

ROSH HASHANAH MORNING (I) 5777/2016
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ELECTIONS AND THE MORAL CHARACTER OF A NATION

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Rabbi Lawrence Kushner has written that Jewish life is based on two cycles: the year cycle and the life cycle. The year cycle, it may be said, is in terrible shape. At any given time, few of us know which Hebrew month we are in, and few of us observe Shabbat and such “major” holidays like Shavuot and Sukkot in any consistent way. But the life cycle, well, that is another story altogether. That is in great shape--and I don’t just mean brises and baby namings, b’nai mitzvah and weddings. I mean Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur also, because those effectively are our annual life cycle check-ins. The Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe, invite us to give thanks for being alive, to reflect on the year that has passed, to express our hope for life in the year ahead, and to reconcile with those from whom we are estranged, including the very Source of life itself.¹

So on this first day of the Ten Days of Awe, which since late antiquity has been described as the New Year of the world itself, I invite us this morning to reflect on Creation, both the natural universe and the human one, and our role in it.

Creation, as it happens, has been an oft-neglected theme in modern Judaism. In the decades after 1945, we tended, understandably so, to deal not with the universal but rather with the particular--in particular, the Jewish national identity, the resettlement of survivors, the creation, survival and security of the Jewish state, the rescue of endangered Jewish communities, and the prophetic call to social justice.

¹ I am grateful to Rabbi Arthur Green for sharing this idea with me and for partially inspiring this sermon.

There is on this particular Rosh Hashana another compelling reason by which to reflect on our role in Creation and the way by which we choose to answer, or not to answer, the prophetic call. For three days ago the Jewish people laid to rest its greatest visionary since Herzl, one of its most revered leaders since Ben Gurion, its oldest and most vigorous perhaps since Moses, and the most devoted servant of the Jewish people and the state since, well, ever.

He could have been any of our grandparents. Born in what today is Belarus, Shimon Persky emigrated to Palestine at age 11, no doubt searching for a better life but also one animated by the dream of one in an independent Jewish state. When he was seen off by his grandfather, a rabbi, at the railway station, he was told, simply, “Stay a Jew.” And boy did he ever.

Years later he would muse, “The purpose of life is to find a cause that’s larger than yourself, and then to give your life to it.” Shimon’s cause would be the Jewish people itself and to it he dedicated his life. Co-founder of a kibbutz, he and his lifelong love Sonia were poor by choice. They lived in a tent, then a building with a tin roof that blew away in the wind. He owned two pairs of pants, two shirts and one pair of shoes. When they married in 1945, the kibbutz owned a special pair of trousers, reserved for grooms. Shimon wore them for two whole days. “This was capitalism below the poverty line but satisfaction above and beyond the line of joy,” he would say.²

By his early 20s, he had already caught the eye of leaders like David Ben-Gurion, who recognized his talent as an organizer and recruited him to public service. Not long after the state was declared, he was sent to the United States to find a way to procure arms for the fledgling IDF [Israel Defense Forces]. He arrived speaking no English; three months later he was fluent. Squeezing in studies at New York University and Harvard, at 29

² From the New York Times, Sep. 29, 2016.

he would rise to be Director-General of the Defense Ministry during which he would establish a special alliance with France that laid the groundwork for Israel's becoming a nuclear power. He would become the minister for absorption, transportation, communications, defense, finance, foreign affairs, and the head of the opposition in the Knesset. And despite the setbacks of losing numerous bids to be Prime Minister, head of the Labor Party, and his first campaign for President, he always persevered. "Better to be controversial for the right reasons, than to be popular for the wrong reasons," he would say.

Indeed he was unpopular for much of his political career, often ridiculed as a loser, as untrustworthy, and as naive. Yet he never backed down from his insistence that peace requires a two-state solution and that you don't make peace with friends, but rather with "very unsavory enemies." Even after the peace process collapsed and the words "Oslo" and "leftist" were turned into epithets by his political enemies, Shimon stood his ground. "After everything I have seen in my life," he remarked in his 91st year, "I earned the right to believe that peace is attainable." Indeed, he argued that the great error of Zionism was "its attempt to ignore the existence of the Palestinians in this land — and [that] Oslo was the true and correct beginning of such a solution."³

