

A Sermon for All Saints

July 3, 2011

As rabbi-in-residence, Leonard Beerman was a frequent guest and preacher at All Saints Church in Pasadena. And as an “eternal dissident,” he understood well and often practiced the principle of speaking truth to power.

His sermon on the eve of the Fourth of July at All Saints was an exercise in prophetic application. He retreated to the Hebrew Bible to recall the case of the foreign prophet Balaam who, surprisingly, refused to curse the Israelites, recognizing in them a set of special qualities. Among those qualities was “a certain restlessness in its spirit” that fueled, according to Beerman, a willingness to challenge convention and struggle for justice.

That quality still animates Jews today, he declared, expressing what was surely a personal credo. He himself sought to exemplify the quality by discussing the meaning of Independence Day—and the United States of America. He did so by grappling with the figure of Thomas Jefferson, who, of the Founding Fathers, delivered some of the most soaring language about the equality of men. Yet, Beerman noted, Jefferson intended men, not women—and white men, decidedly not black men. In this sense, he extracted from Jefferson’s oratory not only inspiration but also aspiration, the desire to improve upon ourselves, to transcend the deficiencies and inequities in our present lives. Therein lay, according to him, the challenge and promise of America.

Standing here near my dear friend George Regas is a vivid reminder for me that the gift of our forty-four years of friendship is one that has kept on giving. It has not only brought the four of us—George and Mary, Leonard and Joan—into a loving connection—but also this gift, the privilege of being here so often with this extraordinary congregation, to have been able to feel the embrace of your

welcome, and the constant affirmation of the conviction that though we come out of different faiths, we are united in the same quest, draw inspiration from the same roots—we belong to one another.

On more than one occasion, I have heard George describe himself as a country preacher. Yes, quite a country preacher, coming out of this humble dwelling, surrounded as it is by all that farmland. But it is here, in this pulpit, that he was able to move so many with his sermons, sermons which displayed the remarkable ability to sneak up on you with those soft and warm quotations from the New Testament, and then suddenly strike with prophetic passion the great issues of justice and peace and love which have always been at the heart of his ministry.

Today, with my friend Ed Bacon on sabbatical, if I were giving a sermon based on a biblical text for this fourth of July weekend, I would be turning to what might seem to you and me to be a most unlikely place, a section of the book of Numbers in the Hebrew Bible (24–25) that centuries before July 4, 1776, was assigned for reading this coming week in all the synagogues of the world. It's that enigmatic one that contains the story of the talking ass. Animals are supposed to be semantically blocked, so if an ass talked it was a miracle. So we used to think, until the modern age and our encounter with some of the candidates for political office.

But let's try to imagine the situation here. The Israelites, led by Moses, are now entering the last stage of their journey to the Promised Land. Beset at every turn by obstacles, rebellious, straining even to return to the security of the slavery they had left behind in Egypt, they have nonetheless advanced toward the ultimate goal. They are a fierce, unpredictable, frequently obnoxious people, and yet they are about to undertake the conquest of what is to become their national home.

The Moabites who live on the eastern border of the Jordan are fearful, filled with dread at the onrush of the Israelites. Their king, Balak, is afraid with them, and he reaches out for help; he sends a delegation to a heathen sorcerer, a strange figure who lives near the Euphrates river, and he invites this diviner, Balaam is his name, to come to Moab and stem the tide of these dreadful hordes of invading Israelites by bringing a curse upon them: "Come now, curse me this people, for they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall prevail that we may smite them and drive them out of the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed."

This Balaam is a baffling creature; he's a prophet of sorts who could use his powers for evil. It wasn't that he lacked cleverness or wisdom; it was character that he lacked. He was capable of the most penetrating observations, but he was for hire—a prophet for hire; he was a man who could be lured by the promise of honor and riches, not unlike people we have come to know about, men and women who can stifle their moral impulses out of their desire to be close to the ruling power, or to be a ruling power. The Hebrew prophets, Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, were men of stern, dogmatic integrity; fear, or the desire for honor, could not corrupt them. They therefore became aliens, solitary, suffering, tragic

men; such was the demand of truth upon their lives. But Balaam was ready to hire himself out, but strangely in his case, the true prophet emerges out of the false, overcomes the false, for Balaam cannot perform the service for which the king is ready to pay him. He cannot bring the curse. Instead, he looks out at the oncoming Israelites and utters the words with which pious Jews have begun their morning prayers throughout the centuries. He looks out and says, "How goodly are thy tents O Jacob, thy tabernacles, O Israel."

