

Return and Restore
Yom Kippur Morning 5770
September 28, 2009

The year is 2017. The date is January 20. A late entry into the recent presidential race caught the nation by surprise; the new occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue is not the first woman, nor the first Alaskan, nor the first Indian-American, but the first American Jew to hold that position. The inauguration proceeds pretty much according to past pattern and expectation, except that the transition team is busy installing... extra sets of dishes in the White House kitchen.

But there, on the reviewing stands, behind the newly-elected president, sits a woman in a fashionable hat. The mother of the president, in a seat of honor, she taps the shoulders of the dignified and neatly-uniformed man next to her, who turns out to be the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Do you see that man putting his hand in the air?" she says, pointing towards her son. The chairman gives her a puzzled look, and nods. "Well," she says proudly... "his sister is a doctor!"

My friends, with all the Jewish physicians in the world, with all the penchant for the profession so prominently displayed in the hopes and dreams of so many Jewish parents, it might come as a surprise to learn that the mandate to heal, the impulse to treat symptoms and cure sickness and fight disease... was actually the source of theological controversy at one point in Jewish history.

Now, you might have heard about some religious groups who still to this day believe that medical intervention contravenes the will of God. Our struggle with the same issue was resolved early in our history at least. But there was a time when we faced the same issue.

It is, I suppose, a question that was bound to come up. For if God is the cause of all events, according to classical theology, if a Supreme Being is in *charge* and in *control* and therefore the *source* of sickness, the cause and the reason why anyone falls ill in the first place – on what basis do we act against this? *Chutzpah!* Who are we, to change what God has wrought?

Let me state clearly, then, as I have throughout these High Holy Days and through all of my teaching, all of my career, that I do not share the theology behind the question, that I do *not*, personally, believe that God micromanages the universe, that God is the cause of every leaf that falls, every wind that stirs, every bacterium that is inhaled. My view, my vision of God is very different than that. But if I *did* share the classical view of God as responsible for health and sickness alike, for each one of us, I would have to admit, wondering whether we have the right to heal... would be a pretty good question.

We know, of course, that there *is* such a right in Jewish tradition. It is even a *mitzvah*. A commandment. An obligation. But, if so: what is the foundation of the commandment.

One basis for the obligation to heal comes to us from a seemingly unrelated aspect of Jewish law. The rabbis of the Talmud root the commandment in the verse from Leviticus which we will read later today, in the afternoon service: “*lo ta’amod al dam rayecha*; you shall not stand idly by as your neighbor bleeds.”

Another answer came from Nachmanides, the Ramban, in the 14th century, who saw medical treatment as a simple and specific application of the general rule, which we will also hear this afternoon: “*v’ahavta l’rayecha kamocho*; you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

But neither of these approaches solves the theological problem: if God caused the illness in the first place, by what right do we intervene?

And so it is left to the great philosopher Maimonides, the Rambam, himself a physician, to comment on a verse in Deuteronomy, and read into it a philosophical basis for the instinctive, the humane impulse we display when we reach out, to help and to heal. The verse deals with...the restoration of property: “*Lo tireh et shor achicha o et sayo nidachim, v’hitalamta meihem... hasheiv tashiveim l’achiycha*. You shall not see your neighbor’s ox or sheep wandering around lost, and ignore it; you shall surely return it to your neighbor. *V’im lo karov achiycha eilecha...* And if your neighbor does not live nearby... *v’lo y’da’to...* or you do not know who the owner is... *va’asafto el toch beitecha, v’haya imach ad d’rosh achiycha oto...* you shall gather it in to your household, and it

shall remain with you until your neighbor inquires after it... *v'hasheivoto lo...* and you shall restore it to him.”

**Restoring health... is analogous... to returning lost property!
We are even commanded... to go out of our way, to bear expense, to
make an effort to do so.**

**We are obligated to do whatever we can... to return things to
how they were. To make it the way it was. Restoration.
Reparation. Return.**

And the language at the heart of the commandment: *hashev tashiveim. Hasheivoto lo...* The same root, the same word... as the central task of this season. *Shuv! Teshuvah.* Response. Repent. Return. Restore.

