High Holiday Sermons
Rabbi Ira F. Stone

Rosh Hashanah - Day 1

I hope you will allow me to indulge in a few words of personal reflection before I begin my teaching this morning. Today marks my 18th year in this pulpit on Rosh Hashana. It also marks the beginning of what promises, with God's help, to be a most significant year in my life and the life of my family. In November I will receive a Doctor of Divinity, *honoris causis*, from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America for 27 years in the active congregational rabbinate. That's a D.D., or what we like to call, a "didn't die." In January our daughter Tamar and son-in-law Alan are expecting to give Annie and me our first grandchild. Finally, in May Aviv Press is scheduled to publish my new book: A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of *Mussar* – the culmination of over twelve years of work. I stand before you a very fortunate man.

Using these events as legitimate occasions for reflection I began to review these twenty-seven years, especially these past eighteen, and realized that I had as yet not said clearly what it is I want to say. I have said many things, but upon reflection, there has always been a single driving idea behind my life and work for these twenty-seven years, and before that dating back at least to the awakening of my passion for Jewish life and thought, that I have not said clearly. This is not entirely because of my speaking style, although that doesn't help. It is, more importantly, because this single thought has been growing and shaping itself, becoming more and more clearly known to me as I continue to grow and yes, to age.

On the basis of these reflections I promised myself to do two very simple things this year. First, to try to focus clearly on what I really want to say. One reaches a certain point in life when one realizes that one is never certain that an opportunity once given will ever re-occur. And second I want to say it clearly enough that I will not have to use the sermon on the second day of *Rosh Hashana* to explain the sermon from the first day of *Rosh Hashana*.

In order to do this effectively I need to begin by setting forth a number of axioms. Basic statements of meaning that guide my life, my faith, and are impacted by the larger subject I will attempt in a moment. 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-centralize 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 are learning to "hear" the Divine voice more clearly.

With those axioms in mind then, I want to say what it is I've wanted to say clearly all these years. The enemy of thought (including science), of right action, and of faith is literalism. The result of centuries of progressive literalism not only endangers the survival of Judaism, but of all of Western culture. We have a stake in what I take to be the last stage in the 'literalization' of Western culture because the total victory of literalism in our culture will have profound effects on us as Jews and as American citizens of the Western world. There, I've said it. Now, since I have a little time left, I'd like to explain how I believe it came about and how it expresses itself.

For many centuries human beings have told stories and created literary forms to express their understanding of the profound meanings inherent in human existence. They were both humble enough to know that they could never be sure what that meaning was and cognizant enough of the limits of their language to fully express the experience of that meaning to refrain from considering the letters of any text to be literally true. In fact, one of the reasons that oral cultures fought the incursion of texts was their fear that mistakes in textual transmission in writing would come to be considered literally correct. They sensed that in the world of oral traditions the very malleability of the text would be taken for granted and when errors crept in, transmitters would be happy to amend them when they were pointed out. More importantly, they knew that all stories resonated with the multiplicity of meanings that various listeners brought to the experience of hearing and that truth, such as it was, would always be the result of this multiplicity of viewpoints and remain itself humble in its claims. Similarly, those who believed that the same relationship between written and printed documents would occur as had between oral and written documents resisted the advent of the printing press technology.

One of the most striking attributes of this multi-vocal use of language was the fact that it could address people of differing levels of intellectual achievement simultaneously. The simple person could appreciate the truths inherent in stories without worrying about their literal veracity. Either such a person believed them to be literally true, or didn't care whether they were or not. The more sophisticated a person was, the more advantage he or she could take of the multi-vocality of the stories possible meanings.

However, with the rise of the scientific enlightenment an entirely appropriate dependence on language that conveyed precisely one meaning and one meaning only was both re-discovered and effectively applied to create the most prodigious revolution in human cultural history. The success of that revolution which is still with us today, and the schism it created regarding truths that could be known absolutely and equal truths that required a multiplicity of expression resulted in the relegation of that multi-vocal tradition to the realm of fiction. And fiction was and is defined specifically as that which is not true. And anyone silly enough to stake his or her life on something that is patently untrue is either simple or foolish. Or, in attempting to defend himself in the face of the enlightenment onslaught, he or she defended himself as a person of faith. A person of

faith is someone who rejected the obvious truth of scientific method and a person of science is someone who accepted that truth relegating all other kinds of truth inoperable. Thus the veracity of the text, once the concern of the simple, became the faith of even the sophisticated.

