

Sermon for Yom Kippur
September 27-28, 2009 – 10 Tishri, 5770
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

When you walk into the welcome center of Temple Beth El's new Beck Family Campus, there is a magnificent mural that hangs over the doors leading out to the classrooms. The very astute committee that put together the artwork for the new campus chose Noah's Ark as a theme.

I like the story of Noah's ark. When my son was a baby, that was the theme we used to decorate his room – he had a Noah's ark comforter, Noah's ark sheets, Noah's ark window shades, even a Noah's ark lamp.

For some reason, it has become very chic to think of Noah's ark with children – which is ironic, because it is a very grown-up story. I think we like the cute animals, but for me, the fascination with Noah has nothing to do with his abilities as a zookeeper.

The story of Noah begins with a famous phrase: “Noah Ish Tzaddik Tamim Hayah B'Dorotav. Et HaElohim, Hithalech Noah – Noah was a pure, righteous man in his generation. Noah walked with G-d.” What does that mean – pure and righteous in his generation? What does that mean – Noah walked with G-d?

I think about this story on Yom Kippur, especially this year. Yom Kippur is a time when we measure ourselves, when we have to account for who we are and how we live. Ultimately, it's a day about what it takes to be good. How do we grow to be righteous?

The Torah tells us that Noah was 600 years old when he went into the ark. Don't you wonder what happened to Noah in the first 599 years? What kind of a righteous man was he? How did he get to be so righteous?

I think one clue to Noah's righteousness may be found in how he is described – Noah Ish Tzaddik Tamim Hayah B'Dorotav – Noah was a pure, righteous man in his generation. The word Tamim is difficult to translate – it's used in different ways. Sometimes it means simple – in the Haggadah when we read about the four children – one wise, one wicked – it is the third, the simple child, that is called Tam. Sometimes it means blameless or pure. Often, however, it means whole-hearted, or with pure intent.

Was Noah righteous because he never sinned – pure and innocent like that third child in the Haggadah? Or did something happen in the course of his life that helped him grow to be a righteous man?

Our tradition is full of righteous people – examples that we set for ourselves. Perhaps the most righteous of anyone in the Bible is Moses, the leader of the people of Israel. Having grown up in Pharaoh's palace, Moses sees an Egyptian taskmaster beating up on an Israelite slave – and his heart is broken. He looks this way and that way, and seeing no one, kills the taskmaster. The next day, when he ventures out, he sees two Israelites beating up on each other, and again his heart is broken. When he intervenes, they ask: “What are you going to kill us too?” So he runs away, gets married, lives his whole

life as a shepherd, and heals his broken heart, until God calls to him and tells him to return to Egypt to redeem the Israelites from slavery.

Who am I, he asks, to go before Pharaoh in Egypt? Who am I, he asks, that I should lead the Israelites from slavery? And God doesn't answer the question. God only says, I will be with you.

Throughout the story, Moses and God are partners: the man whose heart moved him to act, and the God whose heart was moved by the pleas of our people, working together to lead the stiff-necked Israelites from slavery. Despite all the struggles, all the turmoil, all the misgivings and doubts, Moses remains faithful to his people and his mission.

What I always thought was so interesting is that Moses and Ramses grow up in the same house. And in the same house, one man grows to develop a measure of love and compassion that the plight of a slave tugs mercilessly at his heart, while the other man grows to develop a heart so hard, that when his courtiers tell him that Egypt is lost, still he refuses to bend or to feel.

When we look in the mirror there is a little Moses and Pharaoh in all of us. There's a part of us that grows bitter and hard through life's battles, and another part that grows compassionate and understanding. Ultimately, some measure of righteousness is found in our ability to cultivate a pliant heart, a compassionate heart, a heart that feels deeply and keenly the suffering and pain we find in our broken and difficult world and yet does not become calloused or bitter. Righteousness is found when we find ourselves mired in the awful, and we rise above the awful.

Think of the world we inhabit in the year 5770. On the outside, it is a world at war, a world in which greed and corruption have all but smashed the American dream, a world in which thievery on a colossal scale has sapped the fortunes of a nation, a world in which men fight to return us to the primitive norms of centuries past, a world in which freedoms that should be so basic as to be assumed – the freedom to choose a nation's leaders, to speak, and print, and pray, and assemble – are steadily eroding. It is an awful time in which we find ourselves.

