High Holiday Sermons
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Kol Nidre

L'shana Tova U'Gmar Hatima Tova; Happy and healthy New Year and May you be sealed in The Book of Life. To bring those of you who were not with us on *Rosh Hashana* up to date, I have given a series of talks over the course of these holidays dedicated to stating clearly something I've wanted to say for all of my 27 years in the pulpit but which I determined I had not yet said clearly enough. Stated straightforwardly it is this: The enemy of thought (including science), of right action, and of faith is literalism. I have argued that we have a double stake in checking the continued spread of literalism both for its consequences to Judaism and to our Western culture. In the course of my talks I tried to suggest a truth deeper than literal truth contained in Sacred Scripture and I have tried to exemplify these truths by examining specifically the Biblical stories that convey the ideas of both Creation and Revelation. I have suggested that the stories of Creation teach us that we are not responsible for our own creation and therefore we come into consciousness of ourselves already indebted and in a state requiring gratitude. I have suggested that the Biblical description of Revelation is intended to convey to us that we do not come into consciousness without a past, a past that we, in fact, did not experience but is none-the-less ours and shapes the present we live in. These talks can be found on the BZBI web site for those of you who might be interested in seeing them. I should also let you know that I preceded talking specifically about the problem of literalism with five axiomatic statements that under gird my thought that I will re-iterate now: First, that it is inconceivable that life has no meaning. Despite the current common philosophies to the contrary, it cannot be so. The very fact that we posses reason enough to ask ourselves the question: 'Does life have meaning?' is proof enough for our purposes. Secondly, that the meaning of life is to choose good over evil. Third, the primary venue for making and evaluating this choice is its impact on other people around us. Fourth, that we contain within us the necessary apparatus for making this choice because we can hear the cry of the suffering and respond to it, but that this response tends to de-center our own egos which we need to build our own self-worth. Often, de-centering our ego and responding to the need of others threatens to overwhelm us and so we figuratively 'go to sleep.' Fifth, and finally, that the purpose of *Halacha* is to help awaken us to our obligations to respond to the suffering of others and therefore to choose good over evil. When it supports this function it is considered to be Divine Law, when it does not we realize that we must learn to "hear" the Divine voice more clearly.

Tomorrow, before *Yizkor*, I will turn this methodology on the narratives of Redemption and consider the World-To-Come. But those of you just joining us are joining us just in the nick of time as tonight we need to consider that which stands between us and Redemption: Sin. You wouldn't have wanted to miss that, would you?

I do not intend to address a particular sin. The *al hets* do a good enough job of that. I don't even intend to address the conventional notion of sin, that is, the sense that we all

have by virtue of common sense that there are some acts that we commit that are wrong, some that are better than worse, etc. That a secular world view can include the notion of sin as mistake, even sin as hurtful, goes without saying. What I want to explore, keeping with the earlier explorations I've shared with you, is the religious notion of sin as it emerges from Scripture, and our tendency to take such scriptures as fiction and to therefore dismiss them. It is the way in which literalism shields us from the truth of scriptures by applying the truth-test of rational fact alone, excluding the very notion of other kinds of truth with equally binding laws attached to them that I am interested in combating. Thus we start not with our particular sins, but with the narratives of sin in the Bible.

Generally speaking when one thinks of sin in the Bible one thinks of Adam and Eve and their eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. While this can be an instructive narrative I want to suggest that it is only one of two kinds of sin narratives in the Bible, and you may initially be shocked by the category I use it to develop. The story of Adam and Eve, the serpent and the tree belongs to the category that I call: Necessary Sin. It reflects the Biblical understanding of human nature as needing to sin, as being propelled by sin, as living in a world of choices and sometimes rightly choosing the wrong thing. How can that be? I am not talking about the notion of Original Sin in the way that it is understood by others. I might even argue that Original Sin as a doctrine is precisely a misunderstanding of the idea of Necessary Sin. Precisely because we are human and our desires and passions are necessary for our survival, if we did not choose in favor of those desires and passions we would not be human, we would die. The irony and sometimes agony of human being is that it requires the exercise of certain aspects of our personalities which when used indiscriminately can be very hurtful to us and to others, but when not used at all would result in our disappearance. The Rabbis of the Talmud expressed this irony, implicit in the Garden of Eden story, by teaching that each of us is created with a *yetzer ha-ra* and a *yetzer ha-tov* an evil and a good inclination. They also say that if no one ever gave in to his or her *yetzer ha-ra* no one would ever marry or hold a job. Sex and greed originate in our *yetzer ha-ra*, in the core of our perfectly imperfect being and without them we could not live. Whether to even call these urges evil is a question for another time. That the Bible takes up and meditates on the fundamental contradiction between easy morality and the reality of mortality cannot be questioned. We would do well to plumb the depths of these insights in order to strike the appropriate and realistic balance between our *yetzer ha-ra* and our *yetzer ha-tov*, but that too is for another time. Rather, I would have us turn our attention to the other kind of sin in the Biblical narrative, and there are many examples of it. I will use its classical _expression in the sin of the *egal ha-zahav*, the Golden Calf.

