

REMEMBRANCE, RECONCILIATION, AND RENEWAL

Remarks of Ronald W. Brown  
at  
Congregation Shomrei Emunah  
67 Park Street  
Montclair New Jersey 07042  
March 20, 1992

REMEMBRANCE, RECONCILIATION, AND RENEWAL

Rabbi Meyerowitz, and members of the Congregation.

It is an honor, and a privilege to be with you this evening.

This is my second visit here. My first visit was a few years ago. I had somewhere else to be then, but I came on that occasion to be present to remember the events of Kristallnacht. I felt it was much more important for me to be here; it was a matter of conscience and choice and priority. Though I was not alive in 1938, I could not help but wonder how many persons who were alive then, chose to remain silent or had "somewhere else to be" on that terrible night. And so I chose to come forth, to be present, and by my presence in some small way to speak out.

Similarly, when I read a letter Rabbi Meyerowitz wrote to the Montclair Times, I wrote a note of support to the Rabbi and sent him a copy of some remarks I had given. I did not know then that a letter to Rabbi Meyerowitz could not only result in an invitation to come to Temple, but also could result in being asked to speak as well. I hope that my words are worthy of this honor, and its attendant responsibility.

My wife said to me yesterday: "so, you are in the paper." And as any seasoned husband knows, when your wife begins a sentence with "so", watch what you respond. And being a seasoned husband, I said: "hm-m-m". And do you think she would let me get away with a "hm-m-m"? Ha. So, continuing she said, "It says in the paper that

you are speaking Friday night on the subject of the current status of African-American and Jewish relations. What are you going to say?"

I responded, if I could borrow from Michael Jackson's latest video, I would say "do you remember the time" -- I do -- when things were better. Or I would say that without contradiction, as with all relationships of which I am aware, there is room for improvement.

People too often look for differences instead of reflecting on similarities. And because people do not spend enough time looking for similarities or things they have in common, these similarities are too often diminished in importance. Too often people do not spend enough time trying to understand or know one another. And an absence of understanding can give rise to misinterpretation, to misunderstandings, and to a sense of isolation in circumstances where a sense of community should prevail.

And so, in thinking about my message on this subject, my thoughts flowed in three directions: remembrance, reconciliation, and renewal.

The dictionary gives several definitions of these words: remembrance ("something that serves to bring to mind or keep in mind some place, person, event"); reconciliation ("bringing to acquiescence or acceptance"; "to bring into agreement or harmony"); and renewal ("to begin or take up again"; "to restore or replenish"). It is my hope that my words this evening will at least meet the dictionary's requirements. And that these words --- remembrance,

reconciliation, and renewal --- can serve as and will be more than just words, but will help foster positive action and improvement.

More than 200 years ago, Rabbi Nahman of Brazlav spoke the following words in a prayer:

"Adon Haolom. May the will come from Thee to annul wars and the shedding of blood from the universe, and to extend a peace, great and wondrous in the universe. Let all residents of the earth recognize and know the innermost truth. That we are not come into this world for quarrel and division, nor for hate, greed and jealousy, contrariness and bloodshed, but we are come into this world to live together in peace and freedom with one another as good neighbors in mutual respect under Thy guiding providence."

"We are not come into this world for quarrel and division, nor for hate, greed and jealousy, contrariness and bloodshed, but we are come into this world to live together in peace and freedom with one another as good neighbors in mutual respect".

How good it would be for relations between all people if we could remember and live Rabbi Nahman's words, if we could keep them in mind each time we are challenged to live up to them. Rabbi Nahman's words can also serve as a basis for reconciliation between persons, and as a basis for renewal.

Remembrance, reconciliation, and renewal become particularly important in times such as ours where there is great anxiety. People seem lost. People are fearful. And some anxiety comes directly out of fear. Fear and anxiety produce distrust.

Rabbi Charles Shulman has said "our time [is] a period when men are desperately searching for something to replace the lost faith of their fathers, for some substitute for the lost God of their fathers, and for purpose and meaning in life. They have not found salvation in tools they have built, nor security in their increased knowledge of nature and human nature." Rabbi Shulman observed: "We possess great learning and great confusion to accompany the learning. Psychology has opened our minds, but not our hearts. Physics has widened our universe and left us more lonely than ever. Medicine with its wonder drugs has prolonged our life, and we have filled it with boredom because we do not know what to do with our leisure." And even poets, "with other tormented spirits of our generation ask the age-old question, "How long, O Lord?"

