

The devil once decided that he would retire and sell all his diabolical devices. On the day of the sale he put all his tools on display, each with a price tag. One rather plain-looking, well work tool was priced much higher than the others. The devil was asked what it was. “That’s discouragement,” he said.

“Why is it priced so high?”

“Because,” said the devil, “it is more useful to me than all the others. I use it to get inside people’s minds, and once inside I can use them to do my work. It is greatly worn because it is my favorite tool. I have used it on nearly everyone, yet few people know that it belongs to me.”

According to the fable, the devil’s price for discouragement was so high that nobody bought it. And he’s still using it.<sup>1</sup>

There is plenty of discouragement to go around these days. The financial crisis of the past year has not only rocked the lives of many in our community, but every one of us with a home or pension feels less secure. The head of the U.S. Treasury looks us in the eye and says, “Trust me.” But what confidence can we feel when the selfsame former Wall St. CEO misread the extent of the problem just a short time ago? Most of us know something has to be done, but we tremble at the prospect of what lies ahead, and markets have seized up not simply because of financial challenges, but because of a psychology of fear.

The general sense of malaise is reflected in a pervasive sense of disappointment with our leaders. President Bush has a lower popularity rating than any president in a generation. He actually looks pretty good, however, when compared with the dismal view Americans have of Congress (which, I recall, is run by the Democrats). There is widespread discontent about government, a feeling that it does not serve the people, but is a bloated, self-serving bureaucracy, inefficient at best, corrupt at worst. No wonder both political parties have chosen candidates that see themselves as agents of change. The national mood seems to be, “Anything but this.”

The discouragement so many share about leaders here is mirrored in a weariness, if not disgust, that Israelis feel about their own politicians. Gershon Gorenberg, the Israeli historian and journalist, captures the feeling of many that “idealists ... have largely given

---

<sup>1</sup> Told by Rabbi Avis D. Miller in *On Wings of Hope* (2002), p.53

up the arena of party politics (in Israel), leaving it to the allegedly corrupt, the mediocre, and the merely uninspiring.”<sup>2</sup> A Jewish State that once engendered pride in the Diaspora is seen by younger generations of Jews as anything but a “light unto the nations.” A study released a year ago underscoring the increasing alienation young Jews feel about Israel - this despite the more than 100,000 who have gone on Birthright.<sup>3</sup> Disgust, desperation and discouragement - these are the watchwords of our time. It seems the devil is working overtime.

There is no greater antidote to the dispiritedness that characterizes our time than these sacred days. While the liturgy of this season focuses on our wrongdoing, the ultimate message is one of hope and renewal. *Hayom harat olam*- “today the world is created” - we say in our prayers on Rosh Hashanah. The Torah portion for this sacred day reinforces the point, for God rejects the sacrifice of Isaac as a misguided understanding of true faith. To give up on the future - symbolized in the sacrifice of child ... is this not the most desperate act of the discouraged soul? This portion is a repudiation of the culture of despair. No, says God, to death. “Choose life.” As the prophet proclaimed - and we give voice to in prayers today - “It is not the death of sinners that I seek, says the Eternal, but that they should live.”<sup>4</sup>

In desperate times, of course, it is harder to feel so hopeful. Yet it is just in such times that we need the message more. When we least expect it we can see God’s challenge to the devil. It was revealed to me saw in the most unlikely of places last year when I visited Eastern Europe. What I was prepared for was a place of death. That, most certainly, was there. Despite all the classes I have taken, the books I’ve read, movies I’ve seen and survivors I have heard, I was still overwhelmed when I went to the Nazis most notorious death camp - Auschwitz. No words can fully convey the magnitude of evil of Auschwitz. The scale of the camp is overwhelming. There were 300 barracks with 100,000 people “living” (it feels strange to use such a word) there at any given moment. The scope of murder perpetrated there is almost inconceivable. Our guide said that if we

---

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=israeli\\_politics\\_bankrupt](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=israeli_politics_bankrupt) (September 15, 2008)

<sup>3</sup> “Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and their Alienation from Israel”, <http://www.acbp.net/About/publications.php>

<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 18:21

observed one minute of silence for each of the 1.3 million people murdered there, we would stand speechless for over two years.