The result of this process of misunderstanding has affected both the religious and non-religious communities. The religious community found itself unable to articulate coherently the difference between these two kinds of truth. In fact, probably by virtue of the obvious successes of scientific thinking on so many fronts, it began to trumpet as its main virtue the belief in things that were not true except by faith, and began to accept the scientist's mono-vocal reading of their own stories. At the same time, although the greatest of scientists and philosophers were aware that reason had its limits, had its appropriate realms and simply could not answer the kinds of questions of meaning that religious tradition entertained, their voices were drowned out by the headlong application of scientific fact to every aspect of human life. We see the results of this tragic misunderstanding in so many realms as to be nearly exhausting: From the intolerance of fundamentalist religion, to the ethical irresponsibility of technological man; from the debate between evolutionists and intelligent designers on the one hand to the tragic attempts to create misguided utopias in the communist and Nazi history of the twentieth century on the other hand. From radical Islam to *haredi* Jews to the fundamentalist Christian right, this misunderstanding has been carried forward. We Jews, we so-called liberal Jews continue to carry it forward. We relegate to the realm of fiction that which has some claim to truth and we live by the truths of the enlightenment unwilling to call any of its extravagant conclusions into question for fear that its great success might be threatened. And our children inherit our proclivities, the force of our commitments. Given the choice between the "real" world and the world of primitive fiction, what choice do they really have? This is the tragedy that has weighed heavily on my heart for over thirty years and which I have tried to state as clearly as I am able this morning.

Let me end by giving application to my theory. In fact, the rest of my talks during this season will be dedicated to entertaining specific aspects of religious language and unpacking their truths away from the shackles of literalism. Today, appropriate to the Birthday of the world, the idea of creation; tomorrow, the idea of Revelation; At *Kol Nidre* the notion of Sin; and on Yom Kippur at *Yizkor* the idea of the World to Come.

Without taking the time to repeat the well known stories of creation in our tradition I simply want to assert one of its most fundamental truths and its implications: We are not responsible for our own creation. All of the science and reason in the world will not deny the incontrovertible truth that we come into being as a result of the action of another. That without the love and nurture of another we would perish. That our lives are a gift someone else gives us. If we want to trace the heredity of this fact back to some point of origin then fine, let's call it God creating the World. But what is important is the implications of the fact that we are not responsible for our own creation. Namely, that we are born already indebted to another and that an attitude of gratitude for the gift of our own life is not inappropriate. Also that this debt combined with gratitude becomes the very structure around which our lives must, in order to do justice to our creation, revolve.

In religious life we call these service, or *avodah*, and Thanksgiving or *todah*. And these words, in turn, become the words in our language for worship. Worship, in word and deed, becomes the antidote to our falling asleep to these primordial responsibilities. For those of us unencumbered by a propensity to sleep through the demands to serve and give thanks to another, worship is not necessary: Would that I was such a person.

I believe that the debt that we owe the other is not negotiable; we never finish paying it off. When the specific others to whom we are physically indebted to are no longer in need of our response, the other person, our neighbor, the one who cries out to us whether in the sanctity of our home or our community or across the world is also, by virtue of being an Other, a claimant on our debts and the target of our gratitude. As long as we live we are not free of the need to serve in gratitude. We are not permitted to sleep.

However, we need to sleep. We are human and the healthy development of our ego cannot allow it to be so de-centered as to no longer function in helping us to obtain the necessary satisfactions of life. So we have been given an additional gift. The gift of community: when one of us needs to sleep another of us is awake to the needs of others and of the Other. But if each of us does not take a turn, the community is fractured and the debt to the other is not assumed. It is for this reason, I would suggest, that the Torah portrays Creation not only in the Genesis stories, but, as it were, again at Mt. Sinai. We are created first as individuals and again as an indebted community. The claim of our tradition, more true than literalism could ever express, that we all stood together as Sinai is central to the necessary sense of responsibility that not only informs Jewish life but also is meant to inform human life. The progression from Genesis to Sinai takes us from creation to Revelation and I will not address revelation directly until tomorrow.

In the meantime, I conclude by giving thanks for having had this opportunity to say what I mean. And I close with a prayer that we together as a community might re-take the truths that are not only essential for our lives but for the continued health of the human community. That we begin to create within our hearts, our families and our civic discourse the recognition of the importance of non-literalist truth and thereby benefit from both aspects of human intellectual endeavor rather than pit them against one another.

