

Rosh Hashana
5771 – 2010
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas
Mosques, Marriages and Mahzorim
The Need for a Lev Shalem

A rabbi once asked his students, “how do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?” Immediately the students thought that they grasped the importance of the question. There are, after all, prayers that can be recited and rites and rituals that can be performed only at night. And there are prayers and rites and rituals that belong only to the day. It is therefore important to know when the night has ended and day has begun.

So the brightest of the students offered an answer: “Rabbi, when I look out at the fields and I can distinguish between my field and the field of my neighbor’s, that’s when the night has ended and day has begun.” A second student offered his answer: “Rabbi, when I look from the fields and I see a house and I can tell that it’s my house and not the house of my neighbor, that’s when the night has ended and the day has begun.” A third student offered an answer: “When I can distinguish the animals in the yard –and I can tell a cow from a horse – that’s when the night has ended.

Each of these answers brought a sadder, more severe frown to the rabbi’s face – until finally he shouted: “No! Not one of you understands! “You only know how to divide! You divide your house from the house of your neighbor, your field from your neighbor’s field; you distinguish one kind of animal from another, you separate one color from all the others. Is that all that we can do – divide, separate, split the world into pieces? Isn’t the world broken enough? Isn’t the world split into enough fragments? Is that what the Torah is for? No, my dear students, it’s not that way, not that way at all!”

The shocked students looked into the sad face of their rabbi. One of them ventured, “Then Rabbi, tell us: How do we know that night has ended and day has begun?” The rabbi stared back into the faces of his students and with a voice suddenly gentle and imploring, he responded: “When you look into the face of the person who is beside you and you can see that that person is your brother or your sister, then, finally, the night has ended and the day has begun.” (As told by Rabbi Edward Feinstein in “Capturing the Moon” p.54ff)

We live in a very broken world – we are surrounded by so much hate, and pain, so much suffering and indifference – and how do we respond to this condition? Like the students in the story it seems that what we know best is how to do divide, how to separate and further split our world into pieces. I understand his pain when the rabbi cries out: “isn’t the world broken enough? Isn’t the world split into enough fragments?”

A couple of weeks ago, two rallies were held on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial – one was led by Glenn Beck, the other by Al Sharpton – there were separated by only a few hundred yards – but they could not have been farther apart. After much effort – Israelis and Palestinians are sitting at the same table to discuss peace – but at this moment they are still very very far from each other. As we gather here in this beautiful sanctuary on this most sacred of days – we too sit close to one another, but as your rabbi – I worry not about the things that unite us – but the things that divide us. I worry about the things that separate husbands from wives, parents from children – I worry about the divisions between Republicans

and Democrats, Orthodox, Conservative and Reform, Christians, Muslims and Jews – every where we look we see – families divided, nations divided, religions divided - a world divided.

And like the good rabbi in that story, I too do not believe that is what our torah wants from us -- we are, I believe, put on this earth not to divide but to gather the fragments of a broken world and to unite them, heal them, elevate them and make them holy – until we can look into the face of the person beside us and see that person as brother or sister. But for now, it seems we are so very far from that day.

We live in a world where the lines are drawn, the camps are set, the divisions are in place – choose your side, join your party, enlist in your cause. And the beauty of this arrangement is that once you have joined a cause, a party, a camp – there is no longer any need to think for yourself– your script is written, your lines are ready to be recited. And this arrangement, you have to admit, is all so very convenient for whenever something happens in the world – we each know exactly what we and the others are going to say – I mean we have all become so predictable in our opinions. Once you are a card-carrying member of the left – we know you will oppose any cause favored by the right. Israeli's are just supposed to be insensitive to the needs of Palestinians and Palestinians must deny Israel's right to exist. Orthodox Jews must oppose all things Jewish that are not Orthodox and non-Orthodox must object to anything Orthodox and round and round the mulberry bush we go.

