

THE NEW SHUL / Kol Nidre 5771 (2010)

Sermon by Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein

Shabbat Shalom and G'mar Tov— I wish each of you a soulful Sabbath and new year, as well as blessings in the Book of Life and serenity and love within the walls of your homes and within your hearts.

When we began these Days of Awe 10 nights ago, on Erev Rosh Hashanah, I described the building of the Mishkan, the desert Tabernacle that accompanied the Israelites during their 40 years of wandering. I talked about the Mishkan as a paradigm for how to construct a creative community, about how critical both imagination and engagement were to the process and outcome— and about how the role of a willing, giving heart related to the merit and virtue of the finished product. We discussed together how inner attitude, kavanah, determined the worth of our actions.

To highlight this idea, I used the episode of the golden calf, where we saw how the very same precious metal that had once been used to gild an idol was later used to adorn the Tent of Meeting; how idolatry was linked, not to material objects, but to our motivations and intentions. The boundary between the deification of false gods and the elevation of the collective is at times very narrow—and it calls for caution.

All of this raises an important and timely question— What are our golden calves?

Idolatry comes in many forms: Worship of money, power, or fame; worship of celebrity; worship of technology; worship of self, of things that enhance our appearance, our social status, our level of comfort and, ultimately, complacency.

Idolatry is not a new idea, but modern idolatry is especially insidious because it is often only seen thru a glass, and darkly. There is a raw, seductive power behind the worship of false gods, particularly during times of trial like our own. That power can lead us to stray, not just from Adonai, our Creator and Redeemer, but from our own integrity. Why face struggle, austerity, and sacrifice for the good of those around us when we can so easily distract ourselves by speculating in the markets or jockeying for a promotion; by surfing the Web or star-gazing at the Cineplex; by getting Botox injections or purchasing the latest iPod, iPad, or iPhone.

In the end, will these things lead us to happiness? Will they make us wiser or more virtuous? Will they better this broken world, or, dare I ask, rescue our very souls?

In a recent NY Times Op-Ed piece, David Brooks suggests that the first decade of the 21st century will be remembered as a period of excess, a time when people expanded their homes or built McMansions; when teenagers cruised down city streets in Hummers and SUVs while 2 wars raged in oil-rich regions overseas; when many Americans treated their homes like ATMs in order to finance their material indulgences. Then the economy tanked, that lifestyle went poof, and everything changed. Now, as Brooks writes, “the oversized looks slightly ridiculous.”

Over the last few years, our social norms and values have shifted, and we have entered a period of re-assessment. People are starting to look for new, non-material ways to find meaning and purpose.

The “recalibration” that has begun to take place has been music to the ears of people like me—rabbis, priests, ministers, and other clergy. After an era of spiritual malaise, vapid consumerism, and dogmatic secularism, we now have an opening, an opportunity to convey, and create, fresh, bold, and exciting gateways that will allow us to touch lives and renew spirits.

One of the more interesting figures at the forefront of this new wave of thinkers, people I would call “social evangelists,” is David Platt. Platt was ordained a Baptist minister, and by the age of 26 he was leading a 4,000 person mega-church in Birmingham, Alabama. Since then, and based on the “excess” he observed both within the mega-church movement as well as within American society in general, Platt has been critiquing the outsized, over-reaching attitudes and actions of the last several years.

In his recent book, Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream, Platt takes aim, not only at today’s golden calves and false gods, but at the American Dream itself. When Europeans first settled this continent, he argues, they saw around them a natural abundance, and they came to 2 conclusions: first, that God’s ultimate plan for humanity could be realized here—these were religious dissenters and rebels, after all— and second, that they could get really rich while helping God achieve it.

This perspective and mindset evolved into the idea that, as Americans, we have 2 interdependent callings: to build in this world and to prepare for the next. For Platt, this tension between good and plenty, between God and material wealth became the central tension in American life, propelling ferocious, often competing energies and explaining why the United States to this day is at once— by observation and statistical data— so religious and so materialistic. In Platt’s view, Americans are moral materialists, spiritual people who are preoccupied by matter.

Platt believes that these two very different spheres cannot be reconciled— and in this regard, he writes in the tradition of many other spiritual thinkers, both contemporary and ancient. “The American dream radically differs from the call of God and the essence of the Scriptures,” he claims. The American dream emphasizes self-development and personal growth; our own abilities are viewed as our greatest assets. This is not the view of the Bible, argues Platt, where we see resistance to a focus on self: “God actually delights in exalting our inability,” writes the author; the American dream emphasizes upward mobility, but “success in the kingdom of God involves moving down, not up.

In this belief, the minister is very much in accord with many ideas in Jewish thought, especially mystical thought. There is a kabbalistic concept called yeridah lifney ha-aliyah, “descent before ascent. For the mystics, a journey into the muck and mire of our souls, a descent into the straits of our inner Metzaram, our personal Egypt, is the prerequisite for any seeking, sensitive person striving for transcendence.

