

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah Morning  
September 30, 2008 – 1 Tishri, 5769  
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton  
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

Sunday night in our house is our second Shabbat. In our house, one of the ways we keep Shabbat is by doing no housework on Saturday. So Sunday is laundry day. Throughout the busy day, Aimee does load after load of laundry and Sunday night, after we put the kids to sleep, we sit down on our bed, fold laundry together and watch *Desperate Housewives*.

You heard it – *Desperate Housewives*. This is the season of confession, and so I confess: “I watch *Desperate Housewives*.” Aimee and I love to keep up with the lives of the women on Wisteria Lane. Susan, Bree, Lynette, Gaby, and even Edie are our friends.

Now, you may ask, why on earth would your rabbi watch *Desperate Housewives* – record *Desperate Housewives* on his Tivo? It’s a good question. I’ve been thinking about it a lot for myself.

In general, there’s not much to admire about these women. They are petty, snooty, deceitful, hypocritical, promiscuous, jealous, and even a little bigoted. But I think what Aimee and I, along with millions of others who watch every Sunday, love about these women is that underneath their horrible facades, they are genuine, kind, caring, and loving people. And it’s fun to see their zany antics because each episode, you get a glimpse of that goodness underneath the slime.

I think about this on Rosh Hashanah because we live in suburbia too. Our lives, like theirs, can become consumed with façade, with what we see on the outside. Periodically, we get letters from our homeowners association reminding us to clean our roof tiles, to kill the little weeds that grow between our driveway pavers, to clean up the front of the house. We get invited to parties where the attire asks us to come dressed in Boca Chic, and for years Aimee and I have been trying to figure out what that means. We all feel to a greater or lesser degree a desire to keep up with fashion, to look good, to be fit, and to fit in. In some measure, and sometimes in large measure, we care about appearances.

Sometimes we care about our appearance because of how we feel inside, but more often, we care about our appearance because of how we want other people to see us. While usually I would rather not wear a necktie, I tend to wear one because I want people to see me in a professional way. I want people to think that I take my role as a rabbi seriously, so I dress seriously too.

But Rosh Hashanah and the days of awe do not demand an accounting of the wardrobe. They demand an accounting of the soul. They demand that we turn our thoughts away from our preoccupation with what we see on the outside, but turn our attention to what lies beneath, at the very core and essence of our being.

In the book of Genesis, when G-d prepares to create human beings, there is a strange phrase. The passage says, “Let us create humanity in our image, after our likeness.” This passage has confounded the rabbis for centuries: Who is G-d speaking to when it says, “let us create humanity.” Who’s the us? After all, we believe in a G-d who is one. The sages offer many interpretations. Some say that G-d was speaking to all the ministering angels – who served in G-d’s court. Others say that G-d consulted the Torah itself. But one interpretation I’ve always appreciated the most says that G-d spoke to all the rest of creation and said, “let’s make humanity a little like all of us.”

In many ways, each of us is like everything else. We are formed as physical beings. We come into life, we grow, we live, and for reasons we don’t fully understand, there comes a time when we fade, and we die.

But we know there is more to us than what we see on the outside. There is a part of us that you can’t see, you can’t touch, you can’t find with an X-Ray or MRI. We understand this to be our spirit, our soul, that part of us created in G-d’s own image that truly makes us who we are.

It’s amazing, then, that we spend so much time focusing on the outside, on the peripheral, on that which is intrinsically so very unimportant.

Our nation and our world face extraordinarily complicated and difficult problems. And our response generally is to focus on the meaningless rather than the meaningful. Hard as it is to believe, here we are, nearly a decade into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and issues of race, of gender, of ethnicity, of sexual orientation, dominate our headlines.

A recent poll conducted with Stanford University by the Associated Press and Yahoo News found that 40 percent of all white Americans hold at least a partly negative view toward blacks. In a question that asked for white impressions of most blacks, less than 20 percent indicated that blacks, as a group, were law-abiding, or were intelligent at school. Fully 20 percent said the word “violent” strongly applied.

