

As today is a day of confession, there is a sin that must confess to you this morning. It involves this red book that I hold in my hand. It was this book, this very same book that I 'borrowed' from my temple library thirty years ago. Allow me to explain ... The book in question is entitled, Mickey Marcus. It is the story of an American Jew, a Colonel in the American Armed Forces. He was a West Point graduate, director of the New York Prison system and a liberator of Concentration Camps. After WWII, he went to Israel to teach the Jews how to fight in what would be the War of Independence. The story ends tragically as he is shot by friendly fire just as the fighting comes to an end. I cannot sufficiently express how much I loved this book. I can still feel the residue of those childhood emotions when I open it after so many years. I loved Mickey Marcus and his story ... for what it said to me about what kind of person I hoped to become, what kind of Jew I hoped to become and what kind of supporter of Israel I hoped to become. The last lines of the book succinctly sum it all up:

"Yes, Mickey Marcus was a brave, strong hero. He was a hero to the United States and to the people of Israel. We should be proud of this brave man and YOU should try to be as good and brave as he was!"

And so, I took out the book from my temple's library, without any intention of returning the book itself or returning all that it symbolized to me.

Today, at this time in my life and the life of our people, it is time for me to return it ... along with those cherished, yet naïve perceptions of my childhood. What I confess this Yom Kippur morning is not merely the transgression of an overdue or liberated library book. What feels like a transgression to me more than pilfering of the book itself, relates more to the feelings and ideas the book evokes within me. My confession reaches much deeper into my Jewish psyche and hits much closer to home. I confess my ambivalence, my doubts and my internal struggles in regard to my relationship with the State of Israel.

I am guilty of harboring subversive thoughts and distressing uncertainties towards our Jewish cause and the mission of our people. This betrayal has not morphed into any actions that you or others could witness, but has taken root and sprouted in my heart and in my mind. My soul is tormented by the jarring dissonance between the voices within my soul that speak to me of duty and loyalty and those voices that give me great pause in considering State of Israel and some its choices and my relationship to it.

The voices engage in heated debate within my heart as we Jews strive to cultivate our connection to the Jewish State. I heard them as emails arrived in my inbox imploring me to log on and vote in a CNN poll gauging American support of Israel's recent war with Hezbollah. The emails reminded me that we must show the world that Israel has the support of the United States populace. And yet there was a part of me that wondered, "Since when do the actions of a Jewish state need validation via CNN, Fox News or MSNBC?" ... I heard these voices as prominent Jewish institutions in the Denver community (the Rocky Mountain Rabbinic Council among them) planned a rally at the State Capitol against terrorism and in support of Israel's war against Hezbollah. It was a rally organized with other institutions, like Faith Bible Church, who staunchly (as many other fundamentalist churches do) supports Israel, but who I would endeavor to say would not be so supportive of other important issues —like separation of Church and

State, Reproductive Rights, Gay/Lesbian rights –that I and many Jews hold near and dear to their hearts ... I heard the voices when Jews around the world promoted and celebrated a speech purportedly given by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, in which the Israeli Prime Minister boldly and sternly told the world in so many words, “It is us against the world, once again. We will do whatever it takes to protect ourselves this time. You are with us, or you are against us.” The frightening part is while the Prime Minister never gave that well circulated speech, Jews around the world celebrated it.

One of the voices engaged in my internal dialogue continually reminds me about how complex and difficult it is for Israel to even exist with the mess in the Middle East ... of how Israel handles, the ugly but necessary vulgarities of war in as menschlikite of a manner as possible ... of how history and contemporary rhetoric reminds us of that the red-eyed monster of antisemitism is always lurking. Even though this voice makes salient points that appeal to me on a few levels, when it comes down to it there is another voice that speaks with a guarded, yet clear conviction. It tells me that I cannot with a whole heart or clear conscience sit by and accept who we are as a people and where we stand at this moment in time.

This morning’s Torah portion directly addresses where and how we stand as a people. This morning’s excerpt from the book of Deuteronomy relives the moment that our ancestors stood at Sinai, in their unity and diversity, and heard God’s challenges to choose life by living a life of godliness. The Torah begins, “*Atemntzavim hayom*— You all stand here this day.” It appears that this moment in which the people stand at Sinai before God, is one of glory and of spiritual attainment. And yet, the entire book of Deuteronomy is one continuous chastisement, so why would this moment be different. Rabbi Abraham Twerski teaches us that it is not any different.

In the ethical Torah writings it is often stated that angels are referred to as *omdim* (standing) while people are referred to as *holchilm* (progressing) ... angels are stationary, because they can never improve themselves ... Human beings by contrast, have great potential for self-improvement, and should always be making progress in perfecting themselves. (In the Torah) Moses tells the Israelites, “Look how lax you are! You are standing in a stationary position before God, instead of progressing. Everyone seems to have found a niche in which he or she feels comfortable, and no one is making an effort to elevate himself or herself beyond the next level of spirituality which has already been achieved.”

The Israelites, in spite of the fact that they stood at Sinai, awaiting to encounter the presence of the divine, were standing still. They were not progressing. They were caught up in where they had been and how that defined them.

Are we standing still? The setting appears noble and glorious, as we stand today seeking to support Israel in its time of need, promoting the survival of our people and our faith; and being resolved to use whatever means necessary. And yet, are we progressing –are

we *holchim*? Or, are we *omdim*—standing still, stuck in a way of doing things and seeing things that keeps us from realizing our spiritual potential?