Dr. Martin Luther King put it this way:

"The world in which we live is a world of geographical oneness and we are challenged now to make it spiritually one....Through our scientific genius we have made of this world a neighborhood; now through our moral and spiritual development we must make of it a brotherhood. In a real sense, we

must all learn to live together as brothers, or we  
will perish together as fools."

A statesman (Adalai Stevenson) put it this way: "We must strive for  
community at home and around the world... For community with all its  
rich variety and material tolerance is the only proper environment  
for freedom." And the poet Langston Hughes presented it thusly ("I  
Dream A World"):

I dream a world where man  
No other man will scorn,  
Where love will bless the earth  
And peace its path adorn.  
I dream a world where all  
Will know sweet freedom's way,  
Where greed no longer saps the soul  
Nor avarice blights our day.  
A world I dream where black or white,  
Whatever race you be,  
Will share the bounties of the earth  
And every man is free.  
Where wretchedness will hang its head,  
And joy, like a pearl,  
Attend the needs of all mankind.  
Of such I dream--  
Our world!

I share the preachers, the rabbi's, the statesmen's and the poet's  
perspective. We must seek community.

I also share Rabbi Shulman's view that some of our anxiety would be eased if we would "apply to our lives, the great religious values we have inherited from ....the Ten Commandments, the view of the common God of humanity envisaged by the prophet Malachi, the vital meaning of a United Nations as envisioned by Isaiah." These religious values "bid us be copartners with our maker in the building of a better order on earth and reminds us that 'except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it."

We must also seek to find God within our selves and within others. God is not lost, but sometimes it seems we are. May those who come to our town, and especially those who are invited to speak in our places of worship, remember that we are bidden to rise to a level just a little lower than the angels.

"We are not come into this world for quarrel and division, nor for hate, greed and jealousy, contrariness and bloodshed, but we are come into this world to live together in peace and freedom with one another as good neighbors in mutual respect". "We must learn to live together as brothers, or we will perish together as fools."

Unfortunately, throughout history, there have been those who seek to shatter a sense of community.

We should remember that 29 years ago on a Sunday morning in Birmingham Alabama, a bomb exploded in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church killing children in Sunday school. We should remember that almost 54 years ago on the evening of November 10, 1938, sounds of destruction and desecration were heard throughout Germany on Kristallnacht. And there should be no time and no occasion in which a place of worship, whether it is called church, synagogue, temple, cathedral, or mosque, is destroyed or desecrated without all persons of good will speaking out in opposition to such horror.

We should remember these events of the past because unfortunately today, in our world, in our country, in our state, and sometimes even in our town, we still find people who seem to throw bombs. But what they throw is a different kind of bomb than the kind that was planted in that Birmingham church or which resulted in the burning or demolition stone by stone of synagogues in Germany on that terrible night of November 10, 1938. And yet these modern day bombers are just as destructive.

The bombs they throw have the potential to shatter our sense of community. The bombs they throw are ones loaded and exploding in a shower of fiery words.

Sometimes the bombs they throw are against blacks. Sometimes the bombs they throw are against whites. Sometimes the bombs they throw are anti-semitic. And sometimes the bombs they throw are against any person of good will who stands up for something rather than falling for anything. If the decibel level of divisive rhetoric is allowed



to rise high enough, it can shatter the glass of our sense of community.

Even here in Montclair, the bomb of divisive rhetoric can blow up the constructive work of many people and taint the positive atmosphere of good will that they, and I as the former President of the Board of Education in this town tried to foster and spread. The remnants of such devastation may still linger. Please excuse the mixed metaphor, but like the vampire Dracula, the dark shadow of some words still stalk the streets and affect the hearts of some of our citizens. I hope we can collectively put a wooden stake of sensitivity into that dracula, shed the sunlight of sense on that shadow, and perform a verbal transplant of those in whom the heart of brotherhood has suffered with arhythmia since being arrested by the Darth Vader of divisive rhetoric.

Divisive words of separation and exclusion create a backdraft of burning bitterness. And I must confess that I can not understand why the media gives some of these rhetorical bombers so much attention.

On the deepest personal level, I do not wish to spend time fighting rhetoric with more rhetoric. I would prefer to spend time on constructive cooperation and collaboration. I want to remember the best, and to look for reconciliation and renewal in our relationships. Do you share my choice this evening? What do you choose?

We have choices. Especially here in Montclair.