What was Auschwitz in its most naked reality? One SS guard summed it up when, after a 3 a.m. gassing, with hundreds of corpses lying before him, he turned to his comrade and said, "Do you know where we are? We are in *anus mundi*, "the anus of the world." The image I had of Eastern Europe before I went there was exactly that - a place that was a Jewish dead end, a cemetery. It was a place "awful and full of dread."

Despite the horror of Auschwitz, however, I came away with a very different feeling about Eastern Europe. I wanted to not like it there, but far from death, I found in Eastern Europe a reminder of life. In Krakow and Warsaw, Prague and Budapest there are Jewish communities that are not only alive; they are growing. As hellish as Auschwitz was, even its blackness could not snuff out the light of Jewish commitment. More than that, it was a light that is spreading - and the tenacity, spirit and optimism of the Jews in those places can teach us here something important about commitment, hope and responsibility.

I saw the devil put at bay in, of all places, Warsaw. Before the Second World War Warsaw was the second largest Jewish city in the world. Some 30% of the population was Jewish. Then, its Jews were forced into the ghetto. Nearly all were shipped to the death camps. The city was razed to the ground, and even after its restoration under the Communists, Warsaw remained a place nearly devoid of Jewish life. With the departure of the Soviets, new possibilities arose. About nine years ago a small group of people joined together in an apartment for an *Erev Shabbat* dinner. They called themselves *Beit Warszawa* - and, through word of mouth, their monthly dinners grew.

Today the congregation has some 200 individual members and their first rabbi, Burt Shuman, who spoke in our congregation last year. *Beit Warszawa* has active programming, is starting a Sunday school and has 15 people in a conversion program. A member of the community ordained as a rabbi in Israel returned there this past year to help with outreach to smaller communities starting to form in other Polish cities. Services at *Beit Warszawa* were uplifting and joyous - with many young people (the average age of the members is 32!), lots of singing and participation (*halavei*, our Shabbat services should be so lively!).

The potential of a renewed Jewish life in Poland is embodied in the *Beit Warszawa's* young and vibrant director of programming, Gosia Szymanska. Gosia first learned she was Jewish at the age of 12, when she was watching news coverage about Israel. As her father grew more and more agitated, she asked him why he was getting so upset. "Because I'm Jewish," he said. It was a life-changing moment for Gosia, who began to delve into Judaism. Her journey ultimately led her to the Hebrew Union College, where she received a Masters in Jewish Communal Service a couple of years ago. Gosia could have served any community in North America, but she chose to return home to work at *Beit Warszawa*. It is hard to put into words how emotional it was to hear Gosia talk to us so enthusiastically about the changes taking place there. She said that her story is a common one in Poland, where many Jews hid their identity after the Second World War. Since the collapse of Communist rule in 1991 tens of thousands of young Poles have learned of their Jewish heritage, from a parent, at the deathbed of a grandparent or through old family documents stuffed in a drawer.

One thing holding people back is the lack of material about Reform (or, as it is known there, Progressive) Judaism in Polish. To address that need, an agreement has been reached between our congregation, *Beit Warszawa* and the Union for Reform Judaism to translate a seminal book about Reform Jewish thought into Polish. Funds have already begun to be collected, and with your help we can reach our goal.

Gosia Szymanska is a living embodiment of God's covenantal promise to us as a people. She is a living light, pushing aside the darkness of Auschwitz.