It was just about three months ago, when Israeli soldiers descended to the deck of a Turkish ship to interdict its attempt to break the Israel blockade of Gaza – almost immediately we were inundated with opinions about what had happened. In the first few hours and days the condemnations rained down on Israel from around the world. Angry demonstrations broke out in the Middle East and in capitals all over Europe. Israel was denounced in a cascade of angry rhetoric – once again she was likened to Nazis and linked with the worst oppressors in modern history. It was a tough time to be a Jew – to be on the receiving end of such hatred and vitriolic condemnation.

And to a much lesser extent – but similarly – within minutes, certainly hours – we also had our inboxes filled with voices of some of our fellow Jews – defending Israel, condemning her critics – legitimizing the events that had taken place.

And the thing that bothered me was that all of this was taking place long before anyone knew what had really happened – long before we had any facts. And when the facts did become clear, although this was not one of Israel's proudest days, it also became clear that what happened bore no resemblance to the hateful and destructive caricature that was portrayed by so many in the world who were so eager to believe the worst about Israel.

But, the absence of facts really was not a hindrance – the arguments could proceed, the conclusions could be drawn, the condemnations could be stated quite forcibly – without any need of the facts. There are a depressingly large number of people in the world who believe that Israel can do no right and for these people the facts will be found to support their belief. And there are also a small but disappointing number of people who believe that Israel can do no wrong – they too will muster the facts necessary to support their belief.

What has come to complicate this game over the last number of years – is that it used to be that Jews by and large defended Israel, everyone else by and large tended to condemn Israel

– and while neither side was all that helpful in finding lasting solutions to complicated problems – at least it was clear what part we were expected to play. Of late the game has been complicated by a significant number of Jews who have moved into the critical camp. We now find Jews – especially young ones and especially on college campuses – who now uniformly and consistently parrot the lines of Israel’s detractors – and while it is really still the same game – with each side avoiding the necessity for real thought – it is still somewhat unsettling to have Jews on the other side of the barricades. It used to be them against us – now it is them *and* us against us. Same old game – just a bit more frustrating because now so many of us are able to play it at home – over the dinner table as we argue with our kids or friends.

My friend and colleague Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson recently resigned from the advisory board of an organization called Abraham’s Vision. And I think that his frustration is emblematic of this dilemma of which I speak. It is easy to understand why he joined Abraham’s Vision – when you see that its purpose was to bring Palestinians and Israelis together and was based on a conviction that “open and honest dialogue is an essential step for all parties to see each other’s humanity and to create conditions of mutual respect and dignity in which real peace, security, and justice might flourish.” What could be more needed than open and honest dialogue – isn’t this precisely what I am preaching for? The need to get beyond our party lines, outside of our scripts – and create real dialogue? So why did Rabbi Artson resign? He believes that open and honest dialogue must be based on a willingness to critique and be critiqued. But, unfortunately that willingness was only operating in one direction. Honest dialogue in today’s political climate means – that Israel must be open to being critiqued – period. Entirely missing in Abraham’s Vision were critiques of policies, actions or statements of any Arab nations, including the Palestinian Authority. Missing were dissent from any actions or positions of Hamas, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, and others.” So he felt he had to resign. How sad.

Once upon a time politics was defined as the art of the possible – now it could better be defined as the art of the impossible. The floor of congress use to be one of our great American achievements – a rare place where heated but honest debate produced hard won compromise and flawed but real progress. No longer – today our representatives too often can be found shouting at each other and talking past each other as they play to their respective parties – and compromise by some – is considered an act of betrayal.

So here is the Rosh Hashanah resolution I am hoping we can all make today. Let us make this the year that we begin to break out of the divisiveness that is destroying our world. Like the rabbi in my opening story – who was trying to teach his students that we need to stop dividing the world and find new ways to unite it, let us each vow to do our part to honestly listen and consider the positions of others – especially those we disagree with. We have a right to insist that others consider our views as well – but we should be willing in the spirit of Abraham’s true vision – to go first, and learn to listen with an open heart.

