**Turning the World Right Side Up**

Because I am going to speak about a serious subject, I would like to begin with something lighthearted:

The story is told of a congregant at a large suburban synagogue who saw a woman looking quite confused about getting to her seat during the High Holy Days. Deciding to start the New Year off by doing a mitzvah, the gentleman greeted the elderly woman who said she was visiting for the holidays. He gave her a prayer book and walked her into the sanctuary. He asked her very politely, “Where would you like to sit?”

She answered: “The front row, please.”

“You sure you want to do that?” the man asked. “The rabbi’s sermons are really boring.”

The woman said, “Do you happen to know who I am?” “No,” he said.

“I’m the rabbi’s mother,” she replied indignantly.

The man looked at her and asked: “Do you know who I am?”

“No,” she said.

“Good,” he replied, and then quickly walked away…And now, on to the sermon!

The Talmud tells a story of Joseph, the son of the sage Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi who became deathly ill and was thought to have died.  Then he suddenly regained consciousness. It was as if he had returned from some far-away place. As he regained consciousness, his father said to him: ‘What did you see?’ Joseph said: ‘I saw an *Olam Hafuch* (a world turned upside down). What is above was below and what is below was above….’ His father said to him: ‘My son, You have seen an *Olam Barur* (a clear world), you have seen the world clearly….’” [Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 50a]

Many commentators understand Joseph’s vision to have been a glimpse of the World to Come, where those who have suffered in this life will be honored in the world to come and vice versa. But it is also possible to read his vision as a clearer, more unadulterated vision of **this** world. Perhaps the world we live in **is** an *Olam Hafukh*, an upside-down world, where, despite the advances of technology and a world of abundance, we are living at a time of greater polarization and disarray than at any other time in recent memory. When the level of vitriol directed against the State of Israel risks turning it into a pariah nation as it has attempted to rid itself of a network of terrorist organizations both in the South and in the North that seek its destruction. When the level of antisemitism and anti-Zionist rhetoric on college campuses has risen to such a fevered pitch that many of our children and our grandchildren fear expressing their Jewish identities or solidarity with the State of Israel. When the health of the planet seems increasingly imperiled and when catastrophic hurricanes and storms are now the new normal. Perhaps that is what Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was telling his son—now you see *Olam Hazeh*, this world of ours for what it truly is—a place that is so distant from its potential—as to begin to feel unrecognizable.

And for the American Jewish community, now that the New Year has begun, many of us feel as though we are living in an *Olam Hafukh,* a world turned upside-down. A world where we now expect to enter Beth Sholom Congregation and be greeted by our security team—a truly wonderful group of people—who are here because to keep an open door at Jewish houses of worship in this country at this time would feel both naïve and foolish—and even outright dangerous.

And we see that truth reflected in the statistics. Three months after the October 7th massacre in Israel, antisemitic incidents in the United States skyrocketed, reaching a total of 3,291 incidents between October 7 and Jan. 7, according to ADL. That number represented a 361% increase compared to the same period one year prior. And of those almost 3,300 incidents, over 500 of them took place on college campuses.

Just this past week, a group at Columbia University called *Apartheid Divest*, which was one of the primary groups organizing student encampments against the State of Israel last year, distributed a newspaper using Hamas’ name for the October 7th terrorist attack. The headline read: “One Year Since the Al-Aqsa Flood, Revolution Until Victory,” and it was written over a picture of Hamas fighters breaching the security fence to Israel.

Since then, the group has praised a Tel Aviv attack by Palestinian terrorists in Jaffa that killed seven people at a light rail station two weeks ago, including a mother who died while shielding her 9-month-old baby. It has also praised Iran’s missile attack on Israel calling it a “bold move.” And to mark the anniversary of October 7th, another student group on campus, Within Our Lifetime, sent out the following message to its followers on social media: “Long live October 7th!”

Elie Wiesel was once asked what his greatest disappointment was in life.  Wiesel answered: “I was convinced in 1945 that what happened must never be forgotten. One thing appeared to me then: that antisemitism had died in Auschwitz. But now I realize that only its victims perished. Antisemitism is still alive and well.”

*Olam Hafuch*—an upside-down world. When the certainties of society collapse, when people are looking for some reason to explain their misfortune, when people are scared, history shows us that they blame the Jews, the world’s historic scapegoats. Now we are the recipients of antisemitism from the Left **and** from the Right in this country.   We are .2% of the world’s population and just 2% of the population of the United States, but to the antisemites past and present, we are 100% the cause of all the world’s problems.

