

Rabbi Norman R. Patz
Temple Beth Shalom of Puerto Rico
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5769 – 2008

TIKKUN AND HOPE

Shanah tovah to everyone here: those whom we got to know last year, who welcomed us so warmly, and to those of you whom we hope to get to know this year! My prayer is this:

יהי רצון מלפניך ד' אלהנו ואלהי אבותינו שתחדש עלינו שנה טובה ומתוקה

May it be Your will, our God and God of our ancestors, that we be renewed for a good and sweet new year.

I wish for all of us – and for all humanity – a year of health and happiness, of spiritual and moral growth, a year of satisfaction, of fulfillment and peace – the richest of God's blessings.

These greetings for a sweet, peaceful, good new year are sincerely and earnestly offered at this time of uncertainties, dangers and scary challenges – from transnational terrorism to systemic economic and political instability here and abroad; from climatic change to energy insecurity, to name but a few of frightening situations facing the world today.

Yet, despite all these terrifyingly serious difficulties – most of which may be beyond our power to solve – we still wish each other a *shanah tovah*. Why is that? Because our wish is anchored in the hope that things can get, or can be made, better. In spite of everything, we believe that we are not doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. In that, we view time differently from the ancient Greeks. They saw time as cyclical, going around and coming back around again – that what happened before would happen in the future; it might not look the same at first, but it would be the same nonetheless.

We Jews have a different sense. We look at time and perceive it to be linear, not repeating but going forward.

Of course the year, each year, is cyclical; the seasons – in those climates whose seasons vary – repeat in turn. The days are longer in summer and shorter in winter every year. But time, Judaism teaches, moves forward. What's more, we see the future as open-ended. The Greeks of ancient times saw the future in terms of fate – everything yet to happen was already determined, known in advance by the Fates. No matter how hard the hero of a Greek tragedy struggles, we know the outcome in advance: the hero will fail, no matter how valiant the struggle. It is a foregone conclusion, fated to occur.

From the beginning, Judaism has rejected that claustrophobic construct, the idea of a fixed fate. Instead, Judaism believes that we can play an important part in shaping our

own destiny and the destiny of our people. The choices we make are real. Our choices can change the direction of the future. Therefore, for us – for Jews – hope is valid. The future *can* be better.

But we are not naïve optimists. When we examine the forward-looking texts of our faith, we see that they all recognize the hardships that were current in their time. So, the prophet Jeremiah, in the haftarah we read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, says – יֵשׁ תְּקוּהָה לְאַחֲרֵיתֶיךָ – “Refrain from weeping, shed tears no more.... There is hope for your future!” (31:16) In the second paragraph of the *Aleinu*, we pray – עַל כֵּן נִקְוָה -- “We therefore hope, Eternal God, soon to behold Your might... May the time not be distant!” And that paragraph ends – בְּיוֹם הַהוּא – “On that day, the Eternal God shall be One, and known to be One.” On that day ... but not yet! Hang in there, it hasn’t happened yet but it’s sure to come!

Just as our faith cautions us against naiveté, so does our experience as survivors of the 20th century keep us very sober. One hundred years ago, Western society was filled with delirious optimism. The first airplane had successfully flown, people could buy a Model T automobile, the telephone had been invented and was coming into use. People believed that the most difficult problems of the world could be solved without war and that a marvelous future was at hand. We know better now.

There were moments later in the 20th century when the lights of hope and optimism flashed brightly for us: the end of World War II, the establishment of Israel, the landing on the moon, the great strides in civil rights for African Americans and for women, the collapse of Communist tyranny. But in this new century we have Kosovo, Darfur, 9/11, the Taliban, the suicide bombers in Israel and Iraq and London and Madrid – everywhere that freedom is being challenged. We are quite sober, our mood and mindset vastly different from the optimistic outlook of a century ago. In retrospect, we see that their optimism was a false hope – they seem to have been hallucinating!

Yet, in spite of everything we know, here we are, at the beginning of the new year 5769, wishing each other *shana tovah* – a good year. This very Jewish mixture of sobriety and hope is reflected in a term used by the prophet Zechariah. We are, he said, אֲסִירֵי הַתְּקוּהָה, “prisoners of hope.” (9:12) Our faith teaches us to look at life as it is and, at the same time to see how it might be, how it could be if only we would implement the ideals that currently escape us; if only we could recapture the hope that calls us to go forward in good faith armed with the belief that our efforts are worth making on every level – in our personal lives, in our work, in our dealings with the community, in any way that we can have an impact on the world around us – that this is what God is calling us to do.

The work we have to do has been described in our tradition by a term that gives shape and structure to the moral convictions we live by. That term is – תְּקוּן עוֹלָם – “repairing the world.” We have come to recognize our obligation to work for social justice as a key element in *tikkun olam*, but there are other dimensions to the term as well. “*Tikkun*” means to correct, to repair. The “worlds” we need to correct, the worlds we need to repair must include the world of our own self – *tikkun ha-nefesh* – the repair of our souls, and

tikkun ha-am, the repair of our people. For me, they are inseparable. We must work on behalf of our people before we can look to repairing the world; and we cannot repair either the world or our people unless we first repair our own souls and make them whole. We must repair whatever has gone wrong in our lives so that we are comfortable with ourselves, with our family and our friends, with the ethics of our behavior and the honorableness of all of our dealings. *Tikkun olam* demands attention to *tikkun ha-am* and *tikkun ha-nefesh*.