Balaam saw something about the true nature of this people. It was a people of Jacob. It had descended from the patriarch. It had an ethnic identity. It had undergone certain experiences in its history. It was a people like other peoples, full of imperfections (like Jacob himself). It could rebel; it could be ungrateful, unbelieving, doubting, fearful. It could reject, it could even abandon its God on behalf of others. It could degenerate. Balaam must have seen that, that here was a people like others, living within all of the circumstances which had made it a people.

But then Balaam saw something else. That this people was invested with a unique quality, that it possessed a radiance that accompanied it wherever it went. For this was not only the people of Jacob, this was the people of Israel. Israel was the name given to Jacob after he had wrestled with someone in that dark night of his soul: "Jacob will no longer be your name, but Israel." Israel, which means one who has wrestled with God. That was to be the distinctive quality of this people—a certain restlessness in its spirit. For very early in its history there entered a ferment that would give it no rest. In the midst of the pagan world, so magnificent in its grandeur, this people questioned what was universally accepted by those who lorded power over them. When all about them the great nations of the world worshiped many gods, this people refused, for it had come to believe (in the words of Martin Buber) that just as there was the One who had set the sun and the moon in the heavens above, so there was a Lord of being and becoming who had set a commandment of justice and truth above the heads of the human race, and that the great duty of this people was the realization of truth and justice in the fullness of everyday life. So the whole of Jewish history becomes a record of wrestling and struggle against all those forces, within the people, and without, that would divert our people from the truth of its being, from the fundamental principle of its civilization, which called upon the Jewish people to be bearers of a great moral aspiration.

That struggle goes on today. We Jews can acknowledge the wonder of our endurance and celebrate our remarkable accomplishments, our love of learning, and even our capacity for generosity, sensitivity, and humaneness, and even the rise of the State of Israel out of the ashes of the destruction of European Jewry, yet so many of my people are haunted by the chasm between our ideals and our deeds, not only in our personal lives, but also in such contentious matters as Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, the continuing moral outrage of its occupation of the West Bank, and the blockade of Gaza. Yet I would insist that the real threat to us is not the danger of the lingering anti-Semitism, or the hostility of Israel's neighbors,

and the religious fanatics, dedicated to its destruction. No, what is threatened today is the ethical core of our being.

The ethical core of our being. The chasm between our ideals and our deeds. What does that suggest to you? The disjunction of ideals and deeds—that is the great historic embarrassment of all religions, yours, mine, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and all the rest, is it not? And what of America itself?

Tomorrow is the day our country declared its independence from England. The long-standing resentment against British occupation had turned into war. 235 years ago, yesterday, the Continental Congress adopted the declaration, and issued it on July 4. After it had been written on parchment it was brought back to Congress and on August 2 it was signed. But the news had actually reached New York on July 9, and there it was read to cheering crowds who, marching down Broadway to the lowest tip of Manhattan, became a mob, and they tore down the gilded statue of George III on his colossal horse. They hacked off his head and severed his nose and mounted what remained of his head on a spike outside a tavern. I can just imagine . . .

It was these treasonous, raucous, riotous rebels, in the battles that followed, who helped to bring forth a new nation dedicated to the proposition that all men were created equal. Created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, Life, Liberty, the Pursuit of Happiness—those were all the words of Thomas Jefferson; who can hear them and not be moved by them?

Fifty years later and ten days before his death, Jefferson wrote that the declaration would be “the signal arousing men to burst the chains and to secure the blessings of self government. All eyes are opening to the rights of man . . . The mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs for the favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately.”

All men are created equal, Jefferson had written, all men, not yet women. Created equal, all white men, not yet black. You cannot read any of his beautiful soaring words without some ironic discomfort, without looking down into the chasm between his words and his deeds, that even today’s children come to learn. He decried the slave trade and yet bought and sold slaves. The God who gave us life gave us liberty—yes, but he tracked down and punished slaves who, claiming this liberty, had run away. He was convinced that slavery was wrong, immoral, and yet he wrote a slave code for the state of Virginia. He opposed any effort to limit the expansion of slavery. And he was able to discuss slave breeding as though he were talking of dogs and horses, as Benjamin Schwartz has written (*LA Times*, July 3, 1994).

If you have ever visited the home Jefferson built in Monticello you will see a marvelous revelation of the man himself. It is an incredibly beautiful place displaying the many-faceted talents of our country’s first genius. In Charlottesville at the University of Virginia, which he designed and where George spoke recently, and on that hill in Monticello there is a note of balance; everything he designed has this balance: the curtains in his bedroom, the self-winding clock in the foyer. The very

style of his life was Olympian, everything properly proportioned. Jefferson lived on this hill, and from it he could see all the contradictory forces of life. He, like all of us, was composed of contradictions. Monticello, for all of its beauty, like the Egyptian pyramids, rested on the back of slave labor.