Should a mosque be built in the shadow of the World Trade Center? This is indeed a challenging issue – but you wouldn’t know it from the rhetoric we read in our newspapers and hear shouted from our television screens. I am appalled by how some politicians on the right have exploited this issue and used it to galvanize constituencies and so blatantly used bigotry to sow fear and win votes. There is something real here that needs to be discussed. But discussion and an honest exchange of views on this matter are hard to find. Most of it was pretty predictable: Politicians on the right lined up against it, those on the left, tended to defend it. But then something unusual happened. The ADL – normally very liberal on matters of

freedom of religion came out with a very nuanced opinion *against* building the mosque – or more correctly- cultural center – in the shadow of the World Trade Center. As one person said to me, “doesn’t it concern you when you find the ADL on the same side of an issue as Sarah Palin and Newt Gingrich?” Actually – no. In fact I found it rather refreshing. One is forced to wonder if the ADL might have actually considered the issue before they formed an opinion. What a novel approach. I know the temptation for many of us to say, “well if Sarah Palin is against it – that is all I need to know to support it.” But in an attempt to model the very behavior I was preaching, I actually took the time to think about this issue and came up with a startling realization: the other side has a point.

Now I admit, my reflex reaction on the World Trade Center Mosque issue (of course it is not merely a mosque and not really proposed for the World Trade Center site – but that is merely part of the problem. Immediately those on the political extremes radicalize the issue making real conversation nearly impossible.) But initially I saw this as an issue of religious freedom plain and simple. “This is America,” President Obama intoned, “and our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakable.” Sounded reasonable to me – but then I did something unusual – I took the time to try and understand what the other side was saying. Not the bombasts on the extreme right – but those who were sincerely trying to articulate an alternative view – like Abe Foxman at the ADL. And to my surprise – I found a cogent and meaningful dissent. This side argues that America is not only a place of rights, it is also a place of responsibilities – we are more than just a collection of constitutional rights - we are a collection of citizens who also need to learn to be sensitive to the needs and rights of our neighbors as well.

The ADL has a long history of defending religious freedom – so their opposition here caught my attention. The ADL did not see their stance as an attempt to limit religious freedom or to support religious bigotry – stereotyping all Moslems because of the actions of a few - they argued that they felt the situation was analogous to the controversy in 1993 when Pope John Paul II asked a group of Carmelite nuns to move their convent from just outside the Auschwitz death camp. The establishment of the convent near Auschwitz had stirred dismay among Jewish groups and survivors who felt that the location was an affront and a terrible disservice to the memory of millions of Jews who died at the hands of the Nazis in the Holocaust.

Just as we thought then that well-meaning efforts by Carmelite nuns to build a Catholic structure were insensitive and counterproductive to reconciliation, so too we believe it will be with building a mosque so close to Ground Zero – the ADL argued.

And I began to realize this was at its core a conflict between rights and sensitivities. I think it very reasonable to conclude that the right of religious freedom is such an important and fundamental right in this country that it trumps all issues of sensitivity and the feelings of those who might be offended. Similarly, I believe that it is possible to conclude that this is such a sensitive issue for so many in this country that we must find a way to explore alternative sites so that while not trampling on the rights of those who wish to build this cultural center – the deep wounds left by 9/11 not be exacerbated.

Personally, I hope an alternative site can be found. Although his Op-Ed piece in yesterday’s Times does not make me optimistic, I hope that Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf will come to understand that to make this an issue of rights over sensitivities would be a pyrrhic victory – and that finding an alternative site – would not be a victory for racism and hatred but for reason

and sensitivity. I think the ADL and Abe Foxman were correct in encouraging this solution and I *also* hope – that should the Imam choose *not* to follow this wise advice, and should he go and build that Cultural Center blocks from the site of the World Trade Center– that the ADL and we the Jewish community would support his right to do so – as painful as that course might be.

The problem with the world we live in, the rabbi tried to teach his students, is that we live in a world where we know only how to divide. Where we spend all our time in this world dividing – night from day, right from wrong, black from white. How terribly difficult it is to live in a world where everyone is divided into enemy or friend. What a terrible burden it is to have to define everyone we meet as either enemy or friend.