My sermons on Rosh Hashanah morning, erev Yom Kippur and Yom Kippur morning will explore these *tikkunim*, these applications of hope. Let me close with this story which serves for me as the signature of *tikkun olam*. It is a dream described in a Rosh Hashanah sermon delivered by the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. The sermon starts with the powerful exhortation from the shofar service, “O God, sound the great shofar to proclaim our freedom!” And then he describes his dream:

“The Angel of God took hold of me during the night and led me outward, and I stood in nothingness, and the night lay upon my shoulders like a great burden, and the night rolled from below my feet. Then the Angel said, See! And the darkness faded, and I stood in a white nothingness, and I saw.

“There, between two chasms, stood a narrow circular ridge. And within the ridge was enclosed a red depth like a sea of blood, and outside of it was a black depth like a sea of night. And I saw that a man walked upon the ridge. He walked like a blind man, with trembling feet, and his two weak arms wavered, reaching out to feel the darkness on one side of him and the darkness on the other; and his breast was all of glass, and I saw his heart flutter like a sick leaf in the wind, and on his brow was the mark of the icy Hand. The man went further and further around the ridge, without seeing to right or to left, and he was nearly come to the end of the circle, where his beginning had been. And I wanted to call to him, but what I saw stopped my tongue and I could not speak. For suddenly the man had raised his eyes and seen what was on the right and on the left of him. He staggered, and from each chasm arms reached upward to seize him.

“Then the Angel touched my lips and my tongue was free, and I called and I shouted to him, ‘Lift up your wings and fly!’ Then behold, the man lifted up wings! There was no more weakness or fear in him; then the ridge faded from beneath his feet, and the chasm of blood was dissolved in God’s spring-water, and the chasm of night melted in God’s light, and the City of the Eternal One lay before me, open in every way.

“Behold, the year is a circle. We go on a narrow circular ridge between two chasms, and we do not see their depth. But when we come to the end of the way that is also its beginning, then the trembling of fear falls upon us as before the thunder from on high, and the lightning of the Eternal One flashes over the chasm, and we see the chasm, and we quiver.

“Then we hear the shofar sound. It takes hold of our souls and carries them, each call of the shofar carries myriads of souls upon its wings! And the sounds of the shofar leap up

to Heaven, and the Heavens listen, and fear and trembling comes over the Heavens as before the thunder; and the shofar resounds! Sound the mighty shofar, Eternal God, for the renewal of our souls!” (From “The Prophecy of the New Year,” in *The Golden Mountain: Marvelous Tales of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem... retold from Hebrew, Yiddish and German sources*, by Meyer Levin, New York: 1932)

We are people of hope. Let us greet the new year with tempered optimism, prepared to do our part to make the year ahead sweet, peaceful and good.

Amen

Rabbi Norman R. Patz
Temple Beth Shalom of Puerto Rico
Rosh Hashanah morning 5769 – 2008

TIKKUN IN AMERICA

Boker tov and *shanah tovah*. Optimists that we are, even as we enter upon a new year fraught with uncertainty and crisis, we wish each other a good new year, and we pray that God will bless us and all of humanity with a sweet year, a year of prosperity and peace, a year of freedom from fear. Our prayer is:

אלהנו ואלהי אבותינו שתחדש עלינו שנה טובה ומתוקה 'יהי רצון מלפניך ד

“May it be Your will, our God and God of our ancestors, to bless us with a good and sweet year.”

Last night, in my opening sermon, I said that there are practical ways to realize our hopes for the new year. I proposed that we examine three kinds of *tikkun* – the repair work, the corrections and self-corrections – that I believe our tradition urges us to undertake: *tikkun olam* – repairing the world; *tikkun ha-am*, repairing our people; and *tikkun ha-nefesh* – repairing our souls. It would be neat if I could treat each one separately in the three major sermons left in these Days of Awe – this morning’s sermon, the sermon on Erev Yom Kippur and the one on Yom Kippur morning. But I must put you on notice: It doesn’t work that way. Because the three repair jobs overlap and cannot be completely separated, elements of all three *tikkunim* will appear in each presentation despite the different focus of each. Watch for them!

On this morning of Rosh Hashanah, this Yom Ha-Din – Day of Judgment, my focus is on how we think and act as Jews and as Americans, whether on the mainland or here in Puerto Rico. So the primary *tikkun* about which I will speak is *tikkun olam*, for us in America.

We need to approach this topic with sensitivity, intelligence and moral seriousness. Oddly enough, therefore, I am going to start this examination with a look at Barbie dolls! You know, those enduringly popular, “anatomically improbable,” (Wikipedia) WASPy,

busty, blonde, long-legged dolls. Some of you had Barbie dolls. Certainly your daughters or nieces or next-door neighbors had or have Barbie dolls.

But why Barbie? Did you know that Barbie's creator, Ruth Handler (1916-2002) was a Jewish woman, the daughter of Polish immigrants to America? She co-founded the toy company Mattel and made Barbie into one of the world's best-selling toys. What an irony! A Jewish woman created this symbol of assimilation. It's the perfect metaphor for our collective experience in America! The history of Barbie is closely tied to what it means to be American and Jewish in the 21st century. What's more, the Barbie phenomenon raises questions about how modern Jewish men and women encounter, struggle with and incorporate religious observance, acculturation, pluralism and belonging into our daily lives. (This concept is based on a publicity release for "The Tribe," a documentary film by Tiffany Shlain about a Jewish girl living in a 'Barbie world'.)

Barbie most certainly doesn't look anything like an Eastern European Jew or a Sephardi Jew or a Latina. In fact, she epitomizes the gap that existed throughout most of the 20th century between the self-image of immigrant Jews and their children and the immigrant concept of what "real" Americans – in quotation marks – looked like. Now, nearly all American Jews – Jews by birth and Jews by choice – are native-born, even the children of recent arrivals from the Former Soviet Union, but the tensions between being Jewish and being American still exist.

