

## A Sermon for Yom Kippur Morning

October 4, 2014

*“And here we are again, you and I. Another Yom Kippur.” With these words, Leonard Beerman launched into his last sermon at Leo Baeck Temple, his last cri de coeur after sixty-six years of teaching, admonishing, and inspiring his congregation. Leonard Beerman knew that the end was approaching, but he would not surrender the opportunity to use this final Yom Kippur as a call to conscience. As usual, there was plenty on his mind, and it had to do with Israel.*

*The focus of his attention was no longer Lebanon, but rather the Gaza Strip. Following the disengagement of Israeli settlers from Gaza in 2005, tensions escalated between Israel and the ruling party there, the militant Islamist group Hamas. The first major round of fighting between the two came in 2006 after the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, to which Israel responded with air and ground assaults. In subsequent years, Hamas sought to demonstrate its capacity to unnerve Israel by sending locally produced Qassam rockets into southern Israel. Israel responded in late 2008–early 2009 with a major air and ground offensive (Operation Cast Lead) that wrought vast destruction and considerable loss of life. The cycle of Hamas rockets and a large-scale Israeli response was repeated in 2012 (Operation Pillar of Defense) and then again in 2014 (Operation Protective Edge).*

*These rounds of violence, in which Israel’s huge military advantage led to disproportionate and massive damage on the Palestinian side, weighed heavily on Beerman. As a committed pacifist, he had spent a lifetime warning against the excesses of military power—and against the replacement of the Jews’ moral compass with a willingness to engage in violence. In 2014, at the end of his life, he was heartbroken at the death of so many children in Gaza, to the point that he considered calling the Israeli attack on them slaughter. To the last, Beerman was prepared to*

*defy convention and provoke to the point of anger in order to restore the ethical imperative of the Jews.*

*Although he understood that the overwhelming majority of the Israeli public and organized American Jewish community stood in solidarity with the war effort, Beerman was not alone. He belonged to a group of LA-based rabbis, scholars, and activists who had been meeting periodically since the later stages of the second Palestinian Intifada (2005) under the banner "One Community, Many Voices." The group gathered anew after the destructive summer of 2014, forging a statement of principles that Beerman quoted in this sermon. Whenever that group convened, Beerman was the unquestioned moral authority. And so too he was for his congregants at Leo Baeck. Summoning all his psychic energy and literary prowess one last time, he mixed references to poets and writers with a weary refrain: "Another Yom Kippur. Another war in Gaza." When he came to the end of his sermon, admirers and critics alike rose in appreciation, recognizing that this might well be their last encounter with their leader, whose powers of empathy and desire to do good in the world had shaped their community.*

In 1947, two years before I became a rabbi, the poet Auden wrote a long poem entitled "The Age of Anxiety." There was a refrain in it which haunted me when I first read it, and has haunted me ever since. "It is getting late. Is there no one to ask for us? Are we simply not wanted at all?"<sup>1</sup>

Everyone wants to be wanted and needed. Everyone wants to matter. As I contemplated giving this sermon, some part of me, still a child, wanted the words I would speak, gently to be heard, kindly to be judged by you.

When the blast of the war in Gaza rang in my ears this past July, I became totally absorbed, enmeshed, obsessed with feelings of sorrow and pity, with disappointment and despair, and anger, and even with shame. I knew that this mixture of feelings might not be the proper stuff out of which to fashion a sermon for today, and surely, if this were to be the last Yom Kippur morning sermon I would ever give, I would not want it to be that. But nonetheless, here it is.

And, here we are again, you and I. Another Yom Kippur. Another time to reflect on our lives and consider again who it is that we are and what we have become. Another Yom Kippur, another time to think seriously about whether there is anything in the way we are living that needs to be mended.

Another Yom Kippur. Another war in Gaza. The outrages perpetrated by Hamas, the thousands of rockets deployed, thousands of Israelis rushing for shelters, living in fear, the many Hamas tunnels burrowing their way into the borders of Israel.