Let me quote you a statement from a different time and place—and see if you can guess **when** it might have been said: “In all of human history, the antisemites have always been the war-makers, never the peace makers; the foes, never the friends of religion; the apostles of tyranny; never the champions of liberty; the spokesmen of reaction; never the leaders of progress; the voices of tribalism, never the teachers of fellowship; the destroyers and never the creators.  Name an antisemite of any land, of any age, and you will name not merely a foe of the Jew, but a foe of the finest values in civilization—the noblest standards of human life.   The enemy of the Jew has always been the enemy of humanity.  What history teaches, the present verifies.”

That man was a rabbi named Fred Isserman. He spoke these words to his congregation in St. Louis in May of 1941. For so long, we American Jews thought that it would not happen here. But sociologists who have studied antisemitism for generations have concluded that the measure of a society can be taken by how they treat their Jews. “The treatment of the Jew,” writes Dennis Prager and Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, “has historically served as one of society’s great moral barometers.  Watch how a nation, religion or political movement treats Jews, and you have an early and deadly accurate picture of that groups’ intentions, not only toward Jews—but toward all groups they consider to be other.” The hate that begins with Jews never ends with Jews.

So what is the answer? To turn inward and hunker down more deeply and make sure the doors are locked tight? Or perhapsto turn to our Jewish tradition and look for guidance.

Indeed, the start of a New Year might offer us some fresh perspective. We might think that these Days of Awe whose focus is on *Teshuvah* and change would mark the start of a look **inward**—and yet so many of its themes ask us to focus **outward**. The themes of the High Holy Days relate to the whole of humanity. We proclaim that this is the anniversary of the entirety of God’s creation.

We see this shift in a subtle change in the *Amidah* prayer for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—a shift that we do not find on other festivals. On other festivals the key section of the Amidah begins, *Atah bechartanu mikol ha-amim*, “You chose us from among all the nations.” The emphasis is on Jewish *particularity*. On the Days of Awe, however, the parallel prayer begins: “And so place the awe of the Lord our God, over **all**that You have made… so that **all**of creation will worship You.” The emphasis is on *human solidarity*. And *human solidarity* with all those who would affirm life and basic human decency is one of the things that the world needs right now.

Here is a second theme that points us in the direction of how we can respond to an *olam hafuch—*a world that appears to be upside down—the theme of the sanctity of **life**: “Remember us for **life**, the One who delights in life, and write us in the book of **life** for your sake, God of life.” We sometimes forget how radical this was when Judaism first entered the world. The Egypt of the Pharaohs was obsessed with death. We all know that **if** the Hamas terrorists had wanted to minimize civilian casualties, they would **not** have built their terrorist infrastructures inside of—and underneath—schools and mosques. Or they might have shielded their own civilians in the vast network of underground tunnels they had built. Instead, they proclaimed the religious glory of martyrdom for the tens of thousands of civilians who became collateral damage in Israel’s efforts to rid itself of the terrorists.

But as Jews, we do not focus on death and *Olam Ha’Ba—*the World to Come. Instead, we emphasize the obligations we have here in *Olam Ha’Zeh—*in this world. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains it in this way: “Against this horrific mindset of martyrdom for the glory of a future world, the whole of Judaism is a protest. Justice and compassion have to be fought for in **this life**—not the next*.*Judaism is not directed to *fear of death*. It is directed to a far more dangerous fear: *fear of life* with all its pain and disappointment and unpredictability. It is fear of life, not fear of death, that have led people to create totalitarian states and fundamentalist religions. Fear of life is ultimately fear of freedom. That is why fear of life takes the form of an assault against freedom.”

And there is one last theme that our tradition provides us with on this Yom Kippur day to respond to an *olam hafuch—*a world that has been turned upside down. It is what we learn during the *Avodah* service of *Musaf* when we read the description of how the *Kohein Gadol—*the High Priest who, upon entering the Holy of Holies would proclaim God’s ineffable name and to bring blessing upon the people. It is a teaching that reminds us about our *own responsibility to be part of the solution* in a world which has become unrecognizable.

