

**THE NEW SHUL / Kol Nidre 5767 (2006)**

***Sermon by Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein***

Kol Nidre is a night with many meanings— it is a time to examine our souls, to acknowledge our misdeeds, to pray, and even plead, for forgiveness. Kol Nidre also marks the beginning of the end, at least for this season— the start, at sunset, of the final day of our ancient, annual Days of Awe journey. Since, as T.S. Eliot observed, all ends are beginnings and all beginnings ends, Kol Nidre is also about the embrace of paradox, and using paradox to propel us toward new paths.

When we began this pilgrimage together last week, I spoke on Erev Rosh Hashanah about the importance of learning the fundamentals of our faith, about how essential a basic grasp of Judaism is if we are to grow morally and spiritually. Study leads to knowledge, knowledge leads to practice, and practice ultimately leads to the sense of awe, wonder, and enchantment that can transform lives.

For me, authentic Jewish fundamentalism isn't what you think— it's not a rigid dogmatism, a black-and-white conformity of belief, but the reclamation of our roots, our core, our feisty, rebellious, impassioned soul— a soul that's been missing for far too long among American Jewry, and one that's in serious need of recovery. It's about dialogue, not doctrine, about inclusivity, not alienation. Jewish fundamentalism, as I want to define it, is about creating a context for community, a place where the individual is treasured but where the final goal is self-transcendence.

Yet where can we find models of that context, that arena in which human community, as well as spiritual communion, can play out? It ain't easy, but if we look back into history— into our own as well as other traditions— we'll start to see some very interesting things.

Some of you know that Michele and I were in Hawaii this past summer. We hit 3 of the 5 major islands (Kaua'i was our favorite, for those who care), and did many of the usual things that people do while visiting those tropical shores. Yet one activity in particular, a visit to an historical park on the Big Island, strikes me as especially relevant to tonight, as it struck me when I was there. (You should know, we rabbis have to think WAY ahead of time about our sermons in the fall.)

In old Hawaiian culture, if a person broke a taboo, betrayed a trust, harmed someone, or was a non-combatant during a time of war, they were in very big trouble, regardless of whether they'd committed an actual transgression, or were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Often, they only had one place to turn in order to find safety— it was called a pu'uhonua, a Place of Refuge.

Once inside the boundaries of the pu'uhonua, nobody could touch you— no blood could be shed within its walls. The place of refuge was sacred ground, and anyone who violated its sanctity would then themselves become guilty of a great and terrible offense. While inside this safe haven, those who had committed wrongs were given a second chance, a new lease on life. They had time to offer prayers, perform rituals of contrition, to ask for forgiveness— does this sound like anything Jewish you know?

When time passed, emotions cooled, and wrongdoings were eventually forgiven, the person left the place of refuge. If somebody was just a non-combatant during a war, they were free to leave once the war was over, whichever side they were on when it started. In times of personal distress,

the place of refuge functioned almost like a semi-colon, a place-holder that allowed for a stop in action until it was time to begin one's life anew.

This is pretty powerful stuff, and, in some ways, with all its talk of ritualized sins, contrition, and renewal, it seems almost too Jewish at this time of year.

So let's look back even further, much further, deep into our own, ancient tradition in the Torah for some parallel practices— practices that could easily have evolved into much of what we see in modern Judaism, and on Yom Kippur, especially.

In a little known section in the book of Numbers, tucked away in chapter 35, we find a description of *arei ha-miklat*, the Israelite "Cities of Refuge". These 6 cities of refuge— 3 were on the west of the Jordan and 3 on the east— served a vital role in ancient biblical life.

Like their Hawaiian counterparts, these cities were the last hope for some people, a place of protection where no blood could be spilled. They were open to anyone— Israelites, non-Israelites, resident aliens, even exiles and slaves. But these cities of refuge had a far more narrow condition as to who was permitted to enter them.

There were already laws, rules, and practices in place for atoning for sins, property disputes, and conflicts between neighbors or family members. After all, even in the biblical period our ancestors had established a system of justice that included witnesses, courts, and judges— and we're talking literally thousands of years ago. What wasn't clear was how to deal with a situation when somebody was killed unintentionally. In that era and context of inter-tribal vendettas, you were as good as dead, even if the death you were responsible for was purely the result of an accident— and accidents occurred constantly in a world where work was often very physical and very dangerous.

There were no police, and the priests and Levites would be of little help to you if someone wanted to avenge a death by coming after you to kill you as "payback". Since Judaism is a religion based on justice, that urges us over and over again to pursue it, it had to find a just solution to this dilemma. The cities of refuge were created for exactly this reason— both to save innocent lives and to try to construct a society where justice, not vengeance, was the guiding principle for its population.

With the pursued (and likely terrified) individual safe within the confines of a "sanctuary city," the wheels of justice could start to turn— witnesses would be called, trials held, and judgments made. If the accidental death was caused by negligence or some other transgression, then the appropriate punishment would be meted out or the proper restitution would be made. If the unintentional death was not the result of negligence, then no crime had truly occurred, and the innocent person could leave the city if that person chose to, and try to start over with a clean slate. The city of refuge would have saved a life, and, as later Judaism teaches us, saving a single life is treated as having saved the entire world.

The ancient, biblical institution of sanctuary had 3 purposes. It was a protective measure, to give all of the parties involved a chance to let their passions cool. It also served as a quasi-form of punishment for the manslayer, since exile, even in a place of refuge, constituted a form of social death. But perhaps the most important goal of sanctuary was to contain and isolate the sin that had been committed, a death— for killing was understood by our forbears as a contaminant to the

community as a whole. The killing of a human being, even if it occurred without any malicious intent, was a moral wound to the entire household of Israel.