The incident of the Golden Calf is the central narrative of sin in the Bible and is treated as such by subsequent rabbinic literature. By recognizing this we recognize that the central sin in the Biblical narrative is that of idolatry, a fact we remarked on last week when we began to understand the Ten Fundamental Laws of Moral Nature as primarily a response to idolatry. The Golden Calf and the Ten Commandments are knitted together conceptually. And as I suggested last week, understanding the sin of idolatry as having to primarily to do with believing in wooden gods, or gods carved from stone is to literalize

the text. It is just such literalization that leads the sophisticated reader to realize that since we could no longer possibly believe in a god carved from stone, even from gold, then the biblical sin of idolatry represents a primitive _expression not worth taking seriously. Our chutzpa is in assuming that our Biblical ancestors were, in fact, primitive. The Israelites were neither primitive nor stupid and the narrative of the Golden calf is a story. Its truth-value lies not in the facts of the case, but rather in the fact that the facts of the case expose the fundamental flaw of idolatry: impatience. Sin is an expression of the incontrovertible fact of human existence, no less a fact then that the earth revolves around the sun. That fact is: that we want what we want when we want it. And in the name of this idolatry, in the throes of this idolatry, who or what gets hurt, ignored, even oppressed, is of less consequence to us than that we fulfill our needs now. Look at the list of sins in the *al het* and I will argue that each one is in some basic way associated with this impatience. Idolatry is immediate gratification writ large and it has always been a threat to human happiness, but that threat has grown immeasurably with the development of a technological society whose sole purpose is to cater to this desire. Immediate gratification claims to give the lie to the fact that we are not responsible for our own creation. It proposes that we are self-made. It substitutes what it calls freedom for indebtedness and gratitude. Immediate gratification claims to give the lie to the fact that we are not born without a past. It substitutes for that past an obsession with the present. As some of you will remember I have been greatly influenced by the philosophical work of Emmanuel Levinas. One of Levinas' most beguiling statements was that the fundamental principle of all morality is *après vouz*, after you. The idolater can only say: after me. But in Biblical narrative, the ultimate moment of nearness to God, to the totally Other, is acted out on a cliff, jutting out of the side of Mount Sinai. After Moses has succeeded in mollifying God after this very sin of the Golden Calf that we have been talking about, Moses asks God if God could allow Moses to see his face, to understand God's inner essence. But God says that Moses can only see God's back. In response to Moses request to come before God, literally, God suggests that in the human relationship with God and by implication with all other human beings who are equally mysterious in their having personality, the human can only say 'after you,' can only see God's back. But out of this passing-by characterized by the sight of God's back issue the thirteen so-called Divine characteristics which form such a central part of our holiday liturgy. "*Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'hanun, erech apayim v'rav hesed v'emet." Adonai, Adonai,* a God of mercy and grace, patient and filled with love and truth. When we allow the other to pass before us; when we exercise profound patience; when we position ourselves behind God, mercy, gratitude and worship are the results. These traditional antidotes to sin are facts. They are a different kind of logic; follow their own rules no less strictly measurable than the rules of geometry. Moral geometry is no less exacting than Euclidean geometry. Moral geometry is no less an alternative to Euclidean geometry with its own share of the truth than is that of projective geometry by J. V. Poncelet (1822) and of non-Euclidean geometry by N. I. Lobachevsky (1826) and János Bolyai (1832) or another type of non-Euclidean geometry discovered by Bernhard Riemann.

The centrality of the narrative of the Golden Calf is not expendable. Without it we are lost in a world of Infinite Selfishness. To render the narrative literally, to worry about the specifics of time and place, names and dates, to render it, in other words, a document of

historical interest only, then allows us to disallow it on historical grounds and thus disallow it entirely. And without it we are lost in a world of Infinite Selfishness. Without it we inhabit a world bereft of mercy, love and most of all bereft of patience, which is after all but another word for ‘after you.’ Without these we are lost not only in a world of Infinite Selfishness but a world in which all roads back have been sacrificed on the altar of this Infinite Selfishness.

Only the most impassioned prayer by Moses returned God and Israel to one another in the narrative. Only the most impassioned prayer now falling on our own shoulders, with no Moses to stand up for us, will do so now. I pray that we recover the ability to pray impassionedly and use these hours we have been given for that purpose with an understanding of just what we are really praying for. Like Moses we are praying for forgiveness from sin. We are praying for release from the Infinite Selfishness that blinds us to the others around us and the Infinite Other whom we serve. A concomitant facet of understanding sin more deeply is our understanding one of the most profound ideas associated with it. That is, that we cannot forgive ourselves. Certainly, at a certain level we must forgive ourselves, but I would submit that even when we are forgiving ourselves we are making use of the grace of a force outside of ourselves that allows us to look at ourselves from the point of view of this grace. When we forgive ourselves it is because we can imagine being forgiven by another, by God. Just as we are not responsible for our own creation, just as we are born with a past that precedes our experience, so also we cannot profoundly be forgiven except by another. The narrative of these days suggests that if we do so we will be granted life. But we know as sure as the sun rises and sets that not all of us will be granted life regardless of our prayers. Thus what can this narrative mean? What does the idea of Redemption signify and what does it have to do with the relation of this world to the so-called next world? These are the topics we will explore further tomorrow.