The last decade of Shimon Peres' life was richly rewarding, not financially, but personally. To be sure, the newspaper *Haaretz* dubbed him the most valuable brand in Israel. But, unlike many politicians, he never leveraged it for personal gain. Instead, he spent most of his eighties as Israel's most popular President ever, waking every day at 4 a.m. and retiring after 11p.m. to read, write, study, persuade, console, befriend, encourage and advocate in the service of the Jewish people and the Jewish state. Not for nothing did President Obama bestow upon him the Presidential Medal of Freedom and last week order this nation's flags to be flown at half-staff. Not for nothing

³ *Ma'ariv*, September 2003.

did he fly all the way to Israel to attend the state funeral--the only one beside Nelson Mandela's in his nearly eight years as our President.

Now one could go on and on about Shimon Peres' accomplishments: his overseeing the Entebbe Rescue; his masterminding the turnaround of Israel's economy from a basket case with 1200 percent inflation into an economic, scientific, and technological juggernaut. But that would miss the larger point, especially at the onset of these Yamim Noraim, only five and half weeks before a presidential election.

And that is that Shimon Peres embodied everything a leader should be. Nearly everything he did and said was animated by a duty and desire to serve his people. Virtually nothing he did or said was motivated by anything else--not money, not fame, not power for its own sake, not a rapacious hunger to settle scores or to bring his enemies low. No, Shimon Peres believed in the power of ideas and argument which he hoped would turn an enemy into a friend.

Shimon Peres was also a believer and an optimist. "You're as young as your dreams, not as old as your calendar," he once said. The miracle of the Jewish state could only have come to pass by dreaming. As "between being experienced and cynical or being curious and innocent, choose the second," he instructed. "It is much more appealing."

And so he preferred to use imagination more than memory. Instead of dwelling on the fact, say, that his beloved grandfather was burned alive in a synagogue by the Nazis, he helped restore relations with the Federal Republic of Germany and to infuse them with a spirit of partnership, friendship and even warmth. Instead of getting mired in past slights and insults, he forged effective partnerships with former adversaries like Yitzhak Rabin z"l, Binyamin Netanyahu and even Yasser Arafat.

Nor did he resort to politics of fear-mongering or hate. He welcomed refugees, seeing them as a great source of strength, and took pride in the fact that Israel's Jewish population has swelled from 650,000 in 1948 to nearly ten times that today. Who could have imagined a world with more Hebrew speakers than, say, Danish ones, he once asked? And how could a people descended from the Hebrew prophets ever abandon the refugee, the widow, stranger or orphan?

No, as we will read from the Book of Genesis tomorrow morning, each human being was created *b'tzelem Elohim* and, as such, must be honored for who they are. And so President Peres intervened on behalf of same-sex couples to assure their surrogacy-born twins full citizenship and the right to come home to Israel. And so he cultivated friendships with Israel's minorities, especially Arabs and Muslims, and with faith leaders at home and abroad. And so he observed the mitzvah we'll read next week of not ridiculing people with disabilities or exploiting people simply because you can. And so he was generous, not stingy, toward the poor and the vulnerable. And so he toiled for peace, holding that it truly is possible to learn from the errant/wanton violence by Cain against Abel.

Friends, I know that you are a thoughtful and intelligent lot. I therefore need not tell you why *on this particular Rosh Hashanah* the memory of Shimon Peres is such a blessing, or his life so instructive. For in little more than five weeks our country, a great, proud, and powerful country, will be holding an historic, even fateful, election. And so it's critical that we, you and I, vote. And so it's critical that we, you and I, consider our values: the Jewish values embodied for 93 years in the life and leadership of President Peres--in making our decisions.