A number of years ago, the scholar Lucy Dawidowicz pinpointed the tensions. She spoke of "American Jews in relation to the two basic forces acting upon them: the influences of world Jewry, past and present, and the countervailing influences of America, Christian, secular and pluralist." ("In the New World," *Commentary*, July 1972). And here in Puerto Rico we see an additional and powerful influence – Catholic and Hispanic. When we stop to think about it, we realize we are pulled in conflicting directions! A citizen looks to society for values and validation. A religious person looks to the Bible, to God for truth. Everyone feels some tension between being a citizen and being a religious person; Jews feel it even MORE SO. (Based on Leonard Kravitz, "Citizen and/or Religionist," in *G'vanim*, Vol 4, #1, 5768/2008.)

A generation or two ago, most American Jews were taught that such tensions no longer existed, "that there could be no possible tension between being an American and being a Jew, that the two were in perfect harmony.... No serious person today believes that. Over and over again, we find that we are pulled in two different directions. Judaism says there's a Jewish holiday today, and the boss says there's a lot of work that can't wait for tomorrow. Judaism says we should marry a Jew, the general society says marry whomever you fall in love with." That's why young Jews are "interested in hearing the story of Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax; because they didn't find that harmony; they had to make choices, and their choices carried consequences." (Jonathan Sarna interview, *The Forward*, September 5, 2008, page 15. See also his *American Judaism: A History*, 2004, especially the chapter "Contemporary Dilemmas," pp. 373-374.)

Hank Greenberg played first base for the Detroit Tigers. He refused to play on Yom Kippur in 1934, even though the Tigers were in a tight pennant race with the Yankees. Hank Greenberg was a hero for the Jews of America. His choice was a critical dilemma –

how to balance loyalty to parents, religion and tradition with his sense of obligation to his teammates and his desire to participate fully in American life at a time when anti-Semitism was running high and Jews felt marginal in American society. Bucking that tide of anti-Jewish prejudice, Edgar Guest wrote an admiring poem about the event. Its last lines read:

“Came Yom Kippur—holy feast day world wide over to the Jew—
And Hank Greenberg to his teaching and the old tradition true
Spent the day among his people and he didn’t come to play.
Said Murphy to Mulrooney, ‘We shall lose the game today!
We shall miss him on the infield and shall miss him at the bat,
But he’s true to his religion—and I honor him for that!’”

Thirty-one years later, Sandy Koufax, the Dodgers’ star pitcher, also refused to play on Yom Kippur. This time it was Game One of the World Series and the Dodgers were playing the much inferior Minnesota Twins. Without Koufax on the mound, the Dodgers lost 8-2. But the story had a happy ending: Koufax returned to the mound for two more games and led the Dodgers to victory in that 7-game series. It was easier for Sandy Koufax because Hank Greenberg had paved the way, and America in 1965 was a much more comfortable place for Jews.

Most of us are not pulled so spectacularly or publicly, but we know the tensions. Our Judaism calls upon us to live Jewishly, to study the sacred texts carefully, to know the mitzvot and to perform them, to pray regularly and to celebrate Shabbat and the holy days, to represent our grand heritage with knowledge, understanding, pride and commitment. But American culture pulls us in the opposite direction. It doesn’t forbid our being Jewish, but it offers glittering alternatives. Secularism says you don’t have to be religious in any way and you’re still OK. The value of our heritage is irrelevant from this point of view.

Christian influences are most obvious in the commercialization of Christmas, but they’re not absent from high school football games or proselytizing chaplains in the military. The power of the Christian right in public affairs is impossible to ignore.

The impact of the pluralist influence on American society is that “anything goes,” which in practical terms means that for many Jews Judaism is meaningless and that holding onto it is therefore unnecessary. And the fact that we are such a small minority, barely 2% of the general population – and even less here in Puerto Rico – tends to further reduce our personal and group self-confidence.

So the questions arise: What should our role as Jews be – in society and as members of a Jewish community? We can define ourselves to a great degree by the values we choose to act on, knowing that the choices we have are real and that the right choices can repair the world.

What are good choices in daily life?

In the public sphere,

--Recognizing and resisting hypocrisy because unchallenged hypocrisy will succeed in misleading innocent people and the consequences can be horrendous. Exposing hypocrisy is a good choice.

--Working to root out corruption in public life, because corruption cripples the good work we need government to do; it tarnishes the ideal of public service, and it destroys our trust in the democratic process. Fighting corruption is a good choice.

--Rejecting incompetence and ideological rigidity because there is much that only government can do, things we cannot possibly do by ourselves, ranging from putting out fires and maintaining safety on the roads to preventing epidemics and terrorist attacks. And ideologies have preconceived ideas that prevent their “true believers” from grasping reality. Demanding competent and pragmatic leadership is a good choice.

In the personal sphere, what are good choices?

--Acknowledging our sense of duty and living up to it. That means looking inward and then carrying conscience into our behavior. Behaving civilly is a good choice.

--Fulfilling the moral obligations we know we have, whether they come from Judaism or the Bill of Rights. Living a moral life is a good choice.

--Keeping faith with our family, expressing our love by our loyalty, keeping doors open even when pride goads us to be self-righteous and unforgiving. Family cohesiveness is a good choice.

--Remaining faithful to our community, rising about the excesses of the individualism that corrodes American society with its oblivious selfishness. Here, I mean both our Jewish community and our general community. We are needed in both and we are forbidden to withdraw into a private shell. Living in community is a good choice.

--Respecting reason and celebrating human dignity. Being a good Jew enables us to embrace the miracle of human existence and to be partners with others in securing life’s blessings. Nurturing reason and dignity is a good choice.

-- Behaving with compassion and common decency. These qualities help to set the tone of a kind and thoughtful society. Having *rachmones* is a good choice.