Another Yom Kippur. Another 500 children of Gaza killed by the Israel Defense Forces, with callous disregard for their lives. I had thought about using the word "slaughtered" for what I was really feeling, and I lingered over it, wondering whether

it was too provocative. And then I remembered Ari Shavit, Israeli journalist, and his much celebrated book, *My Jerusalem, the Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*.<sup>2</sup> Three of us, Chasen, Ragins, and Beerman, reviewed it here at the Temple. The most closely examined chapter in that book was entitled “Lydda.” It told the story of the all-Arab city of Lydda located near the center of Palestine, a short distance from the international airport. As Israeli military forces began to take over the city in the summer of 1948, 200 Arab citizens took refuge in a small mosque. The military forces killed every one of them. A massacre, Shavit described it. Which set me to thinking: if the killing of 200 Arabs in July of 1948 was a massacre, what about 500 children in 50 days of the summer of 2014. Is that not also a massacre? Massacre, slaughter, callous disregard for life—does it really make any difference?

My friend George Regas once said that the first priority of any civilization is the care of its children—to prevent needless suffering among the most vulnerable and blameless. A Gaza mother sits amidst the rubble of what was once her home. If she knew the words of Nurit Peled-Elhanan, an Israeli mother whose 13-year-old daughter was killed by a suicide bomber in Jerusalem some years before, she might want to use Peled’s words and say to us: “We are the only ones who can tell you that there is no civilized killing of innocent, or barbaric killing of the innocent, there is only criminal killing of the innocent.” And remembering the last time she saw her little boy or girl, again using Peled’s words she would say: “After the death of a child there is no other. No one can avenge the blood of a child because a child takes into her small grave, with her small bones, the past and the future and the reason for war and its consequences.”

Another Yom Kippur, another war in Gaza. A few weeks after the Gaza war five years ago, in 2009, the Jerusalem prize, Israel’s most celebrated literary award, was given to Haruki Murakami, the distinguished Japanese novelist. There was great protest in Japan and in the literary world when it was announced that Murakami would receive this award. They threatened that if Murakami were to accept this Jerusalem prize, they would boycott his work as a response to Israel’s massive attack in Gaza and the terrible number of those who had died there. In his own kind of protest, after apologetically stating that it was his nature to do the opposite of what other people were telling him to do, here he did do the opposite. He went to Jerusalem, even though everyone was saying, “Don’t get involved. Don’t go there.”

Now this is some of what he said in Jerusalem in February 2009:

I do not intend to stand before you today delivering a direct political message. Please do however allow me to deliver one very personal message. It is something that I always keep in mind when I am writing fiction. I have never gone so far as to write it on a piece of paper and paste it to the wall: Rather, it is carved into the wall of my mind, and it goes something like this:

Between a high solid wall and an egg that breaks against it, I will always stand on the side of the egg. Yes, no matter how right the wall may be and how wrong the egg,

I will stand with the egg. Someone else will have to decide what is right and what is wrong.

What is the meaning of this metaphor? In some cases it is all too simple and clear. Bombers and tanks and shells are that high solid wall. The eggs are the unarmed civilians who are crushed and shot by them. This is one meaning of the metaphor.

This is not all, though. It carries a deeper meaning. Think of it this way. Each of us is, more or less, an egg. Each of us is a unique, irreplaceable soul enclosed in a fragile shell . . . And each of us, to a greater or lesser degree, is confronting a high solid wall. The wall has a name. It is the System. The System is supposed to protect us, but sometimes it takes on a life of its own, and then it begins to kill us and cause us to kill others—coldly, efficiently, systematically.

I have only one idea, to believe in the utter uniqueness and irreplaceability of our own and other's souls, and in the warmth we gain by joining souls together.

The System did not make us. We made the System. We must not allow the System to exploit us.

Another Yom Kippur, another war in Gaza. A huge percentage of Israelis gave their full support to the war. In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon with massive force, and marched on ready to begin the siege of Beirut. Israeli newspapers carried the story of a Col. Eli Geva, an armored brigade commander who created a sensation in Israel by asking to be relieved from his command rather than lead an assault on Beirut. The papers reported an exchange between Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Col. Geva. Begin hoped to persuade the young colonel to change his mind and asked why the colonel, the youngest brigade commander in Israeli history, wanted to be relieved of his command. Geva replied that when he looked through his binoculars into West Beirut he could see children playing.

This time, so far as we know, there was no Eli Geva. Oh, there were indeed Israelis who protested. In the middle of the war, 10,000 Israelis demonstrated in the Rabin Square in Tel Aviv. Standing and speaking there would be David Grossman, one of Israel's most celebrated writers, to criticize the war, certainly differing with his distinguished colleague Amos Oz, about whom Ken spoke in his Rosh Hashanah sermon. But those in Rabin Square constituted a small minority.

