated as “In the Book of Life” - can also mean *B’Sefer* “In the Book” *Hachayim* - of “The Living”. If we understand it, in this sense, then we realize that everything we do is written down in the human record - becomes part of somebody's Book of Life - is woven into the plots and dramas of human destiny. Each day we make entries into the biographies of our loved ones, of our neighbors and friends, into the ledger of the general community, into the chronicles of Judaism. Thus, it is at this season that we are bidden to ask ourselves what kind of entries are we making into the *Sefer Hachayim* - into the books of those among whom we are living.”

I find great meaning and wisdom in Rabbi Abelson’s interpretation. Each of us is writing our own *Sefer Hachayim*, “Book of the Living.” Our *Sefer Hachayim* contains the records of our personal histories, our thoughts, and our deeds. It contains our accomplishments, triumphs, and successes, and our failures, losses, and regrets as well. Our book contains the dreams we have dreamt, the goals we have attained, and the record of when we have fallen short or given up. It also contain the truths we murmur in our innermost heart, and the lies we have told to ourselves. In our book is inscribed the times we have reached or exceeded our potentials or fallen miserably short. All these inscriptions we carry within ourselves all of our lives.

But at the same time as we are writing our own *sefer hachayim*, “Book of the Living,” we are also making entries into the *Sefer Hachayim* of those around us. Everything we do or say becomes part of someone else’s life story. When we are angry the hurt is recorded in someone else’s heart. When we are happy, we uplift. When we do a good deed we encourage warmth and beneficence in others. When we do evil, we cut, abrade, and damage. When we perform a *mitzvah* we inspire others to perform *mitzvot* as well. When we commit an *aveirah*, a sin, we may lead others to permit themselves to do the same, or hopefully, to vow to avoid doing the same.

Perhaps if all of us recognized that all that we do and say is recorded not only in our own Books of Life, but in the permanent record of everyone we touch, and the generations that follow as well, we would be much more careful about every aspect of our lives.

At birth my grandson was a genetic composite of all who came before him. As he grows he will integrate the contributions his parents, grandparents, and those around him make to his ever expanding heart and mind. As he matures he will continue to grow and learn, and develop his own lenses through which to see the world, and filters which he will use to separate the useful from the harmful, the good from the bad. And one day, God willing, he will have his own children to whom he will pass on all that he received and his own unique contribution as well.

My obligation to him, as a grandparent, is to do my best to make the entries I make into Neriya's *Sefer Hachaim*, Book of the Living, the most Godly, kindest, generous, and loving ones of which I am capable.

Our obligation, as Jews and human beings, is to make our entries into the *Sefer Hachaim*, the Books of the Living, of all those whose lives we touch, contributions that will help bring our world and its inhabitants closer to *Tikkun*, to healing, hope, holiness, and redemption.