

## 5769: What Went Wrong? Can We Do Better?

Yom Kippur 2009

Beth Shalom, Cambridge

I'm afraid that my sermon this morning will be something of a "downer". This has been a year in which the idea of progress has come to seem especially problematic, when the concept of sin seems vividly real, and the possibility of true atonement seems very distant.

5769 was of course a year dominated by economic turbulence; there has been a partial recovery, and the mood is certainly better than a year ago, yet there have been permanent losses. Much of the financial devastation is associated with the name of one individual Bernard Madoff. It still staggers the imagination to hear the figure \$51 billion in losses for which this man was personally responsible through a Ponzi scheme based to a large extent not on suckering foolish strangers but on relationships of trust with sophisticated investors.

My colleague Jonathan Sarna has written that 51 Jewish philanthropic foundations were wiped out, and 143 foundations, along with important organizations like the American Jewish Congress, Hadassah, and Yeshiva University in New York, took significant losses (in Yeshiva's case, \$100 million in its endowments). Many individuals who chose to invest life savings with Madoff have been left with resources. Is Mr Madoff fasting today in prison today? Is he saying *Al heit she-hatanu* with special fervor? Does he dare to ask God's forgiveness for the shambles he created? That is between him and his Maker; in public there has been no indication of remorse, no effort to reach out to those whom he defrauded and ruined—which is a pre-requisite for proper atonement.

Then Israel and the Gaza campaign. Because so much has happened since then, it seems like a long time ago - those last days in 2008 and first weeks in 2009, when the news was dominated by reports of civilian deaths and a widespread humanitarian catastrophe. Of course no government in the world can stand by idly when missiles are sent from beyond its borders into its civilian centres. I strongly believe that a terrorist group that chooses to integrate itself into a civilian population and fire missiles from the midst of a crowded urban area bears

responsibility for many of the civilian casualties that will occur when its enemy responds.

That does not mean, however, that all Israeli actions were appropriate. Less than two weeks ago, the Goldstone Report of the UN Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict regarding human rights violations was published. The Mission was led by a highly respected South African Jewish judge and prosecutor in war crimes cases for former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. I know that questions have been raised about the neutrality of another member of the UN Mission, a professor of international law at LSE. In my judgment, this does not justify the decision by the Israeli Government not to co-operate with the UN Mission, not to allow them to enter Gaza from Israel, or indeed to visit Israel or the West Bank.

The Government and its defenders condemn the report as a hatchet job. But the report raises serious issues that cannot be casually dismissed: about the impact of the Israeli blockade on civilian life in Gaza, Israeli attacks on Government buildings in Gaza, on an UNRWA Field Office and Al Quds Hospital, the use of white phosphorus in civilian areas, the possible use by IDF soldiers of human shields, the general destruction of the infrastructure as a kind of collective punishment against the Gaza population. Whether or not there is legal basis for a conviction of war crimes, it certainly appears that sins were committed during this period. Are any members of the Israeli government, any officers or soldiers in the IDF, asking forgiveness today?

One of the Israeli government policies that is most disturbing to me is the demolition of Arab family houses in Jerusalem - not because they were used by a terrorist (though that in itself is a kind of collective punishment), but because an application for a building permit to add an extension for a growing family never received a response. "Rabbis for Human Rights" has documented many such incidents of demolition. Yet the government that authorizes the destruction of houses owned by Palestinian civilians who lived in them for generations, insists on the right to continue building in West Bank settlements in response to "natural growth" of the population. Is this demolition of Arab homes too not a sin for which atonement should be made?

On an individual basis: last March, former Israeli President Moshe Katsav was charged with rape of a woman who worked for

him and sexual harassment of several other women. This past Friday was the preliminary hearing in the trial of Ehud Olmert, former Prime Minister of Israel, indicted on charges of corruption, fraudulent misuse of charitable donations for his personal benefit, and breach of trust. The great poet Hayim Nahman Bialik once said that the Zionist goal of making Jews a normal nation would be fulfilled when the first Jewish thief was arrested in Tel Aviv. I doubt that he would have been pleased with such charges against a former Israeli President and a former Prime Minister.

Of course, such misconduct by Jews in positions of leadership is not limited to Israel. In April a Rabbi of Satmar Hasidism was convicted of sexually molesting his daughter from time she was 9 years old, and having moved his family from America to Israel, Belgium and UK to avoid detention. (JC 3 April 6)

In July, the Chief Rabbi of the American Syrian Jewish community and 4 other rabbis were arrested under charges of money-laundering and corruption; two weeks earlier, the Rebbe of the Spinka Chassidic community pleaded guilty to similar charges of tax fraud and money-laundering. (JC 31 July)

The largest kosher meat-processing plant in America, run by Chassidic Jews, declared bankruptcy following a raid by immigration authorities that uncovered 400 illegal aliens working for the plant, and landed the CEO in prison facing nearly 1000 charges. The raid followed many complaints about the mistreatment of workers and animals in the plant (JC 24 July, 16; Forward 6 Nov 08)

What is in the hearts and minds of these men today? Is repentance, atonement, forgiveness possible for them?

Berlin Yom Kippur joke.