--Supporting the causes we believe in – from UJA to the Reform Jewish Appeal to saving the environment and defending civil rights and working for all the other causes that we know are just with generous acts of tzedakah. Tzedakah redeems our authenticity and our personal integrity. Our generosity helps enable others to perform the mitzvot we can’t do by ourselves. Living generously is a good choice.

--Being truly grateful for all that we have, but never relinquishing the hope for a better future. That's why we say *sheh-heh-heh-yanu* to acknowledge the blessings that are ours – and at the same time continue to devote ourselves to *tikkun olam* because so much yet needs to be done. Knowing what is and what ought to be is a good choice.

We didn't get to where we are all by ourselves. Those who came before us made a path for us. Those who come after us, our children and grandchildren among them, are depending on us. We must recognize our obligation and choose to repair ourselves and our communities, and know that we cannot stand still.

Our daughter Debby wrote a doctoral dissertation this year on treating binge eaters with yoga therapy. Yoga teaches an acceptance of self as the first step necessary for healing. But healing doesn't mean complacency or status quo; it is the foundation for growth, for change, for hope. In this sense, *tikkun olam* for us, for Jews who live in America, must start with acceptance of the tensions between our Jewish identity and our American identity. To identify and accept these tensions and then apply the values we know are right – for our own sakes, for the sake of our family, our community, our country, our world – that's *tikkun olam* – the repair of the world that we can honorably undertake – and it's not beyond any of us to do so. We can make a difference – and that's why our faith matters!

This is my understanding of our wish for the new year. It is an understanding grounded in our faith, secure in our identity, chastened by harsh reality – but undaunted. It is an understanding that should fortify us as we enter the new year, determined to work to work toward our ideals, ever vigilant and ever hopeful that we can do good for ourselves and others, and that thus will we be inscribed for life, for a sweet, happy, healthy, good new year.

Amen

Rabbi Norman R. Patz
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Erev Yom Kippur 2008 -5769

ALREADY DEAD

There is a story by the Israeli Nobel Prize-winning author Shmuel Yosef Agnon entitled "*Ahl ha-Torah – For the Torah.*" Agnon wrote in Hebrew, and the story had never been published in English. I first presented it to my congregation in New Jersey, in a translation by my wife Naomi and me, on *erev Yom Kippur* thirty-two years ago, and again twenty-two and twelve years ago. The story is set in the Old City of Jerusalem

some time before 1948. It is a story that describes *tikkun ha-nefesh*, the process of repairing the human soul. I want to share it with you this evening.

“I was tired and too weak to get up. My hands and feet had ceased to obey me and my other organs acted as if my control over them had lapsed. Two or three times I attempted to rise, but I couldn’t get up.

“In the room adjacent to mine, some Sephardic Jews met for *minyan*. I was accustomed to pray with them, out of love for their order and fondness for their forms of prayer, although I myself am an Ashkenazi, and there is an Ashkenazic synagogue in my neighborhood. But for a number of months I hadn’t gone because of my feverish illness.

“That particular day was *Shabbat Shuvah* [the “Sabbath of Return,” the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur], and they had advanced the hour of their prayer in order to go to the city afterwards to hear the *hakham*’s sermon.

“From the phrases I heard, I realized that they had risen to take out the Torah to read the weekly portion. The rhythmic voice of Yedidiah Rafael Hai, the *gabbai*, stood out from the others. His is the steady, hoarse voice that sounds like parchment being rolled.

“Mr. Yedidiah Rafael Hai, the *gabbai*, had quarreled with me because I had dared to compare the poets of today to our great poets Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol and Rabbi Yehudah Halevi. Nevertheless, he did not bear me a grudge. What’s more, many’s the time he called me for the second aliyah, even though another *levi* was present.

“My heart yearned for him to call me to the Torah this very day, after so many months of lying ill away from public prayer and Torah. I concentrated on drawing his mind to me, so that he would be reminded of me and call upon me. As I was lying there, I heard him inquire about me, and I heard them answer: ‘*Adam ha-zeh k’var met* – That man has died.’

“I stood up and shouted from my bed: ‘*Ah-ni hai, ah-ni hai! M’yad ah-ni bah!* – I’m alive, I’m alive! I’ll be there right away!’

“I knew there wasn’t enough time to get dressed, especially since my clothes were scattered about in various places. Despite that, I again shouted: ‘I’ll be right there!’

“How wretched the person who scatters his clothes before he goes to sleep. Many a time I had resolved to arrange them when I took them off, so I wouldn’t be delayed when I dressed. But every time I got undressed, I’d forget about having to get dressed again.

“There wasn’t enough time for me to put on all my clothes; just enough for me to cover myself up with a coat. I asked myself which one I should wear – my summer coat?

But that had been stolen by Arabs. My raincoat? But that one's heavy, and the prayer hall is small, with many men in it – and it's certain to be hot there.

“I didn't let my thoughts slow me down. I steadied myself and jumped out of bed, pulled open the clothes closet and said “Whichever coat I chance upon first I will wear.” I happened upon the short coat. And since it was so short that it didn't reach my knees, I put on over it my heavy black coat, my cold weather coat that covers my whole body and keeps it warm, and I hastily entered the synagogue.

“On seeing me, Mr. Yedidiah Rafael Hai, the *gabbai*, called me up to take the honor.

“I kissed the Torah and recited the blessing, all the while thinking that when they summon a living man to the Torah in a minyan of the dead it is a sign that he is fated to die. What, then, is the destiny of one about whom it was said in a minyan of the living that he is dead?