We are, as you are all aware, in the midst of a heated debate about Health Care reform in this country. Even before his remarks to the Joint Session of Congress, President Obama reached out to religious leaders. I was among almost a thousand rabbis of all movements of Judaism to participate in a late-August conference call, solely on the topic of Health Care. His request to us: to remember... that when a politician calls on a nation to sacrifice for a greater good, or a communal need, critics and cynics swarm and question every motive, every comment. But for religious leaders: to point out a moral path, a higher call, to help us be

better attuned to the presence of pain, the pull of need... that *is* our job. That is what we are here for. That is what we are supposed to do.

I was reminded, then, of a great lesson: it is not a matter of *choosing* between the physical and the spiritual. It is not a matter of needing to defend why we would tackle a seemingly secular subject on this seriously sacred occasion. Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founder of the Musar Movement, the ethical emphasis that emerged as a corrective to overly ritual punctiliousness in the yeshivah world of Eastern Europe in the 19th century... Rabbi Salanter taught: the *physical needs* of others... *are my* our spiritual needs.

Health Care *is* a moral issue, and a spiritual one. The fact that we are the only advanced industrialized nation without a sufficiently shared sense of the common good is an outright ethical failure on our part. Fixing this broken system *is* indeed a *Jewish* obligation. Caring for the needs of those in the society in which we live, it is part of who we are, what we are about. Jewish tradition *demand*s and *command*s: it mandates our involvement, with the motive, with the goal... of returning to health and strength... every person who can be helped.

The website jewsforhealthcarereform.org, a project of our Reform movement's Religious Action Center, is a good starting place for involvement; attending our Tikkun Olam Forum this afternoon, which will address health care among other topics, is another one.

What the tradition does *not* do, however, what it cannot do... is tell us which particular plan or what specific policy is the best way of achieving the more general goal. If your *motive* is to maximize the effectiveness of health care and work towards the best possible system for the greatest number of people, then you are fulfilling the mitzvah, the commandment of our tradition. If your *goal* is to care for the community, then arguments about the best method of meeting this goal are not only appropriate... they are disputes “*l’shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven.” God does not endorse one plan over another, nor need we invoke God to tell us the distance between Montana and Maine [just to take two states totally at random, without any connection to the Senators that come from there].

God calls us to care, and to act... to return and restore... to make things the way they were as best we can for those we live with... and to work out the details amongst ourselves.

Putting things back the way they were. But, with Thomas Wolfe, it’s a complicated business. For, indeed, is it possible? Can we ever go home again?

The tradition begins by speaking about property. About things. And so I open, now, with a materialistic tale to tell. Two Septembers ago my family did something which changed our lives. We purchased a Prius. I was so happy with the car. It handled well, it looked kind of

cute, it got 45 miles a gallon! You can go all the way to New York on a single tank of gas!

And then, when it was just eight days old, it was in an accident. Its very own automotive circumcision. It wasn't our fault, no one was hurt, it's just an object, and I should have focused on all of those things right away. But on this day of inner scrutiny and utter honesty I confess that I did not react all that well. Like the red balloon from my childhood I mentioned last night, and with just as much maturity, I suppose, I had become attached to a thing, and projected more emotion onto it than I had realized.

And so off we went, to find a friendly, family body shop. To restore, to repair, to put it back together. "As good as new," the saying goes.

But it's not. The knowledge of the damage lingered, for a time, even when invisible on the surface.

On an object, I got over it.

But how much the more is it true... when the damage done is in us. Invisible, unseen, below the surface... but present nonetheless. With all the hurt, the pain, the sorrow we experience. And with all the damage we do, to the other people in our lives.

What is visible? And what damage do we never notice, because it happens slowly, and over time?

Like cars, the universe itself experiences a state of entropy. It diminishes, it suffers, it changes from its pristine state with erosion over

the eons. My own children, seeing those scratches two years ago, came up with the following bit of wisdom: if this had happened bit by bit it would not have been so upsetting. Cars and bodies and hearts alike have scrapes and bumps and bruises. It's just the way they are.

Still we long for the way things used to be. What is that all about? There was a tee-shirt I saw once, long ago. "Nostalgia," the tee-shirt read, "isn't what it used to be."

Sometimes, though, we just can't make it right.

Even covering up the pain is not enough.

Sometimes we cannot go back at all. And we have to move on.

For better, or for worse.

Loss of innocence. Loss of youth. Ultimately, the loss of a loved one. There are things we cannot repair. Things we cannot return. Ways in which we cannot go back, to the way it was at all.