What does it mean to have hope? Consider this story told by Rabbi Hugo Gryn, a former rabbi of this congregation, who spent most of his career in England. As a youngster Gryn was imprisoned in a small concentration camp with his father. In the camp food was scarce. Most days the only meal was a watery gruel. Every few weeks a small amount of margarine was distributed - mostly to keep the prisoners alive long enough to work as slave laborers. One day, in the winter of 1944, Gryn's father pulled a few of the inmates together and announced that it was the eve of Hanukkah. He produced a handmade, clay bowl. Inside was a wick immersed in the precious, and now melted margarine. Before the blessing could be recited, Hugo protested at this waste of food. "Doesn't Judaism teach us that the most important thing is *pikuach nefesh*, saving a life?" His father looked at him, then the lamp, and said: "You and I have seen that it is

possible to live up to three weeks without food. We once lived almost three days without water. But you cannot live properly for three minutes without hope!” Looking back, Gryn realized “it was at that moment ... that I first began to understand clearly the meaning of the distinctly Jewish component of my heritage.”<sup>5</sup>

Rabbi Gryn learned that Hanukkah in 1944 that Jewish faith is grounded in hope. It is not a naïve or Pollyannaish optimism that everything will be alright, but a world view that in spite of all the uncertainty and chaos, faith gives us the spiritual confidence that leads to the triumph of the human spirit. In the face of terror and tyranny, we affirm the dignity of every human being. We bear witness to the *anus mundi*, but we refuse to be disillusioned by it. We do not deny life’s setbacks and disappointments. We are defined, however, by how we seek God in the good that does exist in the human heart and in the world around us. And, we do not give up on God.

Perhaps the most emotionally moving *haftarah* reading of the year is the one we read on Rosh Hashanah. It tells the story of Hannah, a woman struggling with her infertility. Her husband is a model of compassion and seeks to comfort her. “Why are you so sad?” he says to her, reminding her that he will be more devoted to her than even ten children. She, however, cannot be comforted. In a deeply moving passage, we hear how Hannah goes to speak to God in the temple. It is a whispered prayer, uttered with tears. But even in her desperation she does not let go of hope. Hannah acknowledges her “anguish and distress”, but she refuses to give in to it. Instead, she looks to God. This passage is an amazingly powerful expression of what true faith is. Not the certainty of knowing all will be good, but the passionate faith that God gives us the power to hope.

Most of us have not had to deal with the challenges faced by Gosia Szymanska, Rabbi Gryn or Hannah, but each of us faces - every year - situations that test our spiritual fortitude. Discouragement whispers in our ears ... and we don’t even realize until, sometimes, it is almost too late. Years of work sap the vitality of our youthful idealism. After so long doing the same job, we wonder: “What have I really accomplished? Is this all there is?” Where is the hope in marriage after years of being together? Has the excitement of being with a partner faded, eroded by caring for children or the dullness of routine? Even our children and grandchildren, in whom we place so much hope,

---

<sup>5</sup> In *A Different Light* by Noam Zion and Barbara Spectre, pp.58-59

disappoint us. We have such hopes for them. And then they decide to do what they want. Their friends, their careers, their own choice of partners - and we second-guess ourselves, wondering what we might have done differently.

One professor of child behavior spoke about the change she went through in her understanding by looking at the various ways she lectured over the years. Before she was married she gave a lecture titled "Ten Commandments for Parents." After she became a mother, she changed the title to "Ten Hints for Parents." A second child was born, and the lecture became "Some Suggestions for Parents." After the third child was born, she stopped lecturing.

For many of us, the most profound challenge to our sense of spiritual well-being comes when confronting illness or death. We thought life would be different, and expected that if we ate right, exercised just enough, we would not age. After all, isn't "50 the new 30"? But sorrow and loss can take their toll - and some become uncertain, others despondent.