We must seek to understand one another. We must seek to understand our traditions and cultures. We must seek dialogue rather than diatribe. We must seek to present perspectives from which learning, knowledge, and education may flow.

In a message entitled "Love Reveals My Neighbour, My Responsibility", Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa shared an insight that gives rise to understanding about conduct in the story of the Good Samaritan. Bishop Tutu advised his audience that the priest and the Levite "were rushing to go to the Temple in Jerusalem to attend the services. If they stopped, they would be late for those important services and they would become ritually unclean, which would make them unfit to participate in the worship of the Temple and that would be taking away something due to God." I do not know if Bishop Tutu's insight was correct or helpful. I do think it provides a perspective about which dialogue and discussion could take place about an event. And that has the potential to be constructive and beneficial.

We must also celebrate and remember those whose actions and attitudes have built bridges over which we both can travel. I would like to do that now.

Thirty eight years ago, a man driving from Las Vegas to Hollywood was in a serious accident. He spoke of his experience in these words:

"God must have put his arms around me that horrible day when I was in the accident. The policemen who helped pick my pieces from the twisted wreckage said it was a miracle that I came out of it with only the loss of an eye. Maybe it was in the hospital after the accident that it happened. Or, maybe it was beginning to work before then, but the frustration of looking for that something in life began to work on me." (Jet)

This man converted to Judaism at Temple Emanuel in San Francisco. He studied the Talmud and attended services. When asked about this, he said:

"Jews have become strong over their thousands of years of oppression and I wanted to become part of that strength. As a Negro I felt emotionally tied to Judaism. I wanted to become a Jew because Judaism held an honesty and spiritual peace that was lacking in my personal make-up. I wanted to become a Jew because the customs of Judaism held a cleanliness that no other philosophy on this earth can offer. I became a Jew because it gave me an inner strength and was the answer to a curiosity that stalked me for years."

(Jet) He also said "the thing that appealed to me is that Judaism preaches justice for everyone." (Variety)

In one of his books, this man related this experience:

"During the filming of Porgy and Bess, I told Mr. Goldwyn I couldn't work on Yom Kippur. He couldn't believe it. Suspending production for one day would cost him \$25,000. I said, 'Sir, I'm sorry for the problems I'm causing you, but I go to temple a lot less than I would like because when I do, people still look at me as if they think it's a publicity stunt. However, I must draw the line at working on Yom Kippur.'

He took off his glasses. 'Sammy, you're a little so-and-so, but go with your yarmulke and your tallis -- we'll work it out somehow.' He sighed, like now he'd seen everything, and as I left his office he was behind his desk talking to the four walls. 'Directors I can fight. Fires on the set I can fight. Writers, even actors I can fight. But a Jewish colored fellow? This, I can't fight!'"

The man was Sammy Davis, Jr. Sammy said: "I am a Black Jew. That doesn't mean that as a Black I agree with every other Black or that as a Jew I agree with every other Jew." (Jet)

I am not versed in the traditions of Judaism. But I know that

Sammy embraced Judaism for more than 35 years. A Jewish friend of mine once asked me "Can Sammy say the prayers in Hebrew? If he can, then he is truly Jewish." I replied to my friend, "I don't know if Sammy can say the prayers in Hebrew or not, but is that the new test under the Law Of Return? More importantly, Ben-Gurion said:" By one definition the Jews are a religious community... by another a nation... and there are Jews without any definition. They are just Jews. I am one of them. I don't need any definition. I am what I am." When Sammy sang "I Got To Be Me" that included how he "saw" part of himself, and more importantly how he "lived" part of himself. And that living included a definition like that of Ben-Gurion.

There was a plaque on the outside wall of Sammy Davis Jr.'s home in Beverly Hills. The plaque read: "This house welcomes all colors, races, and religions, as long as they have peace and love in their hearts." I miss and remember this special man; so long as we remember, and do something in the spirit of that memory, we keep not only ourselves alive, but celebrate his spirit as well. May the words of welcome which were on his home become the hallmark of remembrance, reconciliation, and renewal between all peoples.

Some words must be spoken and remembered, like "Yes I Can". They are words of life, not death. They are truly living words. The most powerful I have ever read are found in the poem "Bashert" (Yiddish for "inevitable") by Irena Klepfisz:

"These words are dedicated to those who survived  
because life is a wilderness and they were savage  
because life is an awakening and they were alert  
because life is a flowering and they blossomed  
because life is a struggle and they struggled  
because life is a gift and they were free to accept it.