Rosh Hashanah - Day 2

Revelation is not a word that most of us take seriously. It is one of those fictions of the religious tradition. The idea of God meeting humanity at Mount Sinai and promulgating not only a series of foundational ethical principles but following that up with a detailed legal and cultic code is simply preposterous. Or, perhaps some of us do believe that it happened just that way. If so, the rest of us counseled by our sophisticated training, by our higher educations, simply shake our head half in disbelief and half in pity. Any one who is religious in the conventional sense of the word, believing in the literal descriptions of events in the bible is a simpleton. And if they happen to be highly educated people, then they "will" simplicity in regard to religious ideas, usually for ulterior motives, even when these motives are unconscious ones. Their motives might be family stability, or escape from the rigors of contemporary life, or a sense of community in an otherwise lonely world. Both sides of the debate agree that the meaning of revelation is contained in the literal text of the Torah and therefore what they disagree about is the literal truth-possibility inherent in the description of these events. That being the case, as I indicated yesterday, the scientist has won the debate because the so-called religionist has acceded to his definition of the terms of the debate.

The futility of this debate and its consequences we see around us almost everyday. It is in response to this futility, the futility of literalism, that I spoke yesterday of having spent a lifetime opposing. It is the one idea that I have wanted to clearly articulate over all these years and which I have stated as clearly as I can yesterday and reiterate today. Literalism is among the greatest contemporary dangers to thought, to right action and to faith. In that regard the meaning of Revelation, not the literal meaning but the fundamental idea which we have inherited via our tradition needs to be investigated so that it may be recovered from the futility this debate has relegated it to.

Let us suggest that the terms of the debate are different. Let us suggest that the story of Sinai and God's appearance there is precisely a story, but a story intended to convey hard won insights into the nature of life and its meaning. Insights forged out of centuries of difficult speculation, insights that attempt to meet the criteria of conforming to the real, felt experiences of what human beings hold dear and to convey those experiences within a framework suitable both for easy transmission, and suitable for meeting the needs of people of all ages and intellectual capabilities. Let us suggest that this story represents the highest level of meditative philosophy able to express not only that which is provable by reason as the Greeks would have it, but also what is empirically true about human experience outside the bounds of mere reason. On this reading we must ask ourselves: 'What does this story reveal and transmit about the human condition such that it can be considered a truth about that condition as incontrovertible as any rational argument?' We must also ask ourselves: "If the story conveys these truths, what are the consequences for action incumbent upon us?"

If creation functioned to affirm our experience of the fact that we are not responsible for our own creation, then I would suggest that Revelation affirms our experience that we are not created without a past. We come into this world weighted down with a history, a past

we never lived but is none the less ours. This is an existential fact of every human being. We are no sooner conscious then we are conscious of where we come from, though we've never been anywhere else. In order to have a present we must use the material of the past to shape it. And without a pre-existing past we would not be able to shape ourselves at all. Again, as I said yesterday, the past comes to us from another. It comes to us from outside of ourselves, from outside of our own being and therefore it simultaneously delivers us a past as a revelation and also reveals to us the fact that our individual being is not the only being. We exist next to someone else. The fact of Revelation by virtue of its establishing a relationship between us and others must convey to us not only the presence of another, but the appropriate laws that guide that relationship. I use the word laws self-consciously. It is part of the assertion of the Revelation story that the past that reveals the other to us comes accompanied by unbreakable laws constituting what we call ethics; laws no less necessary to posit than the natural scientist needs to posit the existence of certain laws of nature without which the system simply would not hold together. Clearly the idea conveyed is that violating these fundamental laws forged out of the past out of which we shape ourselves results in our shaping a malformed present. Disobedience, in other words, of these laws is not a matter of some literal reward and punishment delivered with fire and brimstone, but perhaps a much more terrible punishment and wonderful reward for their being real rather than consigned to fiction, a world that works versus a world that does not. It is these laws and their consequences that challenge us and cause us to be so easily lulled into dismissing the story. If we can consign it to its literalist form we can dismiss it as fiction and fiction makes no demands on us. Perhaps, given the seriousness of the consequences of making the choice whether or not to take the story and its implications seriously, it would do us well do use this occasion to re-visit the laws that our past bequeaths to us as we enter consciousness: the so-called Ten Commandments. Some of you have probably heard me or other Rabbis talk about the mistranslation of *aseret ha-dibrot* as Ten Commandments. The Hebrew only means the ten words, or perhaps the ten statements. However in light of the discussion of these two days I want to suggest that the translation be altered to understand the meaning as the Ten Fundamental Laws of Moral Nature, which is probably why the tradition grew up of translating it as Ten commandments to begin with. I do not want to work through each one of the statements; they are familiar enough. But I do want to suggest that at their heart the Ten Commandments deal with various manifestations of idolatry, but idolatry understood in a particular way, probably its original way. The vigor with which biblical tradition attacks idolatry at every turn is not so much occasioned by the fear that we will set up statues and pray to them, or call rocks God. That level of idolatry is another instance of literalist interpretation of scripture this time assuming that the writer's of the bible, and their antagonists for that matter, must have had a primitive, simplistic and literal idea of God such that it could contain the obviously ludicrous idea of making a God with one's own hand. If that had been the problem there not would have been a problem for very long. However, the idea of not seeing the debt that we owe the other, not recognizing the gap between ourselves and the other to whom we owe the gift of our creation, replacing the other in our vision and more importantly in our sense of obligation to the self, to the ego, that is the idolatry that is at the heart of destabilizing the world. It is this idolatry that requires vigilance not only in regard to the images we make, but also in regard to how we treat our parents, how we