So Jefferson has left us with an assignment: To live up to his ideals, not his prejudices. Abiding by those ideals, he prophesied, “The American people would go on, puzzled and prospering beyond example in the history of man.”

He, and the other founders, left us with a dream, and we have indeed been possessed by that dream, but they have also left us still yearning for an America, in the words of Martin Luther King, that would “live out the true meaning of its creed.”

July 4 is a time to summon up the honesty that would be worthy of so great an accomplishment as bringing an America into being, remembering that ours is a nation that has not fulfilled its promises, that it is not the chosen instrument of God. We might even acknowledge how tarnished our greatness has become. If ever there was a time for the celebration of humility, it is now. With the wanton use of our power we have abused others, killed, wounded, or driven them into exile, in Iraq, Afghanistan, and now in Libya. Not to mention our own dead and wounded, many beyond repair. And now our power has been abusing us, sucking away at our financial resources, abusing so many of our citizens, leaving them in want and despair. And how decadent it is to have organized all of the dominant workings of a society to move in total subservience to an economy that enriches the very few, but leaves so many deprived of a decent job at living wages, health care for all, a quality education, protection from hunger, a secure retirement, too many deprived, even, of hope for a better way of life for themselves and their children.

Look, I know that those who come to All Saints are not a congregation of utterly naïve faith-based idealists. You and I are aware that democracy has always been a dangerous business. To use the words of Lewis Lapham, “it allies itself with change, which engenders movement, which induces friction, which implies unhappiness, which assumes conflict not only as the normal but also as the necessary condition of its existence. The idea collapses unless countervailing stresses oppose one another with competing weight—unless enough people stand willing to sustain the argument between the governing and the governed, between city and town, capital and labor, men and women, matter and mind” (*Harpers*, April 2011).

So, let us here highly resolve that we wish to [be] among those who stand willing to sustain the argument.

“Let America be America again. Let it be the dream it used to be,” the African American poet Langston Hughes wrote in 1938, as the country had not yet fully emerged from the Great Depression.

It may have been in that very year that Thomas Wolfe, a highly acclaimed American novelist of the time, wrote these words for the final chapter of what would be his final book, *You Can't Go Home Again*:

I believe that we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found. And this belief . . . is for me—and I think for all of us—not only our own hope, but America’s everlasting, living dream. I think the life which we have fashioned in America, and which has fashioned us—the forms we made, the cells that grew—was self-destructive in its nature . . . I think these forms are dying and must die, just as I know that America and the people in it, are deathless, undiscovered, and must live.

I think the true discovery of America is before us . . . the true fulfillment of our spirit, our people, of our mighty and immortal land, is yet to come. I think the true discovery of our own democracy is still before us. And I think that all these things are certain as the morning, as inevitable as noon.

COMMENTARY BY MEL LEVINE

America enthusiastically celebrates the birthday of our Declaration of Independence every 4th of July. But we don’t ask: How are we doing as a nation? On the eve of America’s 235th birthday, Rabbi Leonard Beerman added an accounting to the celebration. Why not? Surely this is the essence of Leonard: shining a spotlight on our failures to achieve justice but with his resolute optimism that we do better, urging us to strive, as he put it in this sermon, to live up to our ideals, not our prejudices.

Leonard’s sermon at All Saints on July 3, 2011, was titled “What America Can and Should Be.” He began by describing his longtime close friend George Regas, legendary pastor of All Saints, as possessing “the remarkable ability to sneak up on you with those soft and warm quotations from the New Testament, and then suddenly strike with prophetic passion the great issues of justice and peace and love which have always been at the heart of his ministry.” These words could just as easily have described Leonard, but with an Old Testament template.

Referring to “the chasm between our ideals and our deeds,” Leonard extolled Jefferson for the Declaration of Independence, but chastised him for his moral failings regarding slavery. And this duality in Jefferson, he continued, also existed in the biblical people of Israel: “a people like other peoples, full of imperfections,” but that possessed “a radiance that accompanied it wherever it went.”

America’s birthday is a time for consummate honesty, he declared, recognizing that “ours is a nation that has not fulfilled its promises, that it is not the chosen instrument of God. . . . If there ever was a time for the celebration of humility, it is now.” But, as he always believed, if we have the courage to see what is true, we can summon the power to remedy even terrible wrongs. He echoed Thomas Wolfe, who said: “I think the true discovery of our own democracy is still before us.”