Some words must be spoken. And you must not only say "no" to some things, you must actively oppose them. As Dr. King said we must watch that we do not make ourselves "the victim of [our own] stagnant passivity and deadening complacency."

Some words must be spoken. They are words of life, not death. Like those in this poem by by Langston Hughes:

Dream of Freedom

There's a dream in the land  
With its back against the wall  
By muddled names and strange  
Sometimes the dream is called.

There are those who claim  
This dream for theirs alone--  
A sin for which, we know,  
They must atone.

Unless shared in common,  
Like sunlight and like air,

The dream will die for lack  
Of substance anywhere.

The dream knows no frontier or tongue,  
The dream, no class or race.  
The dream cannot be kept secure  
In any one locked place.

This dream today embattled,  
With its back against the wall,  
To save the dream for one,  
It must be saved for all.

In conclusion, there is a story I like which I would like to share with you. Perhaps you have heard it. Even so, may you still find it enjoyable. As with many good stories, it sheds light on our own living. It is a story about choices.

"There was a rabbi who wanted to see both Heaven and Hell. And God who has hidden from us the opposites and their unity, gave way to his pleading.

The rabbi found himself before a door, which bore no name, he trembled as he saw it open before him. It gave into a room, and all was prepared for a feast. There was a table, and at its center a great dish of steaming food. The smell and the aroma

inflamed the appetite. The diners sat around the table with great spoons in their hands, yet they were shrieking with hunger, and fainting with thirst in that terrible place. They tried to feed themselves, and gave up, cursing God the author and origin of their torment. For the spoons God had provided were so long that they could not reach their faces and get the food to their tongues. They stretched out their arms, but their mouths remained empty. So they starved because of these spoons while the dish of plenty lay amongst them. And the rabbi knew their shriekings were the cries of Hell. And as knowledge came, the door closed before him.

He shut his eyes in prayer, and begged God to take him away from that terrible place. When he opened them again, he despaired, for the same door stood before him, the door that bore no name. Again it opened, and it gave onto the same room. Nothing had changed, and he was about to cry in horror. There was the table, and at its center the steaming bowl, and around it were the same people, and in their hands the same spoons.

Yet the shrieking had gone, and the cries and the curses had changed to blessings. And nothing had changed, yet everything. For with the same long spoons they reached to each other's faces, and fed each other's mouths. And they gave thanks to God the author and origin of their joy.

And as the rabbi heard the blessings, the door closed. He bent down, and he too blessed God who had shown him the nature of Heaven and Hell, and the chasm --a hairsbreadth wide -- that



divides them.

Every day we make choices. And like those in this story, these choices have consequences. We may choose, like those behind the first door, to shriek and curse our choices. We may choose to blame others for our misfortune. Or like those behind the second door, we may seek common solutions to mutual problems and then to give thanks and say a blessing. The table is the same. What we choose to do at the table and with one another makes all the difference.

In this story at one table, each person saw the problem as his own and tried to solve it by himself. There was intractable isolation. Each person was exiled among his own desires and thereby exiled from peace of mind. Perhaps the essence of the hell at that table was the isolation. At the other table, there was something special. There was a sense of community. And I think that in that sense of community was found not only the solution to a problem, but a closer proximity to the Master of the Universe. And that is perhaps the highest and best form of reconciliation to seek.

In the spirit of reconciliation, it is my hope and my prayer that the Master of the Universe will help each of us to release unforgiving thoughts and free ourselves from bondage to resentment, hurt or anger. By letting go of unforgiveness, may the Lord help us to make room in our awareness for thoughts of redemptive love, peace, wholeness, and freedom.

The Master of the Universe has given us the power to choose. May we choose to love rather than to hate, to laugh rather than to cry, to create rather than destroy, to persevere rather than to quit, to praise rather than to criticize, to heal rather than to wound, to help rather than to hurt, to go on rather than to give up, to reach out to one another rather than to retreat within ourselves. The One Who Neither Slumbers Nor Sleeps has given each of us the power to decide, the courage to dare, the energy to do, the will power to be determined, the grace to be dedicated, and the patience to be diligent. And each of us must answer this question: "What do I choose"?

I hope that here in Montclair, that we will choose the second door rather than the first, to stretch out our hands to one another in assistance rather than to clench a fist in frustration, and to work toward a community of caring persons rather than to retreat into enclaves of isolation. I hope this will be particularly so in African American and Jewish relations.