spend our time and how we resist spending time through the Sabbath; it is this idolatry that destabilizes society through murder and theft; that destabilizes families through adultery and envy. Most of all it is an idolatry that deceives us into thinking that we are not indebted an idolatry that convinces us that we need not be grateful for the very life we posses. In this way, the Ten Fundamental Laws of Moral Nature are as inviolable as the laws of physical nature. Not that they cannot be transgressed. Indeed just as someone can jump off a bridge thinking that the law of gravity does not apply to him, so too one can ignore the law of keeping the Sabbath, or adultery, thinking that these laws do not apply to him. But in the end, the consequences for those around us will prove the folly of that belief. We will have traded the immemorial past that has been given us to shape the present for good, instead shaping or contributing to the shaping of a monstrously deformed reality.

To dismiss this empirical reality of Revelation is to deny that we have a past. Despite the fact that so many of us profess an interest in history, that interest does not permit an interest in and affection for our past. History is an objective science. History is one of those tools that render Scripture into fiction. Its use in helping us deny the empirical reality of Revelation helps us to deny equally that our past is informed by an imperative for moral action in the present. To deny the past and to deny the imperative, the command for moral action in the present is to compromise the possibility of the future. This denial is a rejection of our very humanity. Since we know that we owe our existence to another, since we know that our consciousness of ourselves is formed out of the material given to us from the past that we did not experience literally, since we know that these gifts of life and consciousness come accompanied by obligation, when we deny the gifts and refuse the obligation we are denying ourselves. In that denial we are transformed into creatures with no past and therefore no future; we are transformed into creatures with no obligations and therefore no fetters on our naked will to power. The world we live in sometimes seems to be made up precisely of such creatures who I have refrained from calling people. That is because it is sometimes so. But, says our Torah not by way of fiction but by way of fact, the law is not far from you; it is not in heaven, it is in your mouth and in your heart to discover and to do. Therefore choose life: A life that includes a past, a present and a future.

It is to a consideration of the future that we must turn next. The future that is always a surprise and in so far as it is a surprise accounts for the possibility of something new. But before we can talk intelligently about the future, we must talk of the impediments that stand between our future and us. Thus on *Kol Nidre* we will take up the idea of sin and on Yom Kippur the idea of the world to come.

For now I conclude again with a prayer: That we loose the blinders that we ourselves construct that stand between us and our own experience of Revelation. That we learn to read again the Sinai narrative not as literal history but as a reminder of the fact that we are not born as the tabula rasa that the enlightenment would insist we are. And that we know we are not, but hide this fact from ourselves in fear of being overwhelmed by the obligations that past places upon us. I pray that we again hear the voice of Sinai and like

we once did commit ourselves to accept the challenge, promising to *na-ase v'nishma*, to do and to hear.

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.

Yom Kippur

I have tried through this series of talks this year to accomplish two related goals. First, I've tried to establish the fact that religious life gives us access to certain truths, certain ideas, which have a share in truth despite the fact that their share in truth is not the same share held by strict reason or science. I have tried to suggest that one of the reasons we are no longer aware of this fact is that reason itself, since the enlightenment, has become the only type of truth that we accept as valid and that following the canons of reason we have been led to read sacred scripture, which is the seedbed of religious truth, in a literal way. Once we read scripture literally we judge it by the standards of either history or journalism and since it lacks the appropriate credibility to meet these standards we consign it to the realm of fiction. And fiction is anything but true. In pursuit of these two goals I have specifically illustrated the share of truth inherent in the ideas of creation, revelation and sin. This morning we come to the final leg of this journey and the most difficult, we come to the idea of redemption and its sister idea, that of the world to come.