“Before I arrived at a satisfactory answer, the reader finished the portion with the phrase *Adonai ba-dahd yan-heh'nu*, ‘God alone did guide him’ (Deuteronomy/*D'varim* 32:12). I kissed the scroll and I recited the blessing ‘...*v'hayei olam nata b'tokheinu* – who has implanted within us eternal life.’ Then I said the *gomel* benediction – my gratitude for deliverance from mortal peril, as is incumbent upon one who has recovered from an illness.

And Yedidiah Rafael Hai, the *gabbai*, and the whole congregation with him, answered: ‘May the One who has shown you kindness, deal kindly with you forever. *Selah*’.”

This brief story invites our examination and attention. In its interpretation I think we can find a powerful message to us.

The narrator of the story is ill; whatever the reason for his sickness, his limbs are unresponsive; he is totally lethargic, and apparently has been so for many months. He seems to have no responsibilities which impel him to move, yet – as it develops – his illness is surmounted by an exertion of his will.

He is also isolated. He has had no contact with the community, neither his own – the Ashkenazi – nor his adopted one – the Sephardi – for some time. He has gone without public prayer and Torah for months.

According to *Pirkei Avot*, we are forbidden to separate ourselves from the community. But Agnon's protagonist has done just that. We know that a Jew without Torah is like “a body without a soul” –*k'guf b'li n'shamah*.

Thus, his condition is very poor. He is spiritually dead. His only contact with religion is the muffled sounds of prayer coming through the wall which his room has in common with a tiny Sephardic synagogue – a very tenuous hold indeed.

On this day, Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, a time given over to the emphasis on repentance, or to put it in the terms of the haftarah from Hosea that gives the name to this day, “a time for turning” – *shuvah* – *shuvah yis'rael* – “Return, O Israel, unto the Eternal One, your God,” he yearns to return. He wants at the very least to be missed. It hasn't occurred to him that they think he's dead. When, through the wall, he hears the prayers for taking the Torah from the Ark, he desperately wants to be called for an aliyah. He focuses his mental energy on the *gabbai* to “draw his mind” to him – to remember him and call on him. It works. The *gabbai* inquires after him, only to hear: “*Adam ha-zeh k'var met* – That man has died.”

This could be the moment for a humorous response like that of Mark Twain who, upon reading an obituary of himself that had been mistakenly published in the newspaper, said “The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.” But for our man, there is nothing humorous about the situation.

The announcement, his death notice, galvanizes him into action – “*Ah-ni hai, ah-ni hai!* – I'm alive, I'm alive! I'll be right there!” And he begins to get dressed.

At this point, we discover another aspect of his condition. He is totally disorganized. No matter how many times he's made resolutions, he can't organize his clothing – or, we suspect, any other aspect of his life. The man's argument with the *gabbai*, in which he tries to equate the contemporary poets with the classic poets of the Jewish tradition, may be intended by Agnon to suggest either a flightiness of thought that prefigures our protagonist's inability to appreciate Jewish tradition or simply, literally, his total disorganization.

Thus, his inability to lay out his clothes or organize his thoughts symbolizes his inability to prepare for living. His disorganization reveals his spiritual collapse. Agnon is telling us here that someone who lives this way isn't truly alive; that person might as well be dead.

The call to take the aliyah is our protagonist's moment of truth. The summons to the Torah is a summons to renewed life. If he doesn't make it, then what the men told the *gabbai* is true: he's really dead. So he protests – I'm alive! – all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. He is frantic. He knows that he hasn't got enough time to get properly dressed. Since he's a *levi*, if he's called at all it will be for the second aliyah, and the parashah is *Ha'azinu* – Moses' poetic discourse in D'varim/Deuteronomy 32. The first aliyah is very short, only six verses.

He panics. He has time for a coat – the most external of garments. He attempts to make a mental selection but for every coat he finds an excuse for not being able to wear it. Nevertheless, it is critically important to him to appear, so he must cover up.

Wearing not one, but two coats, having grabbed the first one in the closet only to discover that it didn't cover his knees, he rushes into the synagogue. The *gabbai* spots him and – with no apparent surprise – calls him up for the aliyah, that life-giving act of his redemption. The *gabbai* is fittingly named for his role. In Hebrew, *Yedidiah* means “Friend of God”; *R'fael* means “God is Healing”; *Hai* means “Life” and the word *gabbai* itself equals *shamash* – shepherd of his flock.

While the passage of the Torah is being read, our man tries to sort out the meaning of the experience he is undergoing. The tradition tells us that if a person dreams of being called to the Torah by a minyan of the dead, he will soon die. But the opposite has happened to him. One who has become spiritually dead has been called by a living minyan. He is still struggling with this profound problem when the answer is thrust upon him: The *ba'al korei* – Torah-reader – chants the concluding phrase – *Adonai ba-dahd yan'hei-nu* – “God alone did guide him.”

Suddenly he is given to see what he couldn't see before. The Torah passage has told him where to find guidance – how to set priorities, how to determine and distinguish the transitory from the permanent: God alone must guide him. *There* is the organizing principle, *there* is the “root above.”

He realizes at last what a close call he's had, what mortal danger he's been in. He therefore “*benches gomeil*” – that is, he recites the public prayer of gratitude traditionally said by one who has passed through terrible danger or recovered from a grave illness. He understands at last that his failure of the spirit has threatened his very life. Having returned to Torah, having been returned *by* Torah to the community of the living, he has been rescued. The congregation seconds his prayer of thanksgiving and the story ends.

But, of course, it doesn't end for us. Don't we all see something of ourselves in Agnon's man? How often are we isolated from others even when we physically live among them? We cut ourselves off from our community for long stretches. We involve ourselves only sporadically. We further cut ourselves off from our roots by being *b'li Torah* – without knowledge of our tradition. Without that anchor, our lives tend to lack grounding. We get disoriented and can't tell what's good from what's bad.