My gripe with those on the right is that they tend to see everyone as enemy – and miss too many opportunities to heal a broken world. Was it really necessary to draw these battle lines where we did? Is it not possible to disagree with the Imam and not make him an enemy, to disagree with our president and not call him an enemy? To be against abortion and not call the other side murderers? To hold certain political views and not call those who disagree traitors? Facists? Or Nazis?

And my gripe with those on the left – is their inability to see that we do live in a divided world – and everyone is not yet friend. The rabbi in my opening story was pained by the divisions of the world in which we live – but he did not pretend that the world was not broken. The messiah has not yet come – and to pretend that he has may be as dangerous a sin as committed by those on the right. When John Lennon sang about the possibility of a better world – he had the good sense to call it “Imagine”. He may have hoped for a day without division – without countries and nothing to live or die for – a world without religion where everyone could live together in peace – he may have imagined all the people sharing all the world – but at least he knew it was a world that existed only in his imagination.

What am I to say in the face of those whose naïveté is so great that they would tell us that all we have to do is give peace a chance. If Israel would just lay down its weapons – they will see that the Arabs and the Palestinians all really want the same things we want and if we just tear down the walls that separate them from us – we can all live together in peace.

In the imagination of those on the right –all the problems of the world – are due to them – our enemies, who are everywhere. But in the imaginings of those on the left, there are no enemies, all the problems of the world – are due to us.

Radical Islam is not, by any means, a majority of Islam. But with its financiers, clerics, propagandists, trainers, leaders, operatives and sympathizers -- according to a conservative estimate, it commands the allegiance of only 7% of Muslims. 93% of Muslims are not radicalized. But 7% translates to 80 million souls. 80 million people have declared war on us and on our way of life. Radical Islam is a small but very powerful strain within Islam. It has changed the course of nations and affected the lives of hundreds of millions. It is the reason every airport in the West is an armed camp and every land is on constant alert. Ground Zero is the site of the most lethal attack of that worldwide movement and it has only been good fortune that has prevented there from being others. Is there any doubt that this good fortune cannot last?

Allow me, on this most sacred of days to share with you my deepest fear. I fear, that our insistence in believing the best about our enemies might make us vulnerable to the worst

about our enemies.

The cover of this week's Time Magazine proclaims: "Why Israeli's Don't Want Peace! The thinking goes that if Israel will just be reasonable, there will be peace. If Israel will stop building settlements, if Israel will give back the captured lands, if Israel will just do what it is supposed to do – all will be well.

If Israel is the problem – than only Israel can be the solution. And this year, for the first time, we actually heard from so-called reasonable people – the ultimate expression of this logic – maybe Israel was a mistake from the beginning. A foreign body inserted by colonial powers in the very midst of an Arab world – that was destined to cause pain and suffering until it was rejected and eliminated from the world.

We who love Israel, we who know Israel, have watched this transformation in horror. As one security expert put it to us in a briefing this summer: "Israel has gone from being one of the world's greatest assets – to becoming one of the world's greatest pains in the asset." And those on the far left are only giving voice to what many more moderate people are beginning to think even if they don't yet allow themselves to speak it: maybe the world would be better off, if there was no Israel. The Arabs would be appeased, the violence would cease, and the world would be a better place. And my fear is – that on that day, that terrible awful day – that would see the end to millions of Jewish dreams and thousands of years of Jewish hopes and prayers *od lo avda tikvateynu?*– on that day when Jewish hope will have died – and our people will have made the ultimate sacrifice for the betterment of the world – and there will still be no peace, and the enemies who opposed us will not be appeased – and the world will awaken to the true nature of the enemy that faces us – but for us it will be too late, when the battle will finally be engaged we will be gone and our cause will be lost.

We make a terrible mistake when we allow our focus on the 7% to color our opinion of the other 93% of the world's Muslims. But we also make a terrible mistake when we allow our focus on the 93% to cause us to overlook the determination of that 7%.