That the idea of redemption is fundamental to Jewish thought is unarguable. Redemption is a key biblical concept but scholars' debate whether the idea of either the world to come or resurrection of the dead or the messiah is present in biblical texts per se. Its centrality to rabbinic Judaism is a given. At the same time despite the centrality of the notion of the conquest of death to rabbinic thought, the form this conquest takes is expressed by a number of different metaphors, not entirely consistent with one another. Nor does Judaism spend a great deal of time arguing over the details, seeing as how no one has ever come back from the dead to describe the experience. Rather, in this arena too, patience is a central virtue. We will all find out sooner than we'd like. So our discussion this morning will not be about what the menu in the world to come might be or about whether if there is a resurrection we will come back with our original liver, heart, teeth or wife. Such debates precisely emerge out of the literalist standpoint and debase the very pursuit of that share of the truth of human being redemption signifies. This will be more than enough for us to grapple with.

As with the construction of any theory about what is true, we begin with those facts that we have established. We have established that we are created, meaning that we are not responsible for our own creation but rather are indebted and grateful to another. We have established that by way of revelation we come into consciousness with a past that we have not lived but is none the less ours and shapes us. And we have established that the primary impediment to redemption is sin and that sin is a fundamental experience of impatience: we want what we want when we want it. It is Infinite Selfishness. On the basis of these already determined principles I submit that we can begin to speak intelligently about the share of truth that is expressed by the non-literalist reading of the Jewish narratives of redemption. Since redemption requires the overcoming of sin, then it must reflect a world in which sin has been overcome. A world in which instead of Infinite selfishness we obtain to infinite selflessness. A world, if you will, in which the ego is no longer required for the material pursuits that it serves and can allow itself to be permanently de-centered, a world in which infinite patience is possible. Since revelation teaches us that we have a past that we didn't experience, redemption suggests that we

have a future that we will not experience, a future that will remain forever out ahead of us as the field upon which our selfless selves will be able to serve another infinitely. And whereas creation taught us that we are not responsible for our own coming into being, redemption teaches us that we are hyper-responsible for this future that stretches infinitely before us. We are responsible and nothing but responsible. Anything less than this level of responsibility would return us to the world of sin, whereas via redemption we have entered another world, the world to come, the world not yet attained, the future and the possibility of an infinite future. It is at this level of hyper-responsibility that the non-literalist impact of the idea of the world-to-come takes its profound shape. It is not a time or a place that occurs after death, but is rather an always potential dimension of life itself. A dimension that, based on our actions, we can even experience at moments during this lifetime. We live, as it were, between the tension of this world and the world to come, momentarily achieving the future we hope for and then falling away again as a result of the inevitability of our sins. We repent, we start again, and the future opens to us with renewed possibility. Theoretically, if we could live at this level of hyper-responsibility entirely, then the world would indeed be transformed, history, time as we know it would be transformed, and the future would become present. But such a world is not permitted to human beings…it is always in our future; it is never this world, but always the world to come.

But you protest: what role, after all, in all of this for death? Where does my individual death fit into this picture? What can I expect after I die? What meaning does the world to come have in this regard? With these questions we have come to the end of our journey. I have tried to explore the ways in which non-literalist readings of scripture reveals its share of truth as unequivocally as any scientific proof reveals its share of unequivocal truth in its domain. But facing death this application of thought, even if it is not strictly speaking rational it is still thought, fails. When thought fails the scientist either assumes that he or she must only think harder and better and the truth will be revealed, or that all the truth that is to be discovered has been discovered. Religious thought responds differently to the end of thought. Words themselves are transformed, language adopts its different role: no longer interested in communication per se, not even communication between human beings and the divine. Language is transformed into prayer and liturgy replaces thought at the edge of the possible. Faith in its original and uniquely Jewish expression emerges. Not blind faith in the impossible, but supreme faithfulness to our experience. We know we are not responsible for our creation and we know that we have a past that shapes us despite our not having experienced it. So our liturgy serves to remind us that in that past we have already experienced the fact of not being abandoned to oblivion and we are faithful to that experience of redemption. Our first redemption is ours despite our not having experienced it, so we are faithful to the expectation of a redemption that we have not yet experienced. The key to understanding the Jewish notion of Redemption lies in the liturgy wherein every day we praise God for our redemption from Egypt at the Red Sea. Every day we re-experience the physical sensations of that redemption through song. Every day we experience the fact that we are already redeemed, that redemption is part of our past and that it is therefore surely part of our future whatever form it might take. Prayer, regular daily prayer, is the pre-cursor of redemption, the seed-bed of redemption. We can only be faithful to the memory and the

future memory of redemption, but the power to do so is never far from our hands and from our lips.