That's a serious illness of the spirit. When our dangerous condition is revealed to us – when we are confronted with the threat to our beings, we panic. We don't know what to do. We search for something to cover ourselves up with. We try on various lifestyles. We feverishly try to appropriate an identity, to prepare a face to meet the faces that we meet (T.S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”). We run after fads. None is authentic. We are false to ourselves. We are spiritually dead.

The Talmud lists four kinds of people who are accounted as dead (in *Nedarim* 64b): a poor person, a leper, a blind person and a childless person. For each, it gives a spiritual application: poor – in spirit; a leper – in the community; blind – one who lives in

darkness; childless – one who makes no impact on the community and contributes nothing to its vitality or continuity.

Those who withdraw, even temporarily, with every good intention of returning, find themselves reported as dead. Life moves forward without them. Agnon's protagonist returns on Shabbat Shuvah. And his return, epitomized in the prayer of thanksgiving, is validated by the congregation, the Jewish community – the agency that authenticates the identity and worth of the individual Jew. Faith, lost and regained; faith, our anchor and foundation; faith, the basis of all that we think and do. The possibility of recovery, of *tikkun ha-nefesh*, the repair of our souls, is open to each and every one of us.

In the Kol Nidre prayer are the words *Mi-yom kippurim zeh ahd yom kippurim ha-bah* –“From this Yom Kippur to the next.” That is the span of our year. May we be alive to the opportunities it presents us.

Amen

Rabbi Norman R. Patz
Yom Kippur Morning
October 9, 2008 / 10 Tishri 5769
Temple Beth Shalom of Puerto Rico

TIKKUN HA-AM: STANDING WITH OUR PEOPLE

Shanah tovah. G'mar hatimah tovah. May a favorable judgment be sealed on our behalf in the Book of Life. Toward that goal, I have spoken about the necessity for *tikkun olam* and *tikkun ha-nefesh*. Now I turn to the third *tikkun*, *tikkun ha-am*. This means standing with our people, especially in Israel, despite flaws and misjudgments. While we cannot guarantee Israel's survival by our own efforts, we will be harshly judged if we do not do our best. Let me elaborate.

I expect we've all received copies of e-mails that counter the negative pictures of Jews and Israel that have been circulating on the Internet in recent years. One email lists the large number of Nobel Prizes won by Jews of different countries in all of the fields in which Nobel Prizes are awarded. Another catalogues the technological breakthroughs developed by Israelis – evidence of how much the modern world has benefited from the enormous number of scientific discoveries and inventions that have come out of this tiny, beleaguered country in its 60 years of existence.

I am holding in my hand a small example of these revolutionary breakthroughs. I'm not sure you can see it from where you are sitting, it is literally so small – about the size of a multi-vitamin capsule – but inside it is a wireless video transmitter. It is an extraordinary,

potentially life-saving device, according to the gastroenterologist who gave it to me (Dr. Warren Finkelstein, Glenridge, NJ). A person with a digestive disorder swallows the capsule, the camera does its work and in a matter of hours the physician can identify the exact problem. Wow! In a way, the capsule is like our people: small in size, but enormously productive in the most creative of ways. We have good reason to be proud.

I want to reflect on this idea in connection to the value of congregation, a community of faith and action, and our responsibilities to ourselves and our people in this stressful time.

Let's start with ourselves. We all know that it is often hard to answer the kinds of questions about Jewish identity and Israel that crop up on the media every day. These are, when we stop to think about it, questions that bother us too. So it's no surprise that we find it hard to "deliver," to give clear, convincing, accurate answers to such difficult, complex questions, especially ones that we know have grey areas, questions like "How can I believe in religion when so much killing is done in its name?" There was a full page ad against religion in *The New York Times* last month headlined by exactly this question. That ad followed best-selling books like *The God Delusion* by British scientist Richard Dawkins, and *God is Not Great* by journalist Christopher Hitchens. Naïve idealists ask, "How can I defend Israel's right to defend itself when its forces kill civilians." We squirm!

Of course, I've structured these two questions in a loaded, provocative form, but my guess is that you've had thoughts, doubts and concerns that come awfully close to these.

And yet – as Jews who care about ourselves, about our country, about Israel and the worldwide Jewish community – we need to "deliver." What are the parameters of our obligation?

- (a) To tell the truth.

And,

- (b) To tell the truth in ways that acknowledge the powerful antagonistic forces arrayed against Jews, Judaism and Israel – and even against the truth itself.

As we face this challenge, we need to recognize the paradox, the fact that these threats come at the very time when we are the richest, freest, most secure, most successful Jewish community ever, in all of history. What's more, we are privileged to live at a time of a sovereign Israel. Events that have occurred the lifetime of many of us here, particularly the Holocaust, serve as a reality check – if they happened once, then they can happen again; if they are happening to others, they can happen to us too, in ways perhaps even more terrifying than in the past. And so we are bound to remember that all Israel – that's us – are responsible for one another: *kol yis'ra-el areivim zeh ba-zeh*. That was always true in the past and it is still true today, and it needs to be applied by each of us, now – in this congregation, in the larger Jewish community, in our dealings with Israel

and in our relationships with Jews around the world. We are responsible – for Israel, for each other and for ourselves.

We have an absolute obligation to stand up for Israel. Sure, Israel has its flaws. Nevertheless, we must not be taken in by the Israel-bashing media who have been sucked into an unholy alliance with ivory castle ideologues both here and in the lands that the late Oriana Fallaci bitterly labeled “Eurabia.” The United Nations is deeply implicated as well. They are united in their categorical conviction that Israel is to blame for all the ills of the Middle East, and that Jews are to blame for all the ills of the world.

