



# HUMANISTIC JEWISH CONGREGATION OF SAN DIEGO

SERVING SAN DIEGO COUNTY SINCE 1985

## Kol Nidre, 2008

### Tranquility in a Turbulent World

Every day we find ourselves saturated by another scene in the drama of world events. The most recent financial disasters have put the specter of history squarely in front of us, some through personal recollection and others indirectly through stories of the catastrophes of the 1920's and 1930's. All kinds of emotions are being churned up right now, and we feel even more dramatically the difficulty of living in a turbulent world.

We live a very personal experience of history. We truly have no desire to compare our pain or joy with others of the past because our feelings are immediate. WE suffer. WE worry. If there is to be joy, then WE celebrate. Regardless of how close our times match those of another era, the present time is the valid for us.

That is not to say that we have no empathy. Nor does it say that we demean someone else's experience. We may try to be removed from the immediacy of the stress by intellectualizing the solutions. But the truth is that we wear our mortality every day – twenty four hours of destiny.

Many of us are activists who focus on working for institutional change instead of working on personal change. These turbulent times are a challenge because we see the need to address an overwhelming number of problems. This focus can become a contradiction we feel during the High Holidays. We take the noble path of helping humanity very seriously, and we feel less comfortable putting the focus on ourselves.

This attitude is engrained in us from our Jewish culture. We have a mandate as Jews to look outside ourselves to take care of others. Here is a story told by Nathan Ausubel about a famous 18<sup>th</sup> century Hasidic rebbe that illustrates this point.



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*On the evening of the Day of Atonement, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, “the poor man’s rabbi,” asked an illiterate tailor, “Since you couldn’t read the prayers today, what did you say to God?”*

*“I said to God,” replied the tailor, “Dear God, You want me to repent of my sins, but my sins have been so small! I confess: There have been times when I failed to return to the customers the pieces of left-over cloth. When I could not help it, I even ate food that was not kosher. But really, is that so terrible? Now take Yourself, God! Just examine Your own sins: You have robbed mothers of their babes, and have left helpless babes orphans. So You see that Your sins are much more serious than mine. I’ll tell You what, God! Let’s make a deal! You forgive me and I’ll forgive You.”*

*“Ah, you foolish man!” cried Rabbi Levi Yitzchok. “You let God off too easily! Just think! You were in an excellent position to make Him redeem the whole Jewish people!”*

Is it any wonder that we are so deliberate during this reflective ten-day period in thinking about our doing Tikkun Olam and providing Tzedakah over the past year?

But we need balance. The Jewish High Holidays, and particularly Kol Nidre, binds together our individual days into a year and forces a long pause in our momentum of living. Before we put one more foot in front of the other, we have a chance to unload some weight we have accumulated along the way.

We let go of regret and recharge our dignity. We reflect on our experiences, and reconcile them with the vision of who we want to be. In so doing, we alter the path we were walking along, because the destination is more defined.

Many of us do not like the future we are walking into. The violence of hatred, the disrespect for nature, the excessive materialism – the problems are staggering and oppressive. And inside us.

We feel the sickness of the world and it leads to a desire for isolation. It is there when we shop in the market, or perform at the workplace, or even talk to a phone company representative. Underlying most everyday interactions with others is an interchange which limits communication to the business at hand. A perfunctory greeting is usually all we give another person who we don’t know.



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Why? Because we are being protective. We are maintaining our walls in a world we believe is a hostile place. We must be cautious. From all we hear, the world is inhabited by people who may be dysfunctional. People except our family and friends, of course.

Looking around at strangers, we see the clichés about people that television has created. Instead of a person with an ordinary life, who ate cereal for breakfast, we may see a caricature of the next victim of exploitation. Instead of a postal worker with a name, we see a “Miss” or “Sir.”

We perpetuate the malady of aloneness in urbanized San Diego by keeping ourselves from making that human connection with others. We continue the plague of disrespect when we settle for a generalization about someone instead of looking for their uniqueness.

Jewish people have a four-thousand year history of dispersion and living in unfamiliar neighborhoods. Yet we sit here together tonight, fortunate to be able to share in our connection with, what Rabbi Wine calls, “an historic extended family.” No matter what superficial boundaries such as language differences have separated Jews from each other, we at least have a common thread of culture shared through stories, music, history, and holidays.

What can we learn from our experience as Jews? That the ties that bind human to human are stronger than the obstacles which separate us. That dignity and hope come from finding support with others, rather than letting externally negative forces scare us into isolation.

Small efforts work well. A simple but sincere compliment, or the sharing of a little personal trivia, will break down walls in record time and protect us all from the sickness of isolation.

We all have many enough models of negative behavior to look at. There are more examples of disrespectful behavior communicated daily than of considerate behavior.

We can understand institutional reasons for this anger of human beings.

Unfortunately, the damage done by regularly seeing reactive behavior can penetrate our rational protection. A bombardment of other people’s disappointments adds to our own disappointments and



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shakes our confidence. Everyone else's failure to take responsibility weakens our resolve to improve. The lack of empathy impacts us to make us selfish.

On this Kol Nidre night, we must look inside ourselves to see if any part of the dysfunctional behavior in the world lies within us. This is a night to look at truth and not illusion. This is a night to seek our own integrity.

Kol Nidre begins the unburdening and the redirection we need to repair ourselves. Repairing ourselves means showing appreciation to others for the things others do. Saying, "Thank you," is expected and won't create change. Saying, "I see how much effort you are putting out to do this for me," is surprising to the recipient. It is a statement with transformative power. You are strengthening your connection to another human being and giving them the message that they matter.

Repairing ourselves means making an association to someone else's experience. Saying, "I understand," or, "I have been through that, too" empowers both people in the exchange. You

are validating your own past and giving the other person double the resources for dealing with their life.

Repairing ourselves means looking rationally at the world and acknowledging that there are things which we cannot change. We find the way to move ourselves and others forward because we declare that, "Yes, life is unfair. It is terrible, but you will get through this time because you have the strength inside to do so."

Thinking positively can be very powerful in the face of a crazy, turbulent world. But such an idea can seem silly and naive in the reality of today. We can take some direction from novelist and poet Erica Jong, who said, [quote],

*Many people today believe that cynicism requires courage. Actually, cynicism is the height of cowardice. It is **innocence and openheartedness** that requires true courage – however often we are hurt as a result of it. [end quote]*

My mother taught me that a positive attitude is the gift of life, because it strengthens a person to endure all the curve balls that unexpectedly come their direction. Her major obstacle was losing her hearing



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as a teenager, and spending her adulthood as a deaf person. Her aspirations to be a world-traveled journalist were cut off by that cruel act of fate.

Yet, she never stopped absorbing the wonders of her greatly narrowed world, and sharing them with others. Today, she is still excited by a beautiful detail of nature, the expression on a child's face, the pleasure of an exquisite meal. She sings the songs of her youth off-key and joyously. Her passion for life represents many of the values of Humanism – wonder, beauty, happiness, light.

Tonight and into tomorrow, we are going to listen to the truths of our inner voice and look for a positive focus to direct us in the New Year. We are going to correct our course forward to match the aspirations we have for ourselves and our world.

The turbulence and troubles of our world will not make us despair. They will not diminish our hope, nor will they distract us from seeking beauty in life itself. We will start by living the change we would like to see in the world. We will share our love of humanity with others, and experience the power of directing our experience of life on our terms. This will be our plan for having a tranquil life.

-Madrikha Beverly Zarnow