And in the general society, the reports of personal sinfulness continues to shock, bewilder and depress. A year and a half ago, it was the Austrian man who locked his own daughter in a home-made windowless cellar prison for 24 years, fathering seven children by her. Last month it was a man from California who thought of himself as intelligent and good, with deep religious convictions. He was distributing evangelical leaflets on a university campus, when it turned out that he had kidnapped an 11 year old girl 18 years before, imprisoned her on his property

with the full knowledge of his wife, and fathered two children who had never been to school and never seen a doctor. (G 29 Aug, Obs 30 Aug)

In mid-November we had the first news of “Baby P”, who died at 17 months as a result a series of some 50 injuries administered by the baby’s mother, her boyfriend, and another young man living in the house.

Last month we learned of two brothers, age 12 and 10, in Doncaster, Yorkshire, who consistently terrorized and brutalized two other schoolboys with matches, knives and bricks (late August). A little more than a week ago (18 Sept), it was a single mother in Leicestershire who took her own life and the life of her severely disabled daughter by setting fire to their car (Oct 2007), in despair of having been harassed and terrorized by a gang of youths over a period of some 15 years, despite more than twenty complaints to the local police.

What does it say about our society that such behaviour is possible? And this is not to dwell on the MP expenses scandal, the published reports of massive child sexual abuse in Irish Catholic schools, fraudulent elections in Iran and Afghanistan, suicide bombers in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Mumbai India targeting Lubavitcher Jews—and that we had to be warned last night not to congregate outside the Guild Hall in the centre of Cambridge—for our own safety!

Of course, these are crimes and sins of other people. We did not commit them. Yet the wisdom of our liturgy calls upon us to reflect that we are not without responsibility for the sins of others in our society. In *Al heit she-hatanu lefanekha*, the litany of sins, we confess to many sins that we personally did not commit. Why? Because *kol Yisra’el arevim zeh ba-zeh*, as the Talmud says: “All Jews are responsible for each other”, responsible in the sense of being sureties, required to pay a metaphorical debt if the borrower defaults.

What kind of sins are specified in *al heit*? Not eating shellfish, or *hameitz* on Pesach, or coming late or not at all to Shabbat worship. They are all ethical failings, they apply to Jews and to all human beings.

Today we might extend the statement to say that *kol b’nei adam*, all human beings are sureties for each other: all of us responsible for a society and a world where monstrous behaviour

can occur, where common empathy and compassion for the suffering of others is overlooked and ignored.

The memories of this past year are a powerful reminder that—to use a British understatement—we are still rather distant from the messianic age. If indeed, the world was being judged based on the balance of good and evil in the past year, with a verdict to be sealed at the end of this day, I fear that we might not reach another Yom Kippur. Is the capacity for interpersonal cruelty and intolerance without limit? Can we do nothing to promote the values of empathy and commitment to the common good? Is there nothing from this past year that can give us hope? - other than the birth of my first grandson on the first night of Hanukah last December?

I reject the pessimistic conclusion. There are indeed individuals who continue to inspire - I think especially of Daniel Barenboim, with his prodigious musical talent in large part devoted to an orchestra that enables Israeli and Arab musicians to work together in the production of astonishingly beautiful music.

But let me conclude by mentioning two other individuals who died during the past year. The first is Ted Kennedy. Every article, obituary and eulogy for Kennedy reviewed the crushing burden of tragedy he experienced in the deaths of so many members of his immediate family. And they also reminded us of the disastrous night at Chappaquiddick in 1969, when a young woman companion drowned in the car he drove off a small bridge. Yet, as Joyce Carol Oates wrote in what might have been a YK sermon (G, 27 Oct 1), following that nadir in his life, “Ted Kennedy seemed to have genuinely refashioned himself as a serious, idealistic, tirelessly energetic liberal Democrat in the mold of 1960s/1970s American liberalism, [arguably the greatest Democratic senator of the 20<sup>th</sup> century]. His tireless advocacy of civil rights, rights for disabled Americans, health care, voting reform, his courageous vote against the Iraq war . . . suggest that . . . one sins and repents and is forgiven, provided that one remakes one’s life.” His was a life that shows us that even when it seems as if everything is dismally and bleak—in our personal lives, in our society, in the world we inhabit—we can find the strength to rise to new heights by working to improve the lives of others.

The second inspirational life may be more surprising. Paul Newman, who died exactly a year ago, had a Jewish father and a Hungarian Catholic mother, but he identified himself as a Jew. He was a superstar, no need to review his great movie roles. But there are two things that distinguished him from most superstars. First, a 50-year marriage to Joanne Woodward. And second, he is reported to have given more money to charity in relation to his own wealth than any other 20<sup>th</sup>-century American.

The “Newman’s Own” food brand, which started with salad dressing, using green principles and recycling, has generated \$250 million profits donated to thousands of charities around the world. One of his last causes was the Jordan River Village, a camp for Israeli and Palestinian children suffering from life-threatening diseases, to which he donated £300,000. (JC 3 Oct 08, 4) Although he lost a son to a drug overdose, Newman never faced the continuous personal tragedies that Ted Kennedy did; in a sense, he had everything. He knew that having everything, he could have even more through personal commitment in marriage, and by giving his wealth away to causes that build hope.

In the darkness of corporate and personal greed, of sadistic brutality toward other human beings, of religious fanaticism and intolerance, these are lights that shine with inspiration, showing us that we as individuals can become better, that our society can be improved, that our world can be redeemed. A little light can dispel a large amount of darkness. If through our resolutions now and our actions in the future, we each bring our personal candles of commitment, then we can help to fulfil the promise of our Haftarah, וזרח בחשך אורך ואפלתך כצהריים , “Then your light shall shine in darkness, and your gloom shall be like the mid-day sun” (Isa. 58: 10). 2230