Our faith in the future is not blind faith. It is faith built on our experiences of our creaturliness and of our pre-existing past as well as on our struggle with the difficulties inherent in living for the future, our sinfulness. But in the end conventional words fail us in trying to express such insights and so we turn to liturgy, a special task of language, to help us. Rather than struggle to express the inexpressible any more, I propose that we model this turn to liturgy by looking together at the Yizkor liturgy for this day and what it teaches us about that which only liturgy can teach us.

Yizkor Elohim, 'Let God remember." With these words we begin each of the individual paragraphs that comprise the heart of the Yizkor service. Already we have expressed liturgically more than we could express in any other language. We attribute to that which is beyond any possibility of ours to know, the characteristic of memory. We assert that it is not only we who are shaped by a past that we can not have experienced, but it is God also who is shaped by each of our individual lives that we lived privately, that God did not live. Thus God's immortality is forged by our mortality. Without our lives God would have nothing to remember and with our deaths' God is granted a future by virtue of our past.

Nishmat emi,avi,bni etc. 'the souls of my mother, my father, my child, etc.' Our prayer continues to express that which we could not otherwise express. My mother, not just any mother, my father, not just any father, my child, not just any child, each one is a soul. A soul is not something we tend to dwell on these days, but it is a liturgical necessity for *Yizkor* because it represents the realization that we are fundamentally not defined by our material make-up. That there is a part of us that from experience we know exists apart from materiality and therefore escapes the demands of ego. It is that part, whether small or large, of the people who we are remembering, where we remember their overcoming their egos, when they served us or served others. It is that service, in turn, which is what we call their soul, and it is their soul, again in turn, which we now offer as the elements forming God's immortal memory. God's immortality is not made up of all of our loved one's lives, but the selfless aspects of their lives.

She-halach l'olamo/a, 'he or she has gone to his or her world.' With these words we return to creation. These words recognize that it is not only the immortality of God that is built on the goodness of human lives, but that this goodness is itself the source of the human lives that come after it. We spoke about creation signifying the fact that we are not responsible for our own creation. Now we have named the responsible party, as it were: the selfless acts of those who've come before us gathered together in the immortality of God. Language itself, even the language of prayer strains at the radical nature of this insight, but it does not break. It refuses to be cowed by the limits of reason or the canards of literalness.

Hineni noder zedaka b-ad hazkarat nismato/ 'Here I am. I pledge to give *tzedaka* on behalf of their soul's inclusion in memory.' This statement is the centerpiece of our

prayer. We take a stand, using the same language of Abraham and Moses when they were called to Divine service, we announce our willingness to serve as the opening between immortality and mortality by accepting responsibility for others, for the poor, the homeless, and the orphan; or by contributing to the maintenance of the central institutions of religious life, the synagogue for instance. When we say *hineni* we form a link between the gift of our creation and the immortal. When we learn to emulate selflessness, we become creators in our turn, on our way to our own immortality. We become the generators of worlds, worlds to come, but not for us; for others. Therein lies the profound paradox of the world to come. If we think it is about us, for us, then it does not exist. Only when we can help to provide it for others does its existence become real.

Ana, 'we beseech.' Confronted by these nearly impossible truths we can only turn in prayer, beseeching God that *t'hi nafsho/a zroro/a b'zror hahayyim*, 'his/her breath will be bound to the breath of life.' That is, that the gift of creation that he/she bestowed by virtue of whatever small part of themselves acted selflessly in the world continue to live in and through that creation and in and through God – *ut'hi minuchato/a kavod*, 'and they rest in glory.' That is, their rest is only the Glory of God's continuing creation of the world. We do die. But our deaths have ultimate meaning when the goodness we bring with us from life becomes part of the memory of God and those whom we leave in the world accept their responsibility serve the past we left them and the future we will pave for them. Beyond that, even words of liturgy cannot go.

Knowing now how much rests upon our prayer and how much of what is inexpressible of truth it contains. Let us rise together for the Yizkor service.