What is keeping us stuck? How do we get moving? One of the reasons that we humans find such a challenge in progressing spiritually is the inherent difficulty in doing so. Sometimes it takes years, decades and even generations to truly get moving. And we Jews have often found ourselves at the heart of such progress.

Throughout the history of human civilization, Jews have been at the heart of movements that identify and then integrate radical and progressive ideas into the world. The cornerstone of this spirit is the sacred dialogue in which we as a people have engaged over time. In such a dialogue we honestly examine and, when appropriate, challenge the stagnant status quo within our community or within the world. Well, perhaps it is time to get ourselves and the world moving once again ... perhaps it is time for some new radical ideas ... ones that can motivate and animate us, ones that can make us *holchim* once again.

This morning I offer, two impediments, to this sacred dialogue toward progress, two stumbling blocks to our forward movement: The stumbling block of particularism and the impediment of violence.

The stumbling block of particularism stands in the way of the progression of the Jewish community and of humanity as a whole. Indeed, the spirit of the Jewish people is one that envisions not a Tikkun Am — a healing of a **people**, but a Tikkun Olam — a healing of the **world**. It is not one that is only focused on the survival of the Jewish people ... but on the transformation of humanity. Martin Buber, in 1946 penned these thoughts on the Jewish spirit and its place among the nations of the world.

... if the spirit of Israel is no more to us than the synthetic personality of our nation, no more than a fine justification for our collective egoism ... than we are indeed like unto all the nations: and we are drinking together with them from the cup that inebriates. And when we grow drunk after their fashion, we become weaker than any other nation, we find ourselves entirely defenseless in their hands ...

(Buber — Essays in Time of Crisis — 1946)

As important as the State of Israel is to us and to so many people, if we as Jews forget that it and what it stands for are a part of a larger mission, a larger truth ... then we lose touch with our greatest dreams. If we become solely or mainly committed to our physical survival, then what time and energy is left to devote to the healing of the world? Being concerned only with ourselves, is akin to standing still.

The presence of violence in our world serves as the most significant impediment toward the evolution of the human race. Who better, than we Jews — the source of some of our civilization's most cherished values of justice and fairness to take another page from the book of progress and radical ideas to envision a world without violence. The challenge

here is, that we are so embedded in our manner of seeing the world and our condition in it, that it is difficult even to imagine. Even now, as the idea is proposed, many of you are considering the albeit few, but legitimate times that violence is called for and even needed ... in the face of evil like Hitler, on the verge of annihilation or in the shadow of a culture who seeks our destruction and does not play 'war' by the established rules of fairness and equity. And yet, even these suppositions are made within a worldview that accepts some violence as necessary. Perhaps, now is the time to ask the question, why?

Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. reflected upon this question upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964:

After contemplation, I conclude that this award, which I receive on behalf of that movement, is a profound recognition that nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time: the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression.

Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts. Negroes of the United States, following the people of India, have demonstrated that nonviolence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation. Sooner or later, all the peoples of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love ...

... I refuse to accept the idea that the "is-ness" of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal "ought-ness" that forever confronts him ...

... I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality ...

... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.

... I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed and nonviolent redemptive goodwill proclaimed the rule of the land ...

... I still believe that we shall overcome.

Perhaps it is time for us as a people to invoke our spirit of change and progress and work toward overcoming the sway that violence holds on our world. As long as violence remains an option in response to conflict, humanity is standing still.

The questions and challenges inherent in such a dialogue are evident; they mirror the debate between the combative voices within me. How can I suggest that we keep our mission focused on the entire world, there are those in our world that would sooner forget or remove us from it, rather than live in the world we envision? How can I stand here this day and speak of non-violence, when the safety and security of the state of Israel lies in the balance? I am torn, because I feel the strong pull to tell you to send money to Israel and vote in the CNN polls and attend the rallies demonstrating to the world that we are united and together. As strong as I feel that pull ... I feel the force of something else speaking to me. It tells me that Israel, the state, may win this war in which they are engaged and further secure their survival, but Israel, the people, cannot win this war or any war fighting in this manner. There is some other theater of warfare to which we must attend. No matter the circumstance of our predicament, no matter how deeply how we seem entrenched by the situation or even within our own nature. We must not be *omdim* and strive to be *holchim*.

My words, my thoughts, my struggles this morning may comfort some and challenge some. In sharing with you this sacred morning, I take a risk in the spirit of true dialogue. This morning as I humbly begin this discussion, may we as a synagogue and as a community, continue it in earnest. Talk to me, talk to one another ...let's get moving once again.

Today it is time for me to return this book ... but I wonder if I need to return it and all that it means to me. The words at its conclusion challenge me, to be as Good and Brave as Mickey Marcus was. It may be that at his time and his place his actions were how one acted with strength, courage and compassion. For us, strength, bravery and courage may take a different form. Perhaps, for us American Jews, for us Jews to be as good and brave as he was ... means to not let ourselves be *omdim*—ones who stand still, and strive to be *holchim*—ones who progress. Such an undertaking requires us to face the same risks and dangers that he faced. It also necessitates embodying the strength, compassion and courage that Mickey Marcus possessed. Even though I must give the book and much of what it represents back, it is these traits that not only will I keep, but I must keep. May we encounter that strength, that compassion and that courage in abundance as we strive stop standing still and to move forward into our potential and into our destiny.