The right is wrong when it divides the world into them versus us and sees all of the world's problems caused by them. And the left is wrong when it divides the world into them versus us and sees all the world's problems caused by us.

And that rabbi was right when he felt the pain of living in a divided world and sought to teach his students how to navigate a path that would heal those divisions and not exacerbate them – to seek a path that would bring us *and* them together without denying the rights and the sensitivities of us or them.

In the world of us versus them – the only thing you can do is to choose sides. In a world of us *and* them – the challenge is to find a way forward together.

Could such a simple change of perspective really transform our world? That rabbi thought so – and so do I. And not only do I believe it can transform our world – I believe it can transform each of us and every one of us – and make our lives and the lives of our loved ones – so much more fulfilling.

Now I admit, for we Jews, getting beyond this us versus them thing is a real challenge. For

thousands of years it has been us versus them – and it usually ended with us getting *schmised*. Anti-Semitism is not some ancient relic of a distant past – it murdered our parents and grandparents in Auschwitz. It threatens the very existence of Israel – the greatest Jewish experiment in the last 2000 years. Is there any doubt that the worldwide outrage over Israel – is fueled by a resentment that is above and beyond all reason? Yes us versus them – is a very comfortable category for we Jews to operate in historically -- but as the rabbi in my opening story was trying to teach his students, us versus them only perpetuates a divided world – it perpetuates the hurt and does little to facilitate the healing.

If ever it became clear that we are moving beyond old definitions – that the world, for many – certainly many of the younger generation – is no longer divided into us versus them – all we had to do was take note of the marriage this past summer of Chelsea Clinton and Marc Mezvinsky. It was the social event of the summer. And the fact that the daughter of our former president Bill Clinton and our current Secretary of State Hillary Clinton married someone who was Jewish – that a rabbi co-officiated with a Methodist Minister – that the *hasan* wore a *tallit* for the ceremony, that they were married under a *chupah* and broke a glass at its conclusion, that Bill and Hillary were lifted on chairs at the party – well all of this certainly deserved, demanded a Jewish response. And true to form – most Jews immediately took to their respective corners in forming their answer to the age-old question – is it good for the Jews or bad for the Jews.

In a world of us versus them, where *they* are the enemy – there are those who condemned the wedding as an abomination, a violation of all we hold sacred and dear, a blurring of the lines between us and them that will only result in the total assimilation of our people and the end of the Jews. And on the other side, there were those who rejoiced – the ultimate victory for the desire to eliminate all divisions between them and us. If we are not quite ready to imagine a world of no religion – well at least you can do your thing and I'll do mine and we can all live happily together in this great and wonderful country. Uh, we can discuss the children later.

And what do you think is my opinion as your rabbi on this matter? Now be careful. Think this through. Don't try and put me too quickly in a box. Remember – this is all about embracing the complexity of our world and the challenges of recognizing the truth in multiple arguments. I'll share with you my take on Yom Kippur, until then why don't you try your hand at what I am trying to model – an approach to life that embraces it in all of its complexities. That challenges you to see the other side as well as your own, that wants you to form a conclusion but not before you have exhausted all sides of the argument. A world where no longer think in terms of us *versus* them but recognizes that there is an "us" and a "them." Go ahead; see if you can predict what I will say on this issue. I invite you to email me your predictions – not what you think about this matter – although I welcome you to share that as well – but what you think is my opinion – and I will share some of your predictions when I address this at *Kol Nidre*.

Yes, this is a game you can play at home – it is one in fact I want you to play at home. I want you to begin to challenge yourselves and how you approach the world. In a world that is divided between us and them – - not us versus them – but us and them -- when is it right to make it about us and when is it necessary to make it about them?

Use the rest of this Sacred Service to take stock of your own life. If you think over all the issues of this past year that occupied your life and your attention – and if you find that all the problems of your life is because of *them* – your husband or wife who does not understand you, your

friends who are jealous of you, your co-workers who are trying to get ahead of you – if it is ALL their fault – you may want to reconsider. And similarly, if you spend all your time blaming yourself for everything that does not go your way – if it is always your fault, your weakness, your failures that cause the downfalls in your life – maybe, just maybe you are mistaken. In the divided world in which we live – in a world of us and them – sometimes it is us and sometimes it is them and the challenge is to know which is which and when and then to let the healing begin.