One of the most famous illustrations of this concept is the prophet Jonah, whose story we will hear tomorrow afternoon as we do every Yom Kippur. Before Jonah can transcend the constraints of self, he descends. After receiving a call from God, the Bible tells us that the reluctant prophet “went down” to the port city of Jaffa, “went down” into the hold of a ship, went down into the sea, and descended further still into the belly of a giant sea monster. It is only after this experience of downward mobility that Jonah is transformed, that he finds the courage to get beyond his self, heed the divine call, and ultimately fulfill his mission.

In light of Jonah, the mystics, and Platt's bold critique of the American dream and our impulse toward "abundance," what happens next? If we are truly living in a post-bubble, post-excess moment— and I think we are— how do we move forward?

With so many people today seeking more meaningful and non-material ways to approach their lives, the opportunities for re-assessment and positive change have rarely been as plentiful. One of Platt's suggestions is that we try to put a 'cap' on our lifestyles. Live as if you made \$50,000 a year, he writes, and give everything else away. Take a year to surrender yourself— offer your skills to a non-profit or an NGO; move to some poverty-stricken part of the world and help those in need; take time to focus on the greater good, not yourself.

Platt is advocating good old-fashioned evangelism, but with a social, rather than theological, twist. His call for us to become social evangelists is not Christian—it is humanitarian. Rather than propping up false gods, our focus ought to be on giving, and giving back. To sacrifice, to make an offering with a full heart— as did our ancestors when they built the Tabernacle— is still a profoundly countercultural idea. Yet it is, as it has always been, our very best antidote to idolatry.

It is an antidote for a specific and powerful reason— it creates community. At the start of this sermon, I noted that the biblical example of the golden calf illustrated how the same precious metal that had once been used to gild an idol was later used to adorn the Mishkan, the desert Tabernacle; how idolatry was connected, not to material objects, but to our motivations and intentions. And the intention of our forbears was not merely to build a physical structure in which to perform rites and ceremonies, but to combine their resources, skills, and energy in order to deepen their relationships with one another—in short, to become a people.

One of the key reasons that community can serve as an antidote to idolatry— even in all of its modern forms and guises— is that true community, almost of necessity, takes us beyond the self.

Think about today's economic situation (as painful as that might be). It would be so easy to excuse diminished support for our community this year, to reduce our material "offerings," by blaming it on the terrible economy. Yet who among us hasn't continued to spend on things we feel like doing— getting manicures and pedicures, going to Yankee games, having dinner at a new or favorite restaurant?

We need to remember that community isn't something that is guaranteed to us, something we can just take from when we need it; with that sort of attitude and intention, one day we will turn around and our former community will be gone.

The Mishkan offers us a model for how to give of our material good as well as our good actions. It shows us that our gifts, our free-will offerings, must come from the heart.

That is an audacious, brazenly counter-cultural idea, one that accords not only with the "post-excess" critique of the American dream, but with the teachings of our ancient spiritual tradition. The Israelites did not treat their contributions to the Tabernacle as "dues," nor did they treat their participation in its construction as coerced; as I said on Rosh Hashanah and as the text makes clear, they did both with willing hearts and giving souls.

In giving deeply of themselves, they got beyond themselves— in getting beyond themselves, they discovered their best selves.

Those seekers and dreamers who built the Mishkan represent a model for us, as well as a remedy. They are a model for how to imagine and construct a creative, dynamic, and engaged community, a network of caring and interdependent relationships, bound by faith, identity, and love of neighbor. Yet they also offer us a remedy for our ills, a non-material way to find meaning and purpose beyond the golden calves of money, power, and social status. In this brave new world of introspection and re-evaluation, community, and the self-sacrifice that it requires, is our antidote to the seductions of idolatry.

Despite the cry of thought leaders like David Platt, Americans may not yet be ready to renounce the moral materialism at the core of their national identity. I doubt we're going to suddenly see hordes of people flying to Haiti or the Sudan, or hurling their BlackBerries and iPods into the Hudson. Still, this country is clearly re-defining what sort of lifestyle is socially and morally acceptable— and what is not.

As a creative Jewish community, we need to be at the forefront of that conversation.

What do we truly value? What are our priorities? Is our focus on ourselves— our appearance, our portfolio, our home? What about our spiritual home, The New Shul?

This year, let's all become evangelists, Jewish evangelists, and reach beyond ourselves in support, both material and non-material, of others, including everyone you see in this room. Let that same counter-cultural drive that helped make our people who we are today help to remake us as we move ahead into the future.

In this new Jewish year, 5771, when all our souls will surely continue to be challenged by the economy, the political environment, natural disasters, and other unforeseen forces beyond our control, we will need a spiritual community more than ever.

Look around you— here it is; don't take it for granted. Where will you invest yourself and your abundance—in a golden calf or in this holy Mishkan, this beautiful community?