The newspapers, news magazines, TV reports and internet blogs are not demanding that Hezbollah and Hamas stop firing rockets into Israeli towns and celebrating suicide bombers. Instead, they are filled with heartrending stories of Arabs suffering “the agony of military defeat” and suffocating under Israeli occupation. Just weeks ago, the Middle East correspondent for The Economist complained: “Can’t we just admit that American support for Israel is strategically burdensome and is driven by the passion of several domestic constituencies rather than cold cost-benefit geopolitics?” In an exasperated tone, the writer condemns blind “indulgence of Israel.” (“War and Peace,” by Max Rodenbeck, review of *A Grand Strategy for America in the Middle East* by Kenneth M. Pollack, in *The New York Times Book Review*, August 24, 2008)

The daily barrage of anti-Israel criticism is coupled with emotional accounts of the sufferings of Palestinians who live in refugee camps. Refugee camps? Three generations of Palestinians have been kept in these “camps” by the governments of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. And how can these people be refugees when they have been living in territory has been controlled by the Palestinian Authority since 1993? But why should the world be troubled by that bothersome little fact? Why are they still treated as refugees except for cynical political purposes?

Yet few ever ask: *Why* are the Palestinians suffering? Because they teach their children to admire and emulate these so-called martyrs and because they celebrate the rocket attacks, kidnappings, and murder of Israeli civilians.

But the media rarely show the impact of those rockets on Israelis. Jewish suffering doesn’t make the cut. Is that because Israel is to blame for everything? This is the world turned upside down. The victim is transformed into the aggressor through the skillful exploitation by Arab propagandists of the West’s sympathy for those it perceives as underdogs, no matter how far from the truth the claim is, a lie which is swallowed uncritically in the media reportage and by the talking heads.

An eerie union of Islamist fascism and popular left-wing multiculturalism has emerged, a diabolical marriage that aims to normalize hatred of Jews worldwide. That multiculturalism ignores rampant Islamic Judaeophobia and worries instead about Muslim sensibilities offended by Danish cartoons. This August, Random House cancelled its contract with Sherry Jones to publish “The Jewel of Medina,” her novel about the bride of Mohammed, because it feared that the publication would “incite acts of violence.”

Two years ago, on the anniversary of 9/11, *The New York Times* Op-Ed page editors – most of them Jews – “asked writers who know” about terror strikes in other large cities that were “targets of vicious attacks in recent years.” What cities were described? London, Madrid, Istanbul, Mumbai. Fair enough. But that was it! No mention of the horrendous bombings of buses and cafés in Jerusalem, like the two attacks on Café Moment, on Cafit, on Sbarro’s pizzeria, to name only a few; or in Tel Aviv, the dreadful bus bombings on Dizengoff, or the attack on the Dolphin Disco, where 20 teenagers were killed and 90 more wounded, or the assault on the Pesah seder at the Park Hotel in Netanya, with 27 elderly Jews killed, 140 people wounded, or in Haifa, or Hadera or Netanya— or Sderot, which has been hit by over 10,000 rockets fired from Gaza since Israel withdrew in 2001! How about Ashkelon and the dozens of other places in Israel targeted by Palestinian terrorists whose major gifts to the world have been airplane hijackings and suicide bombings?

Also missing from the list were the bombings in Buenos Aires of the AMIA (JCC) building, the deadliest attack in Argentina’s history (85 murdered, over 300 wounded) or the attack on the Israeli embassy there two years earlier, both of which crimes remain officially “unsolved.” Where was the story of the 1972 Munich Olympics, when PLO terrorists murdered eleven Israeli athletes, the entire wrestling team and their coach and the games went on as if nothing had happened, largely thanks to Avery Brundage, president of the International Olympic Committee. Or the surface-to-air missile attack on the chartered El Al plane taking off from Nairobi? (November, 2002) Fortunately, that attack failed; otherwise, 261 passengers would have been murdered.

There was no mention of any of these in what *The New York Times* entitled “Terrorism’s Grand Tour.” Don’t blame the writers. They wrote about their experiences. Blame the editors bending over backwards to deny Israel’s suffering. As the war against Hezbollah was going on, many critics accused Israel of “disproportionality.” The disproportionate response rests not with Israel but with the coverage of the war by the press, especially *The New York Times*, a newspaper widely regarded as “the paper of record.”

(See the exchange in *The New York Times*, first: “Picturing the Conflict: Perspective versus Balance,” 9/10/06, then “Other Voices: War and the Power of Photographs” 9/17/06 in the Public Editor’s column.)

Do they truly believe that Israel is the root of all evil? If, God forbid, Israel were gone, as the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wishes very publicly, wouldn’t the Sudanese government still be massacring Darfurians? Wouldn’t Shiites and Sunnis still be executing one another gangland-style in Baghdad? Wouldn’t Osama bin Laden and his crew still be proclaiming the faith of *jihad*? And Indians and Pakistanis still be at one another’s throats over Kashmir? Would it have prevented the massacre of over 200 school children in Chechnya? Would it stop the rise of Islamist power in every part of the Muslim world – in Mogadishu and Islamabad, in Cairo and Damascus and Amman, in Riyadh, Teheran and beyond? Would it lower the price of gasoline at the pump or solve the West’s energy crisis? If we Jews answer “yes” to any of these questions, I know a person who’s got a bridge to sell us. This would not be innocent gullibility. It is the

service of *luftmenschen*, airheads, transformed into the accomplices of the murderers of their own people, our people. These people can be described as “useful idiots.”

We need to deal with it. Here’s how. With straight information. We need to know the truth and we need to be able to communicate it to others.

First of all, Israel is a true democracy, the only one in a sea of repressive Middle East dictatorships.

Israel is a 21st century pluralist society surrounded by hostile pre-modern fundamentalists who overrule any elements in their countries that yearn for freedom.