Two images, one of sadness, the other of hope.

During Yom Kippur, later this afternoon, we will observe the tradition of Yizkor. It is a time of reflection, recollection, remembrance. There are those who shaped us, brought us into this world and brought us up in it, who gave of themselves and are no more. There are those who came into our lives, shining lights, fiery flames, passionate loves or enduring friendships, gone, gone, beyond the touch... beyond repair, beyond our reach... living still only in the minds and hearts of those

around them. There is the loss that cannot be brought back. We look backwards but must, in the end, look away, lest we, too, dissolve into the pillar of tears. We cannot bring them back. We just... can't... fix... it all.

And yet, and yet. Another image, from another occasion.

The foot comes down, the people cheer, the couple kiss.

And on the floor is a shattered glass that can never be put back the way it was. Never repaired. Never restored. Never returned.

A symbol, to me, not of its traditional meaning, but of the fact that, no matter what happens, the couple standing under the chuppah, *cannot go back* to being the people they were, before they walked down that aisle. They cannot go back. Their home lies ahead. They face the future.

And the assembled guests join in hope and prayer...

That the best is yet to be.

Early last month, somewhere in the suburbs of Tel Aviv, crowds gathered to watch what I am told was quite a spectacle. Madonna, in person – I'm sorry, maybe we should call her by her "other name," "Esther" – Madonna performed a "Kabbalistic concert."

Don't ask. Really, I don't know what a "Kabbalistic concert" is. Nor do I see any benefit in red strings, or in drinking Kabbalah water.

What I do know, though, is that one of the concepts most important to Reform Jews, which we say we care the most about... has

its roots in the Kabbalah, in the Jewish mystical tradition. It is the notion of... Tikkun Olam. Healing the universe. Mending, restoring... repairing the world.

Here, then, is the Kabbalistic view of creation, the tradition that gives us the concept we value so much.

In the beginning God was everything, and everything was God. Oneness and unity permeated the whole, so that there was no separation, no distinction or definition, no-thingness at all.

But there was no room for any “thing” else. Nothing separate or apart. Nothing that stood on its own.

And so, to make room for everything that is, God engaged in a *tzimtzum*. [That’s *not* the stuff you eat in traditional Ashkenazic homes on Shabbat. That’s *tzimnis*. Totally different.] *Tzimtzum*. The word means “withdrawal.” Contractions, to give birth to the universe.

Into the emptiness flowed God’s light, to create the material world. But the light was so intense, so powerful that, even in its diluted form, it could not be held, in the vessels meant to contain it.

So the vessels shattered, and the light of the divine energy was trapped, inside shards, husks, remnants of the vessels which, now, represent hardness and harshness, evil and resistance to God.

The light yearns to break free, to return to its source. The cosmos itself aches in pain at its broken state.

So what's a Jew to do? The role, the task, the very purpose of our being, according to this mystical approach... is to be partners with God, in fixing what went wrong. In healing the world.

Originally this had very little to do with social justice, as we understand it now. In its original context, the task of the Jew was clear and vital. Every time a Jew performs a mitzvah – any mitzvah, ethical or ritual, every time a Jew lights candles on Friday night, keeps kosher, honors parents... every time a mitzvah is performed, one of the *k'lipot*, the shards, the husks breaks apart, and a spark of the divine is reunited with its source.

But every time a Jew commits an *averah*, a sin, every piece of pork, every Shabbat unmarked and unobserved...then another spark is trapped, another piece of God's light is cut off from its journey home.

My friends, we don't need to take the imagery literally – nor do we have to accept an exclusively Orthodox definition of what is a *mitzvah* and what is an *averah* -- to realize what a *powerful* spiritual model Tikkun Olam can be. Even without red strings and incantations, we can see our role as helping to heal the world. To salve the hurt, and ease the pain. Here we hear, from this we know that God weeps with the crying child, God aches with the pangs of the hungry, God yearns with the wandering and homeless and helpless in our midst.

Our task, our role, our holy calling: to return and repair and restore. To set the light free, and let it seek its source. To bring about healing, and wholeness, and love.

Tikkun Olam. We are all physicians. It is up to each one of us, to repair the world, to bring it – backwards or forwards – not just to the way it was. But the way it should be.

L'shanah Tovah.