And for so many of us, our inner world is in turmoil too. Many of us struggle through life, exhausted by the tension and stress, anxiety and anguish. We're mourning a loved one and have not yet healed from the loss. We're battling illness – our own or that of someone we love, and we're terrified of what is coming next. We're wondering if we have grown apart from our spouses, if we have lost the ability to understand and relate to our children. We're struggling to hold our businesses together, our households together. Many of us have done things over the course of our lives of which we are not entirely proud. We're battling, and we're battling hard. But inside, for many of us, it's awful too.

But think of the word awful for a moment. Inherent in the word awful is ... awe. And awe how we rise above the awful. It is the essential building block of holiness and righteousness.

What is awe? It is a combination of wonder and amazement, mixed with a rich measure of fear and trepidation. Awe comes when we are struck by the forces in our world that make for radical amazement. Think of the moments of awe in your life – the extraordinary beauty of a bride or groom on a wedding day, the profound wonder at the

birth of a child, the astonishment when seeing a son or daughter, for the first time on the verge of adulthood, standing in a very adult place, wearing some very adult clothes, saying some very adult words, sharing some very adult words as a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Think of the moments of amazement at the human capacity to create art, to sing, to dance, to design machines, to cure illness, to act. Awesome.

This is how Moses meets God. He passes by a bush that is burning unconsumed. Now think about it for a moment. How long do you have to stare at a burning bush to realize it is burning unconsumed? You can't tell from just a glance. It requires concentration, attention. How many people do you think passed by the burning bush and never stopped to take a look? And Moses responds to this awesome phenomenon with awe.

And in some respects I think that is a second key to righteousness – to find the awesome in the awful – to be awesome in the midst of the awful.

I want to tell you the story of one of our people's most awesome sages, a man named Akiva ben Yosef.

Akiva was born in the lowlands of the land of Israel somewhere around the year 50. He was born into an average poor family during the height of Roman power in Judea, and was an uneducated shepherd. He worked for a man named Kalba Savua, one of the wealthiest men in Jerusalem. Akiva fell for Kalba's daughter Rachel, but Kalba would not permit her to marry a man of such low stature. When she insisted, he disowned them both.

Rachel agreed to marry Akiva only if got himself an education. They were so poor, that Rachel even sold her hair to buy food for the family. But Akiva acceded to his wife's demands, and began to study. He was already nearly 30 years old, and some say older when he began to learn his aleph bet alongside his son. Eventually, Akiva rose to become one of the most significant sages and leaders of the Jewish people.

Times were unbelievably difficult. Akiva lived through Roman onslaught as they mercilessly quashed the Judean revolt. He endured the destruction of Jerusalem, and the burning of the Temple. Despite the extraordinary oppression and violent rule imposed on Judea by the Romans, still Akiva studied and taught. He took an intimate interest in the plight of the poor, and made numerous journeys to collect funds on their behalf. Despite his high rank and high regard, Akiva was extraordinarily modest and humble.

Ultimately, our people rose up again. In the year 132 Bar Kokhba began a full-scale revolt against the tyranny of Rome, and Akiva enthusiastically backed the effort. The Romans imposed an edict that anyone caught teaching Torah would be put to death, and Akiva openly defied the decree. After a period of imprisonment, Akiva was tortured to death by the Romans who mauled his flesh with iron combs.

Akiva had his detractors too, and people who disagreed with what he said and did and taught. He was by no means a perfect man. And in that is found his righteousness. A righteous person is not one who has never strayed, never sinned; never found himself on the wrong side of the tracks. A righteous person is one who, in the midst of ugliest the world has to offer, does not become bitter or turn away from the good, but embraces the good even tighter.

As a boy, Akiva hated scholars and students of Torah. He even said that if he had the opportunity, he probably would have grabbed a sage and beaten the stuffing out of him. But his studies of Torah taught him to approach his world with awe. He learned to approach his world with wonder, to appreciate the extraordinary gift of life and creation with amazement, to devote himself to a life in which he would raise up the humanity and holiness of the powerless and the poor.

Akiva taught that a person should rejoice more in affliction than in good fortune. In the suffering, Akiva taught, in the affliction, in the awful, that is where we come to know God best.