And here, it seemed that American Jews were speaking in one voice. Every major Jewish organization rallied to the cause, rabbis among them, expressing their solidarity, the absolute necessity to continue the attack on Hamas and the people of Gaza. "Israel has a right to defend itself," a principle that must have first been developed by the Neanderthals, was all the justification needed. It was unsailable. It could cover every doubt, if there was doubt about Israel's conduct of the war, the horror of it. Hardly a word found its way out of a Jewish mouth to express the slightest concern about the way Israel was exercising its right to defend itself, the appalling human suffering being visited upon the people of Gaza.

Although there was a rabbi, a certain Chasen, in Bel-Air who, breaking ranks from this rank indifference, wrote this to his congregation: "The past three weeks

have undeniably been among the most agonizing in the modern state of Israel's 66-year history. While the aerial bombardment in Gaza and Israel has been carried on relentlessly, our eyes and spirits have been bombarded with an endless stream of heartbreaking images—dozens of Israeli soldiers falling at the hands of Hamas' terrorists . . . countless battered and bloodied children trapped in the middle of Gaza's warfare, so many of whom are dying . . . most of Israel's civilian population living in fear as air raid sirens force them into bomb shelters every day . . . a growing destruction of life in Gaza that will take enormous time and commitment from the world to reverse." Those were Ken's words.

As for me, it seemed clear that somewhere on the way to Gaza Israel had lost its moral compass; it was the very moral compass that had brought such glory to the people of Israel, the high ideals that had gone into its making, the passion for justice for all, the yearning for peace, the wonderful, warm, human decency that could be found among its people. And now Israel had risen up and said that it needed, as they put it, "to mow the lawn" again in Gaza. Seduced by the lure to war and filled with the desire for revenge, and with the passion of utter rightness, cheered on by Jews everywhere who wanted to demonstrate their solidarity, no one but a very few questioned whether this might possibly lead to a strategic failure and a moral defeat.

Here in Los Angeles an assorted group of Jewish academics and a sprinkling of rabbis met to speak of our anguish and sorrow over the loss of life and scale of destruction and decided to give expression to the idea that this is one community with many voices, not just one. I suppose that in some way we were striving to give expression to the dignity of difference. And we produced a statement of principles that would come to bear, along with many others, the signatures of four rabbis associated with Leo Baeck Temple, Lewis Barth, William Cutter with Georgie, Sandy Ragins, and Leonard and Joan Beerman.<sup>3</sup>

(The following is an abbreviated version of the Statement of Principles.) "Love thy neighbor as thyself. One community, many voices." This was the epigraph for our statement. "We, members of the Los Angeles Jewish community write to express our anguish and sorrow over the loss of life and scale of destruction in the conflict between Israel and Gaza. We condemn Hamas' war time tactics and at the same time are acutely aware of the destruction inflicted by Israel. In thinking of the violence, we affirm the ancient wisdom of the Mishna that 'whoever destroys a single life, it is as if he or she had destroyed an entire world' (Sanhedrin 4:5).

"Hovering about all, above all questions of tactics and strategy—are the dead children, nearly 500 Palestinians and one Israeli. The loss of one innocent life is intolerable. The loss of many hundreds of innocent lives demands a moral accounting . . . Especially as we enter into the season of Teshuvah, repentance, it is imperative that we look into our souls and not rest quiet until we understand how this massive loss of innocent lives could have taken place. We insist that it not happen again. As deeply as we are connected to Israel, we reject the demand that we

support Israeli policy without dissent. We believe it is an obligation of all Jews to contribute humanitarian relief in both Israel and Gaza as a reflection of our commitment to our own people and to the neighbors with whom we must find a way to live together in peace. And we urge our friends and colleagues and above all rabbis in our community to undertake a profound rethinking of the way they manifest 'support' for Israel. Unreflective support perpetuates the myopia that leaves too many of us insensitive to the suffering of our Palestinian neighbors and cousins. At the same time, the kind of unreflective support on display in the latest Gaza war does not serve Israel's best interests, but rather reinforces the extremist tendencies that threaten to undermine Israel's democratic core.

"We believe that the blockade that Israel has imposed on Gaza since 2007 has contributed to an intolerable economic, health and humanitarian situation that should be removed with appropriate supervision to ensure that the materials brought in be for civilian use only."