I want you to listen to a rabbi’s description to his congregation of the meaning of this *Avodah* service in a sermon that he preached in the fall of 1943. The rabbi’s name was Rabbi Walter Wurzburger, and he was the rabbi of a congregation in Brighton, Massachusetts. Remember, World War II was raging at the time, and D-Day had not yet occurred. Here is Rabbi Wurzburger’s description, and then his commentary—which I am going to quote at some length, because I think it speaks perfectly to the moment we are in. He could have written it today. Here is how he addressed his congregation on Yom Kippur 81 years ago:

“When the Jews lived a normal life in *Eretz Yisrael,* they assembled at this solemn hour, the holiest day of the entire year, at the holiest place, in the Temple of Jerusalem. The eyes of the entire people were focused on the High Priest—the foremost member of the holiest tribe of the ‘Chosen People.’ Imagine the awe that gripped the people, when its most saintly son entered the Holy of Holies to ask forgiveness for the sins of the nation. There, facing his God, the High Priest stood to give account for all the failures and shortcomings that undermined the structure of all Jewish existence. Who was to blame for the pettiness and the jealousies which had caused untold suffering for the nation? Upon whose shoulders rested the responsibility for the chaos that put man against man, nation against nation? The militaristic Romans? The idolatrous Babylonians? The Godless Assyrians? The faithless Egyptians?

Did the High Priest blame the external enemies, or even the internal enemies of Israel, the profiteers, the politicians, the criminals? **No!** This is what he said: *Pashati, aveeti, chatati*—O Lord **I** have sinned! **I** have failed! **I** am guilty. **I** am responsible for the suffering of the people. I caused all the agony, misery and injustice that shakes the structure of our ailing society.”

Who utters these terrible words? A traitor to the cause of God? A criminal? A social outcast? **No,** it is the High Priest, the chosen representative of the chosen tribe of a chosen people. He who represented the best, the highest, the noblest of Israel. He realized his responsibility. But before he spoke of the sins of his people, he thought of his own. Before he blamed the world, he blamed himself. Then and only then, did he have a right to include others in this terrible indictment. So that only after he acknowledged his **personal** responsibility, did he turn to the **community** and say: “They, too have sinned.”

And then Rabbi Wurzburger added his commentary for his congregants: “My friends, how badly are we in need of this message today! We, who are always ready to denounce and blame others. We, who waste so much time and energy condemning the Nazis and the Fascists! We, who witness a conflagration of the world that is unparalleled in history. A civilization goes to pieces, and we seek comfort and consolation in the thought that “our hands did not spill this blood” (Deut. 21: 8). It is not **our** fault. We pity ourselves. We lament our fate and bemoan our misfortune. We throw our hands high in despair and give up the struggle. We feel that we are merely a pawn in a gigantic chess game. What can we do in the face of all the demonic forces of evil? …”

“We are always ready to condemn others. But do we ask ourselves these discomforting questions? Did I send a letter to my Congressional representative to intervene on behalf of these Jews? Did I join a national Jewish organization that strives to save these doomed people? Did I contribute my money to help those that still can be helped? Did I buy war bonds so that this war might be shortened?...”

And then the Rabbi concluded: “Each and every one of us is responsible for the debacle of civilization. Do I not hear a voice from a corner: How can you accuse me? I am not a politician. I have no influence. I cannot oppose the powerful political, social and economic forces. I am a helpless individual.’ Friends! Let no one deceive himself! A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Every individual is a link in a great chain.”

*Olam Barur* – this too I see clearly:

That we can make common cause with all who affirm life and all who respect the sanctity of life. That **we** will stand up to the antisemites and to those who glorify terrorists and that **we** will proudly proclaim that the sovereign State of Israel has a right to defend itself and to allow its citizens to live at peace in their homes without fear of terrorism and mayhem. And that **each one of us** is responsible for the world that we are living in—for making our voices heard—and for taking actions that reflect our deepest values. Like the *Kohein Gadol,* each one of us must acknowledge our own responsibility for the world around us and resist the temptation to throw up our hands and say there is nothing that we can do.

Yes, there is something that each one of us **must do…**At the start of this holy and solemn day on the Jewish calendar, let each of us be strengthened by our commitment to do these sacred tasks together. Let us work collectively to affirm life and to cultivate allies in the fight against hatred. And at the same time, let us proudly affirm our Jewishness, and proudly declare that we stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Israel—so that together, we can help create a world that is turned right side up.

*Kein yi’he ratzon—Shana Tova Tikateivu*—May we each merit a New Year of blessing in the Book of Life in the coming year.