Israel is one of the only successful movements of national liberation that has not degenerated into a military junta or drowned in corruption.

Israel is not a rogue state. It doesn’t host international terrorist groups.

Israel’s human rights record in the critical areas – freedom of ideas, civil rights, women’s rights, sexual freedom, political rights and religious tolerance is outstandingly good on its own merits; it’s absolutely astonishing considering the siege Israel faces and the huge, disparate population groups it has absorbed during its short existence – Jews from former Soviet Union and the satellite countries, from underdeveloped nations in Africa, from dictatorships in South America.

Israel is willing to negotiate. It does not insist on total victory. It does not play a zero sum game. Not so long ago, Israel offered fully 97% of the West Bank and Gaza to the Palestinians only to have the offer rejected. In 2001, Israel withdrew unilaterally from the Gaza Strip – and we see the chaos that has followed. What does that tell you? Israel makes offers, the Palestinians never do, so they can always criticize Israel without having any of their own proposals on the table to be analyzed and assessed.

What’s more, when agreements are negotiated, the Palestinians violate them. The Palestinian Authority and the Hamas police forces have been turned into private armies – exactly what the Israelis feared would happen, and yet Israel allowed them to come into being and to be armed in the – vain – hope that they would rise above their past actions and prove trustworthy. The Israelis are desperately hungry for peace and peaceful neighbors.

Make no mistake. *Tikkun ha-am* means that we must have good answers about Israel. And it means making generous gifts to UJA. It means purchasing Israel Bonds. It means keeping contact with our friends and family in Israel. It means going to Israel. It means an engagement in the synagogue and in the larger Jewish community that is intense enough to break through the muddle-headed self-destructive impulses that we unconsciously absorb from a society which sees Israel as irrelevant at best or ultimate evil at worst.

If there's evil to be found, we must look at the history of Islam. Although there are those who claim that *jihad* is a spiritual struggle and that there is a distinction between moderate Islam and the ideologically-driven Islamists, my studies show that Islam, from the beginning, has divided the world into two realms: *dar el Islam* – the regions controlled by Muslims, and *dar el harb*, or *dar el jihad*, the areas that remain to be subdued. That division is hardly spiritual. It is a declaration of war.

Do you think that the pope wants to enter into a dialogue with the imam of the mosque at the King Fahd Defense Academy in Saudi Arabia who said “We will control the land of the Vatican. We will control Rome and introduce Islam in it”? (Introductory quote in Daniel Silva's *The Messenger*, 2006) Does anyone really expect the murderers of Daniel Pearl to negotiate reasonably with anyone in the West? Why isn't there outrage at such sadistic barbarism? Where are Christian voices of protest? Instead we transfer billions of our dollars to the funders of fundamentalist Islam in our addiction to oil, which, Tom Friedman writes, “makes global warming warmer, petro-dictators stronger, clean air dirtier, poor people poorer, democratic countries weaker and radical terrorists richer.” (*Hot, Flat and Crowded*, 2008)

From the beginning, Islam – the faith – has always been united with power and control. Never has Islam entertained the idea of separation of church and state. In their idea of a perfect society, the state has a “sphere of activity coextensive with human life...” In such a state, “no one can regard any field ... as personal and private.”

(Maulana Abul Ala Maududi, Indian Muslim *salafi*/ Wahhabi [i.e., fundamentalist] theoretician, 1903-1979 – quoted in Peter Beinart's TRB in *The New Republic* of 9/25/06).

That kind of vision is straight-out totalitarianism. It is the very opposite of the truths we hold to be self-evident. The truths of the jihadists are totally different from ours (see *Shalimar the Clown* by Salman Rushdie). The world they seek has no room for us at all. If we want the Western civilization we love to survive, we've got to know how to defend it from its own confusions, contradictions and flaws (including its persistent and often malevolent ambivalence toward Jews); how to defend it from an enemy whose zeal for a new world – their style – results in pure destructive nihilism, with us as its primary target. We embrace a culture of life, and that culture of life has always and will always prevail against a culture of death.

That is why every one of our congregations needs strengthening initiatives, efforts that will guarantee that they become and remain real communities, a “big tent,” so to speak, whose members are close-knit, trusting of one another, inclusive, open and flexible. Our congregations must be composed of people willing to listen respectfully to one another and to compromise, people who are proud of one another's styles and achievements. It is vitally necessary for the future of this congregation, as well, and for the future of the Jewish people. Let this congregation, with its abundance of talented and committed members, continue on its course and continue to be a congregation whose example others will admire and seek to emulate.

And that leads me back to my beginning. We need to act on our beliefs. That's *tikkun*

ha-nefesh! We need to believe the truths we discover, the truths we defend to ourselves. That's *tikkun ha-am!* And we need to carry those truths through into action. That's *tikkun olam!*

What is our faith? What are our truths? As the Torah reading for Yom Kippur morning says: "You stand this day all of you before the Eternal One, Your God.... I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity.... I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life if you and your offspring will live, by loving the Eternal One, your God, heeding God's commands, and holding fast to God." (*D'varim/Deuteronomy 29-30*)

We stand, all of us, each of us, before God. Life or death. It is our choice. What will we choose? What choices will we make in the defense of Israel? What choices will we make about the meaning of our faith and our people? About this congregation, this community? About ourselves? It starts with us, with each of us.

"We live by the conviction that acts of goodness reflect the hidden light of God's holiness./ God's light is above our minds/ but not beyond our will. It is within our power to mirror God's unending love/ in deeds of kindness, like brooks that hold the sky."

May we be equal to the challenge. "It is within our power to mirror God's unending love in deeds of kindness, like streams of water that hold the sky." May we be worthy.

Amen