All over America, we hear conversations about ethnicity, race, gender. We hear conversations in which people say, “Oh, you know what those people are like...”

And in this year, these issues have come to the fore in the midst of an historic presidential election. We watched for months as Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton dueled for the democratic nomination and the issues of race and gender were as much a part of the campaign as their ideas on healthcare, the economy, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I can’t count the number of conversations I’ve shared with members of our congregation who talk about the potential for Barack Obama to be elected. These conversations rarely focus on the differences between his policies and that of John McCain. They focus on the deep-seated belief many people hold that “other people simply won’t vote for a black man.” “Sure they say they’ll vote for him, but when they’re in that voting booth, what will they really do.”

It gets worse. There are many, many of us, who in conversations with our neighbors, our family, and our friends, have overheard someone admit they can’t vote for a black man, or a woman – not because of a policy concern, but because of race. How many of us have listened to someone we know and love say things like, “What can I tell you? I guess I’m racist.”

Whether you support Senator Obama, or Senator McCain, or haven’t figured out yet who you support, we ought not be focused on the meaningless factors that seem to be our nation’s obsession. The ability of one person or the other to serve as our nation’s president has nothing to do with the color of his skin, or her biological gender. It has everything to do with beliefs, ideas, policies, character, and integrity.

And yet we can’t seem to get beyond the immaterial meaningless chatter. I recently was watching a news program in which the reporters and commentators were discussing what it would take for the candidates to win the debate. They said one candidate had to look presidential, the other candidate had to watch his temper, they both had to make sure to have a few good one-liners, zingers, and sound-bites. Why isn’t the measure of a debate about the potential efficacy of one’s ideas, the wisdom of one’s plans, the values that drive one’s policies?

It isn’t just in American politics. Racism and bigotry extend all over the world, even into Israel. Recently Elana Sztokman wrote in the Jerusalem Post that in a religious girls school in a town called Emanuel, girls from Sephardic backgrounds are not allowed to be in class with Ashkenazi or Hassidic girls. They have different teachers, different classes, even different recess times, and a fence between their yards just to ensure that the two groups do not mingle during breaks. In Petach Tikva, a state religious school physically and academically separated Ethiopian girls from the rest of the school – separate teachers, separate curricula, separate rooms, separate recess.

Why are we so obsessed by cultural, ethnic, racial divides? Ultimately, it comes down to precisely what it means to be Jewish.

Judaism is a tradition that was always rooted in the physical realities of life. In ancient times, our worship comprised extraordinary physical acts, pilgrimage, and sacrificial ritual. The corpus of Jewish law ponders questions of property, damages, contracts, and physical human interaction.

But what Judaism teaches is that in life in which so much depends on our physical reality, we must do all we can to transcend that reality. To worship the physical is to engage in idolatry, and Judaism is predicated on a commitment not to worship the physical, but that we worship the spiritual.

I like to play a game with our confirmation class. We talk about the things in life we think are important and valuable, but that those things could be divided into two categories – the temporary and the ultimate. Now imagine we could list those things we pursue that we know are important. For example, think of how you got here today. You drove a car, right (hey, we're not orthodox – it's okay!). Now think about that car. You drove the nice one right – after all, it's Rosh Hashanah. A car is an extremely valuable piece of equipment. It's usually one of the most expensive things we ever buy, besides our house, a boat or airplane. But think about it again. How long have you had that car? For how much longer do you think you'll have it? My guess is that for most of you, you had a car before you got this one, and you'll get another after you're done with it. A car is very valuable – hard to get around Boca without one. But it's of temporary value.

There are lots of things we might put on this list – our house, our clothes, our job, our computer and electronics, our jewelry, our stuff, our money, even food. We spend the vast bulk of our time making sure we have these things. We go to work, so we can earn the money, so that we can pay for the car, the house, the clothes, the electronics, the stuff, and our food.

But we know there are other things in life that are also valuable – really of ultimate value when we think about it. Things like life and health, love of family and friends and community, justice and compassion, wisdom, knowledge, and peace. These are the things that really matter in life.