Commenting on the the Creation story (or more accurately stories) in the Book of Genesis, the great Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught that there are actually two types of people in every one of us. The first, who he calls Adam the First, is the human doing the mitzvah to "fill the earth and subdue

it.” (Gen. 1:28) That is, the Adam, or human, of the first creation story lives to “conquer, to create, to dominate, to control.” This is the side of us that wants to “build, create, produce and discover things.”⁴ He wants power and glory, fame and fortune. And this Adam is legitimate; for God has implanted within us the instinct to create and master the world around us.⁵

But, says Soloveitchik, there’s a second type of Adam as well. This Adam, the second Adam, has different goals. This Adam is interested not in how things work but in why the universe exists and what message it carries.⁶ This Adam worries about the world around us: the terrifying effects of despoiling the earth, let’s say; or the unequal access of people to courts of justice, decent housing, or quality education; or the plight of the migrant field worker who picks our vegetables; or of the refugee who longs for home; or of the child injured by gun violence; or the mentally ill person’s access to treatment. This Adam, the second Adam, wants to live a just and righteous life--to be a generous, loving and moral being. This Adam, the second Adam, wants “not only to do good, but to be good.”⁷

In fact, Soloveitchik says that each of us has to live with our own two Adams: the first wanting to conquer the world, the second to “obey a calling to service it.”⁸ But here is the problem, and I’m going to quote the writer David Brooks to describe it:

We live in a culture that nurtures Adam I, the external Adam, and neglects Adam II. We live in a society that encourages us to think about how to have a great career but leaves many of us inarticulate about how to cultivate the inner life . . . We live in a culture that teaches us to promote and advertise ourselves and to master the skills required for Success, but that gives little encouragement to humility, sympathy, and honest self-confrontation, which are necessary for building

⁴ David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, p. 6.

⁵ David Shatz, Foreword to *Lonely Man of Faith*.

⁶ Brooks, p. 6.

⁷ *Id.* (emphasis added).

⁸ *Id.* (emphasis added).

character [and, I would add, leading a nation.] If you are only Adam I, you turn into a shrewd animal, a crafty, self-preserving creature who is adept at playing the game and who turns everything into a game. If that's all you have, you spend a lot of time cultivating professional skills, but you don't have a clear idea of the sources of meaning in life, so you don't know where you should devote your skills, which career path will be highest and best. Years pass and the deepest parts of yourself go unexplored and unstructured. You are busy, but you have a vague anxiety that your life has not achieved its ultimate meaning and significance. You lie with an unconscious boredom, not really loving, not really attached to the moral purposes that give life its worth . . . You foolishly judge other people by their abilities, not by their worth. You do not have a strategy to build character, and without that, not only your inner life but also your external life will eventually fall to pieces.”⁹

In other words--and this is the voice of an ideological conservative, mind you--if all you do is promote yourself; if you are incapable of giving a part of yourself to others, you are spiritually incomplete. You are falling short of your potential to be a whole and integrated person. You are not living the second Adam's values of “lov[ing] intimately, sacrific[ing] yourself in the service of others, liv[ing] in obedience of some transcendent truth,” and of cultivating a “soul that honors creations and one's own possibilities.”¹⁰

The same could be said of us as a nation, could it not? If all we stand for is the acquisition of wealth and power; if we as a country abandon the foundational principles of liberty and justice and charity for all, of malice toward none, then we will have surrendered a portion of our humanity. If we shall be made to believe absurdities then, God forbid, we shall be capable of committing atrocities.¹¹

⁹ *Id.*, pp. 8-9.

¹⁰ *Id.*, p. 7.

¹¹ Paraphrasing Voltaire.

[And if you want to read a chilling account of that very thing happening in the Germany of the 1930s, I can't recommend strongly enough Michiko Kakutani's September 27, 2016, *New York Times* review of Volker Ullrich's new book, *Hitler: Ascent, 1889-1939*.]

So this is the sacred work we must set out to do--as individuals and as a country. We must honor and uphold not only the Adam I within each of us--our creativity, our dreams of success, our aspirations for comfort and happiness. We must discover and uphold the Adam II as well, for ultimately it is those qualities by which we will be remembered.

On his last night as Israel's President, Shimon Peres might have celebrated his many achievements--of enhancing Israel's standing abroad and restoring trust to his office at home; of improving relations with Israel's minorities and defending human rights.

But instead he made two shiva calls to the families of fallen soldiers: one of Ethiopian origin; the other, an American family from Los Angeles, the family of 24-year old Max Steinberg. It was a fitting final act of a great leader, for he subdued the first Adam within himself, in favor of the second.

It was an act borne of self-restraint, rooted in a sense of duty, service, and love of his people and his country. As Jews, as Americans, and as humans--Adam I and II both--may it be a lesson and an inspiration to all of us.

Amen.