*Hayom harat olam* - "today is the world is created." We can begin again. We need not lose our dreams - or our hope for the young. Rosh Hashanah is our reminder of God's message of hope. Financial storms can be weathered. We can find a capacity for compassion and healing, even in illness. Our marriages can be renewed. Our parents can be forgiven for their missteps and our children can be accepted who they are. As we read from the prophet Jeremiah on the second day of Rosh Hashanah: "There is hope for your futures, says the Eternal."<sup>6</sup>

I have met a number of people this year who have faced great traumas and I have learned something from them about perspective, hope and faith. The teachers of faith are not just the righteous men and women of Torah, then, but sit amongst us. One individual, who lost his job, also had a parent die suddenly. He said to me recently, "Some days are tough, and I do occasionally get down. But, you know, I have my health; I'm blessed with my family. I count my blessings." Instead of only seeing the negative side of his situation, he has spent more time with his children and volunteered more at the synagogue. Another person was with her husband day and night in the hospital as he battled cancer. Treatment after treatment did not work, and he began to despair.

---

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 31:17

“Maybe it would be better if I didn’t keep going,” he wondered aloud. “It’s not fair to my family.” His wife, with tears in her eyes, said, “Did you think I was in this with you only for the good times? Did you ever think I also worry about what is ‘fair’? But I’m not giving up. And all I want is for you not to give up, too.” One congregant lost a leg, and a few months later had to call another who had to have a foot amputated. “Just hearing how well that guy is doing,” said the second man “makes me feel like I am going to be OK.” Lying in the hospital, he told me, “No matter what, I will be standing next to my daughter when she becomes a Bat Mitzvah.” And he did.

As you know, the Creation began with light: “Let there be light.” Our traditions teach us that this light was almost lost at the beginning, but a small bit of it was placed in a stone, called the *tzohar*, and passed from generation to generation. This special source of light was taken in to Noah's Ark to help inside not be overwhelmed by the darkness. After the Flood it was lost and lay hidden in a cave, until Abraham. He passed it to Isaac, and Isaac to Jacob. Jacob gave it to Joseph ... and this was the light that kept him warm in the pit he was thrown in by his brothers. It was hidden again until the time when Moses first experienced God through the light of the Burning Bush. Later, in a dream, Moses was told to take the light in the glowing stone and hang in the sacred place of worship of the people of Israel, the *Mishkan*.

There is, however, another version that tells that the glowing stone filled with God’s light was always kept with Moses. Just before he was to die, Moses asked God why the *tzohar* had to be buried with him. “Why place it in my grave where no one will ever find it? If it has done so much for me, imagine if all Your people could feel the warmth and live by its light.”

God whispered to Moses, “Such was always my design. And now that you ask, you will see the light that all will have.”

With that, Moses opened his hand. Lo and behold! The light unfolded itself, expanding until it became a scroll of light. God said, “In your hands I place My Torah. You will give it to the Jewish people before you die. Whoever studies it and lives by it will discover its inner secret as you have.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> From “The Tzohar”, *Gabriel’s Palace*, Howard Schwartz, attributed to Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, 19th century

The message of the legend is that the Torah is the light. As important as is that lesson, I would suggest that Judaism teaches us a truth even more profound. You see, the Torah is not the scroll in the Ark, it is the scroll of our lives. The eternal light is not before you and me, but in our hearts. You are the Torah. And the Torah is the person sitting next to you. You are the light.

Refuse to give in to discouragement ... keep the light alive. Do not be swayed by the temptation to value your real worth by the size of your portfolio, but by the good name you create ... and you keep the light alive. When buffeted by the illness, remember that God's blessing is not a promise of a life without pain, but that righteousness and compassion transcends suffering. Have faith in God's covenant with us. As Jacob was wounded when he became Israel, so we are wounded by life. But as you and I are his namesake, so do we seek the promise of a world not as it is, but as it ought to be is our legacy. Kick out the devil of discouragement. God has implanted within you the capacity to triumph.

And so, gain hope, O wayward people. Gain hope. And sing with the prophet, Isaiah, "Arise and shine, for your light has come." A new day dawns ... and you are the light.