I know that the vision I have presented to you today makes your life more difficult. I know that your old world –the world of us versus them – was – well, so much easier. You knew what side you were on, what positions to hold, what opinions to embrace and what lines to recite. In that old world – there were Republicans and Democrats, Orthodox, Conservative and Reform, enemies and friends – everyone had their place and every one knew their part. You could go to your rabbi and he would *paskan a shayla* – he would answer all your questions – he would tell you what was *asur* and what was *mutar* – what was forbidden and what was permitted – what was *kosher* and what was *treif* – and now my message to you on this most sacred of days is that you need to think for yourself. Our rabbis, teachers, and politicians – well, we can help – but bottom line – you must decide for yourself – and I know that is not easy.

My son taught me a beautiful *gemorrah*, one that he learned this year from his teacher, Rabbi Benny Lau an Orthodox rabbi in Jerusalem. Rabbi Lau was quoting a not well-known *gemorah* from the Babylonian Talmud from the tractate *Hagigah* 3b. It tells the story of a particular student who was overwhelmed by the competing and contradictory opinions he met at every turn in his study in Judaism. He seeks clarity from his teachers and all he gets is confusion. He seeks answers and they give him more questions. Finally he cries out in exasperation – “this one says it is permitted and this one says it is forbidden, this one says it is pure and this one impure – how am I supposed to learn what God wants me to do in such an environment?”

And then in what I believe is one of the most remarkable Talmudic quotes I have ever studied, the *gemorah* responds with advice similar to mine:

תלמוד לומר: כולם נתנו מרעה אחד - אל אחד נתנו, פרנס אחד אמרו, מפי אדון כל
 המעשים ברוך הוא, דכתיב וידבר אלהים את כל הדברים האלה. אף אתה עשה אזניך
 כאפרכסת, וקנה לך לב מבין לשמוע את דברי מטמאים ואת דברי מטהרים, את דברי אוסרין
 ואת דברי מתירין, את דברי פוסלין ואת דברי מכשירין.

“All these contradictions and differing opinions they were all given by one Shepherd, One God gave them, one leader uttered them from the mouth of the Lord of all Creation – as it is written: “And the Lord spoke all these words...” So make your ear like a funnel and get thee a *leyv mayvin*, a perceptive heart to understand the words of those who declare things clean and those who declare them to be unclean, those who declare them to be *kosher* and those who declare them to be *treif*.”

What a remarkable text. I hope we will have an opportunity to study it in greater detail. Written almost 2000 years ago – it teaches that what we need most to make it in this world – is not the right party, not the right rabbi, but the right heart – a *leyv mayvin* – a discerning heart.

It is no coincidence my dear dear friends – that the new *Mahzor* you hold in your hands – the new *Mahzorim* that I believe will transform our *davening* experience on these most sacred of

days for years and years to come – is one that marries traditional prayers and modern sensitivities – and it is no coincidence that it is called: *Lev Shalem – a complete heart*. For that is what we seek today: a *lev mayvin – a lev shalem* – a discerning heart, a complete heart.

A rabbi once asked his students, “how do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?” And as each student offered his answer the rabbi became more and more frustrated. Each of their answers brought a sadder, more severe frown to the rabbi’s face – until finally he shouted: “No! Not one of you understands! “You only know how to divide! You divide your house from the house of your neighbor, your field from your neighbor’s field; you distinguish one kind of animal from another. Is that all that we can do – divide, separate, split the world into pieces? Isn’t the world broken enough? Isn’t the world split into enough fragments? Is that what the Torah is for?”

So this then is my prayer today – for a *lev mayvin – a lev shalem* -- a heart that will enable us to look into the face of the person who is beside you and see that that person is your brother or your sister, then and only then will the night end and the day have begun.