

Yom Kippur 5768 – A Time for Transformation

RABBI STEPHEN JULIUS STEIN

Saturday night is symphony night in our home. Stephen Ariel and I put on our nice clothes, get in our nice sedan, and leave the Miracle Mile for Disney Hall. Turning east on 6th, we drive by the mansions of Hancock Park, bathed in opulent lighting and verdant splendor. Soon, Wilshire Center and Koreatown appear, confronting us with commerce in every conceivable place along with storefronts whose names are mostly indecipherable. It's only minutes before Korean signs give way to the barrio. The once-elegant Barbizon Hotel is now windowless, boarded up. On the way home after the concert, we see a skid-row food pantry serving an endless line of men, women, and children, whose ten p.m. hand-out is their only meal. Good Sam is just a few blocks away; here, more and more of the poorest come, many in dire need of emergency care.

From 6th and La Brea to the Music Center—seven miles of road with more than 130 languages spoken on either side. Mansions and cardboard mats; \$300 bottles of wine—\$300 to feed a family for a month. It's a moral crime that the wealthiest nation on Earth has the widest gap between rich and poor of any industrialized nation.”¹

Last night, Rabbi Leder spoke of his vision for the Temple campus; a dream not of one man but of our community, a dream realizing both the unique importance of this historic site and our mission to be a vibrant Jewish presence

in the heart of the nations' second-largest city. And he rightly claimed, we must know our neighbor—and they must know us.

Much of this has come from the Temple's efforts in tikkun olam—the mitzvah at the heart of who we are. Some synagogues do it differently, but with national and international recognition for our programming, we can fairly say, few do it better. So far, our activities have been transactional in nature: someone is hungry and we give them a bag of food; the beach is dirty, we clean it up; Darfur cries out and we send tzedakah. Someone needs—we give. That's transactional tikkun olam. It's fundamental to who we are and how we live, but now, we need to begin work on another way to repair the world: this is transformational tikkun olam.

For example, in addition to giving the hungry food, we can work with our city's leadership to systemically address poverty. Instead of only cleaning up the beach, we can come together and persuade politicians to enact legislation to protect our environment. Community organizing “...is a process that transforms religious communities into centers of civic power... [in which we] join together to act on issues of common concern.”²

Sound political? It is—but not the kind of left-right, blue-state red-state rhetoric that divides and derides us. This is about the powerful politics of people—a “polis,” a group to effect positive change. Sound naïve? “Rabbi, great idea, but noth-

¹<http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts.asp>; from “The Corporate Planet,” *Corporate Watch*, 1997

² From *K'hilot k'doshot*, Jewish Funds for Justice, 2007

ing gets done at City Hall” —actually, a lot of good is happening all over the country from churches and synagogues joining together—and we’d be foolish not to engage our large and compassionate congregation in a process proven to be powerful, profound, and successful.

In Baltimore, synagogues and churches worked together to win the first local living-wage ordinance in the country, which spurred more than one hundred successful living wage campaigns across the United States. A Miami coalition convinced the city’s housing agency to require high-end real-estate developers to create a significant percentage of affordable living units. But what’s going on here—how do we improve life in our city? 90,000 homeless, many of whom face serious health crises, sky-high real-estate, traffic problems affecting all our lives . . . there’s so much to do.

First, we have to shed those fears of “the other,” the fear we’re just one voice, the fear we’ll never be able to create change. We have to be willing to engage each other in conversation, responding to each other’s stories, challenges, and dreams. Now, let’s listen to an extraordinary voice whose quiet demeanor and powerful spirit have inspired great change in Los Angeles. Please welcome Sister Maribeth Larkin, one of the professional community organizers from One-LA, the organization we’ll be working with to start our community organizing program. Sister Mary Beth, tell us what can happen when synagogues and churches join together for good. . . (*Sister Maribeth tells the story of children who could not breathe due to the toxicity of the Bradley landfill and community organizing that not only stopped a proposed 45-ft. addition, but ultimately resulted in the landfill being closed.*)

Thank you, Sister Maribeth. Children who can’t breathe—neighbors who “heard the call” —all it takes is a willingness to speak up, and now, children CAN breathe. We all care—and I believe we all have concerns we want to share. We want our voice to be heard, we want our city to be better, and we can be a part of that change. Today’s Torah reading proclaims, “[Here] you stand this day, all of you, before the LORD your God: all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp...” Here we stand, all of us—so who will stand with me and take the next step to make Los Angeles better? Do you know—the mitzvah mentioned more than any other in Torah is to care for the stranger, the widow, and the orphan among us? We can, and we will do that through our food pantry, through all the transactional tikkun olam activities of the Temple. But now, we are poised to take a step forward—to take a step deeper into ourselves, into our community, into our city—and lift up our values to be *Or la’goyim*—a light unto the nations. How? It couldn’t be easier. Men, women, teens, we need all of you who are willing to talk about what you think needs to change in our city. When Temple Israel of Boston asked that very question, 800 people like you and me stepped up to the plate. So, let me ask: who will stand up for our city and all it can be—who will stand with me and make LA a better place to live—who will come to my house and speak their mind? That’s all it takes—it starts with us, with our dreams and desires, our hopes and aspirations—and the result may change hundreds, thousands, even millions of lives. When services conclude, stop by the tikkun olam table and fill out a card when you leave. All we need is your name, your email, and your phone number. We’ll invite you to a meeting at my house—and together, we’ll take the next step in building a stronger synagogue and a kinder city.