Seventy years ago, in a little village in southern France called Le Chambon sur Lignon, there lived a pastor named Andre Trocme and his wife Magda. As a boy, Andre had grown up privileged, but was once cursed by a poor man who despised him for that privilege. As a teenager his mother was killed in a car accident and he learned how fragile was life. Living through World War I, he saw brother turn on brother in the pointless exercise of war. As the Nazis invaded France and set up the Vichy regime under Marshal Petain, Rev. Trocme spoke to his congregation. He exhorted them to resist, to become a place of refuge for the Jews who would be persecuted and murdered. And over the course of the next four years, the people of his village saved nearly 5000 Jewish men, women and children. He said, "We don't know what a Jew is. We know only men." Despite the presence of French soldiers and eventually German troops, still the villagers persisted, hiding Jews in the hillsides and sometimes in plain sight. Rev. Trocme and his colleagues were arrested and sent to a concentration camp. For five weeks they tried to force him to sign a pledge of allegiance and for five weeks he refused. Amazingly he was released and went underground, and still the village persisted until the end of the war.

The villagers of Le Chambon had seen the awful before. They were refugees from the Spanish civil war, they had fled at the turn of the century from the awful oppression the industrial revolution wreaked on the lives of children. They were Protestants in a Catholic country. They knew what it was to suffer, and they knew that the answer to suffering was to not to turn away from one's fellow in fear but to turn toward him in love.

We look at the stories of Moses and Akiva and Andre Trocme and we think to ourselves – well they're heroes. And perhaps they are. But they are like all of us. Moses was just a man. When we read the five books that bear his name, we find him to be incredibly human. He is impatient, and scared, and frustrated. He makes mistakes, and has blood on his hands. But he grows to become Tamim, whole-hearted, humble, strong and wise. He knows he doesn't know it all, and yet he will not, no matter the adversity, swerve from what he knows is good and right. His ability to rise above the awful is what makes him the greatest Jew who ever was. And what the Torah teaches is that any Jew can be as great a Jew as the greatest Jew who ever was.

We don't become righteous by living pure, mistake-free lives. We become righteous when, having found ourselves in the awful, we rise above it. When we fall, we get up. When we err, we learn from the error. When we sin, we atone. We become righteous when we learn to respond to life's challenges with integrity, with a whole-heart, determined to do what's right and what's good.

Each of us has lived through our own awful. And each of us can choose how we want to respond. We can greet the awful with bitterness and despondency. Or we can greet the awful with awe. We can allow the awful to crowd out every glimmer of life and light and hope, or we can rise above the awful and let God's light guide our way.

Noah lived in a day and age when everything was going wrong. He lived in a time when the whole world was so corrupt as to make God regret it was ever made. And yet he is described as Tamim -- whole-hearted, filled with integrity. Because Noah rises above the awful and chooses a life of awe, Noah walked with God.

In this year 5770 we can be inspired to walk with God as well. We can respond to our world with awe. We can, like Moses, open our hearts to each other with love and compassion and resolve to work to liberate the oppressed.

We can, like Akiva, start to study Torah. He didn't start until he was married with kids, and there's no reason you can't start now either. I invite you to join me in learning Torah this year. Take an hour on Shabbat morning to delve into the study of Torah and together we will fill the Sabbath with awe.

We can, like the Trocmes, reach out to someone in need. Help someone find a job, volunteer your time even if you don't think you have any, give more tzedakah than you think you can afford.

We can, like Noah, adhere to the teaching of Pirke Avot – BaMakom She-Ayn Anashim, Hishtadel LiHyot Ish – In a place where there is no humanity, strive to be human.”

A friend of mine who is an 8th generation Lubavitch rabbi once came to teach my confirmation class. Imagine, he said, there is a ladder, and the ladder extends all the way from our world to God's world. How long, he asked, do you imagine that ladder to be. A bright young man named Adam, who decided to become a physical therapist even though I thought he should have been a rabbi, answered: “It's infinitely long.”

“That's right,” he said. “So if the ladder is infinitely long, then no matter where you are on the ladder there are an infinite number of rungs below you and an infinite number of rungs above you. So if you're never likely to make it all the way to the top, nor are you ever likely to fall all the way to the bottom, what is it that God expects you to do?”

Adam raised his hand again: “God,” he said, “expects you to climb.”

May the year 5770 inspire us to moments of awe and wonder, and inspire us to climb each day to higher rungs of holy life. Together let us rise above the awful, and walk together with God into a New Year of righteousness and peace.”