Another Yom Kippur. In the summer of 1936, in the heart of the great depression, Henry Luce, publisher of *Time and Life* and more recently of *Fortune*, must have discovered that there was indeed a depression, and he sent off James Agee and the photographer Walker Evans to explore the daily lives of tenant farmers in southern Alabama. It was an extraordinary collaboration. Agee wrote a report of 30,000 words, submitted it with the instruction that not one word of it could be changed. Luce rejected Agee's work, leading Agee to rework the material and to create five years later *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which has come to be considered one of the most influential books of the twentieth century.

There is a paragraph in the original rejected article which is a ringing testament of Agee's beliefs, and at the same time will lead us to understand why Luce would not feel it was appropriate for his *Fortune* magazine and its readership. "A civilization which for any reason puts a human life at a disadvantage, or a civilization which can exist only by putting life at a disadvantage, is worthy neither of the name nor of continuance. And a human being whose life is nurtured in an advantage which has accrued from the disadvantage of other human beings and who prefers that this should remain as it is, is a human being by definition only, having much more in common with the bedbug, the tapeworm, the cancer and the scavengers of the deep." We could apply that to our own country, with its gross inequalities. Or we could remember that for forty-seven years the Palestinian people has lived under Israeli occupation and suffered the humiliations, great and small, that come with being an occupied people, severely restricting their freedoms in every aspect of their lives, while Israeli lives are nurtured in an advantage which has accrued from the disadvantage which has been imposed upon the Palestinians.

Well, enough of this raucous stuff, some of you may be thinking. Is this what Yom Kippur is all about? Yes, Yom Kippur calls us to account for who we are as Jews, to remind us that we can never fulfill ourselves in an inhuman world. We can never fulfill ourselves until we become dedicated to each other's fulfillment.

If Judaism has any continuing relevance it is because it has always been to grapple with the character and destiny of Jews and all humanity. And the distinctive quality of our faith as Jews is its will to sanctify life because of the sacredness of every human being. So it is that we have come here again to affirm our identity as Jews, and to assert for all to hear that there is a people in the world that has suffered all of the outrages of history, that has been victimized by thousands of lies and deceptions, a people whose bodies were trampled, whose spirits were mutilated in every era of human history, and yet that people persisted in believing in the infinite task of sanctifying human life.

Another Yom Kippur. It has come to us to remind us that our world, you and I, need desperately to be mended. Our world needs troubled people, Jews even, men and women who care, men and women who are not ashamed to be sensitive and tender. And our world needs men and women who have the courage to be afraid, afraid of all those forces which have removed our own humanity. And we need men and women who can resist all those, friends and enemies, who seek to prevent us from seeing the utter uniqueness and irreplaceability of our own and others' souls, and in the warmth we gain in joining souls together.

It is to such a challenge that this New Year comes in all of its brightness, in all of its persistent hope.

COMMENTARY BY PROFESSOR  
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Leonard's last summer was a difficult time. On July 8, 2014, responding to rocket fire from Hamas, Israel invaded Gaza. Over 2,000 people were killed in the ensuing weeks, including 66 Israeli soldiers, 5 Israeli civilians, and somewhere between 2,100 and 2,300 Palestinians.

Like many of us, Leonard was anguished by the Gaza war. Unlike many of us, Leonard found a way to put that anguish into words. I was not among those who had the privilege of attending his last Yom Kippur sermon. But if there was any consolation, it was that I got to hear him practice it and to discuss it with him over the months leading up to Yom Kippur. Leonard said it was his habit never to discuss his sermons before delivering them. But this year was different. This year he worried over every word, weighing each one. The words he was ruminating over came tumbling out over the dining tables over which we met, as he rehearsed his text, testing it, seeking our response.

One word in particular caught all of our attention, and that was the word "slaughter." One member of our party argued vociferously against it, contending it did not accurately describe the IDF's motivations. Even if the IDF deserved blame, Leonard's interlocutor argued, it did not deserve blame for *slaughter*, which implies the *intent* to bring about mass killing. Leonard conceded the point, agreeing there was no proof of a desire for the deaths on the part of the IDF. Eventually

we came up with “callous disregard” as an alternative. Yet Leonard refused to completely let go of his original word choice. For him, no passive, agent-less language, no “mistakes were made,” would do. And if the only choice was between language that implies responsibility for slaughter and language that evaded Israel’s moral agency, he was going to go with “slaughter.”