So, here we are tonight, a new household of Israel— or at least a small part of it. It is the year 2006, or 5767, depending on which calendar you follow. and, though thousands of years have passed, and with them the ancient cities of refuge, we modern Jews, on Yom Kippur, are still being presented with that same gift— the gift of another chance, a clean slate, an opportunity for personal and communal renewal and redemption. Your sins are my sins, and my sins are yours— like it or not, we are in this thing—together.

This room is our sanctuary, our pu'uhonua, our city of refuge. It's our place of prayer, of reflection, of transformation. It is a sanctuary in the truest sense of the word— a safe haven, a place of asylum. Whether saint or sinner, this hall is your home—if only for this moment, this night, this sacred Kol Nidre.

Throughout Jewish history, the idea and the institution of the sanctuary evolved and changed. In its most common and traditional form it was called a Beit Knesset, or, in its English translation, the deceptively simple, “synagogue.”

Yet the Beit Knesset was much more complex than the word implies. In Hebrew, Beit Knesset is best understood as a place of assembly, just like the Greek root that the word “synagogue” comes from. There were other dimensions to this structure, however, and very important ones.

The Beit Knesset also served as a Beit Midrash, a place of study. Traditional synagogues were seats of learning, community libraries, schools for the Jewish soul. In Eastern Europe they were often called shuls, Yiddish for “school,” and we have carried on that tradition in our name as well, The New Shul.

The third major purpose of the Beit Knesset was to function as a Beit Tefillah, a place of prayer. It was a place to worship God— for some, on a daily basis, for others, on special festivals and holy days.

As a seat of assembly, study, and worship, the traditional Beit Knesset was meant to touch our bodies, brains, and souls. When it worked, it did just that, and the synagogue still aims for these goals even as it goes through a new phase in its evolution as a religious institution.

Yet for a synagogue to become a sanctuary, it must go even further. The 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionists offer a powerful model for what I mean. As runaway slaves fled for their lives along the underground railroad, the abolitionists often turned their churches into safe houses for them, offering shelter, food, and fellowship as they made their way north toward freedom.

The modern-day sanctuary movement offers yet another example. From about 1982-1992, scores of U.S. churches, and some synagogues, sheltered desperate Central American refugees trying to escape the political violence roiling their regions. It was the stated mission of the movement to provide “sanctuary,” or faith-based protection, from both the bloodshed of internecine conflict and from the oppression of the authoritarian governments, then in power, in El Salvador and Guatemala. By opening their doors to those trying to flee, and protecting them from our own authorities who wanted to return them to their countries where they would face imprisonment or death, these brave congregations broke from the herd and transformed their houses of worship into havens for lost souls.

Tonight, I've offered models of true sanctuaries, both ancient and modern— places and cities of refuge, safe houses and safe havens. These, in my view, are examples of religion at its best— and I present them as counterpoints, and beacons of hope, to what we see around the world, and even in our own nation, which are illustrations of religion at its worst.

So where does that leave us— what might a post-modern sanctuary look like? On a certain level, we are in one right now. The holy day of Yom Kippur gives us a , a safe space to look inward, and the security of knowing that we all have been granted the promise of a second chance, an opportunity to atone for our transgressions and to renew, and recharge, our souls.

But, as I said at the start, we must move beyond the self, and a true sanctuary must not only embrace the individual, but help that individual re-connect with others. For that to happen, we've got to go back to the basics, to the fundamentals of our faith. I know I've hammered that message home ever since Rosh Hashanah, but if we don't learn the essence of Judaism, if we don't fully grasp what it means to be a Jew, then we won't develop the tools, or feel the motivation, to counter this culture, a culture that is too focused on personal success to even imagine the rewards that await us when we reach out and help other people in need.

The creation of an activist, post-modern sanctuary involves the embrace of paradox— we need to construct a community where the individual is valued greatly but where the final goal is self-transcendence. We need to look within in order to act without. We need to be anchored in our roots before we can soar to the highest heavens. Knowledge is the key, but knowledge that doesn't lead to concrete action is an incomplete exercise.

As was the situation back in the biblical era, there are still people in this world fleeing for their lives, seeking protection and shelter— there are still refugees out there in search of safe havens. Now we might not own a building, but as a post-modern sanctuary— and not just another synagogue— we can nevertheless be of assistance to others.

As a community that strives to be open and inclusive, it is our responsibility to open our tent as far as it can possibly stretch. When we work with other organizations, attend protest rallies with other groups, and link with others who share our values, our reach will extend exponentially. We'll be able to feed men, women, and children who are starving in Darfur— maybe not with our own hands, but thru the hands of strangers who have the same goal. That is the creation of sanctuary, a place of refuge, a haven for lost souls.

Sadly, there is no lack of important causes today that cry out for our help. But the fact that we are able to aid others— in ways that the abolitionists, for instance, could never have dreamed of— is itself something magical, something that transcends time and space. The post-modern sanctuary isn't a physical structure with gates and walls, but a moral impulse, a drive to erase injustice and demonstrate empathy.

If we live up to the great challenges of our time, we will place ourselves squarely in the tradition of those forbears who built cities of refuge, who sheltered tired and hungry slaves, who took in families fleeing oppression. and I can think of no better springboard for action then Kol Nidre. For if God, as an expression of compassion, has given us this gift— the chance to transform and transport ourselves— how could we not give back to those around us in even more dire and desperate need?