Ever know someone who had lots of things on the Temporary side of the page, and not so much on the Ultimate? But have you ever known someone who didn't have so much of the Temporary things, but lots of those Ultimate values?

When I was in high school my track coach was Mr. Greg Dunston. Let me tell you about his car. He had a Ford Pinto Station-wagon. You know how there is a latch and lever that holds the driver seat in place depending on how tall you are? Well Mr. Dunston's was broken. So you had to hold on tight when you drove that car because the seat would move back and forth. But you had to wear gloves when you drove it, because all the plastic had crumbled off the steering wheel, and you'd burn your hands on the metal if you weren't careful. He'd show you the various dents around the car – one which came from a truck from a fencing company that landed him a new fence around his yard. Another gave him the money for a new TV in his living room.

Mr. Dunston was a math teacher, who deliberately taught remedial ninth and tenth grade math. One semester I worked for him as a teacher assistant. Why, I asked, don't you teach the advanced classes? "Those kids can learn math from anyone," I remember him saying. "It's the kids who can't get algebra that need a good teacher. I'd rather help those kids." He was an extraordinary runner and ran every single workout with the team. He led by example, with integrity, and honesty, compassion, and love. He organized trips for us to race in New York City, Virginia Beach, even Paris and London. He cared about sportsmanship and trying your hardest a lot more than he cared about living.

On Rosh Hashanah this morning, we recited the familiar words of the Unetaneh Tokef prayer. Rabbi Amnon of Mainz who authored these extraordinary words asked us to imagine that today G-d is opening the book of life to our page. And on that page is a chart that looks a lot like the one we draw in our confirmation class. It shows what we did and what we valued. How much time we spent in pursuit of the temporal and fleeting; how much time we spent in pursuit of the ultimate and the lasting. What's on your page? How did you spend your year in 5768?

We as a Jewish community can no longer tolerate racism and bigotry in our community. We can no longer tolerate judgments based on race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. It's not enough just to know that racism is bad individually – we have to go further and reject it in our community. We need to become obsessed with values of ultimate importance, not with meaningless distinctions that are of no consequence.

On the ballot in November is a nefarious and noxious proposal called Amendment 2. It proposes to amend Florida's constitution to include the following phrase: "Inasmuch as the legal union of only one man and one woman as husband and wife, no other legal union that is treated as marriage or the substantial equivalent thereof shall be valid or recognized."

This amendment, while creating a whole host of problems for domestic partners and unmarried men and women, seeks to enshrine in our state's constitution prejudice and bigotry against gay men and lesbians. It would not simply legalize anti-gay bigotry, but would seek to promote it as a societal good.

Many would seek to use the Bible to authenticate this amendment. But a closer reading of the book of Leviticus shows that debauchery and promiscuity were what G-d sought to denigrate, not intimacy and love. When two people, regardless of the mix of gender, choose to build a home together based on love, intimacy, and fidelity, it should be their choice to do so, for it is to me, without question, as sacred a commitment as any marriage.

I am proud that last week, our congregation's board of trustees voted unanimously to condemn Amendment 2 and to encourage members of our congregation to vote to defeat it. It violates everything that our synagogue stands for, that Judaism stands for. It tells us that marriage is about what's on the outside, when really marriage is not the union of a man and a woman, but the union of two loving souls and kindred spirits.

G-d cares about that which is of ultimate value, not the temporary. G-d is not comprised of cars, clothes, houses, jewelry, money, status, or stuff. G-d is the ultimate expression of life, love, justice, compassion, wisdom, knowledge and peace. We read in the book of proverbs – "Ner Adonai Nishmat Adam – the light of God is the soul of humanity. (Proverbs 20:27)" And it is that light of God that lies in each of us that we ought to seek out, cherish and worship above all else.

We can watch *Desperate Housewives* and laugh because we know it's just pretend and make-believe. But the real world in which we live demands that we eradicate senseless prejudice, that we speak up with those we love and let them know that in our community we cannot sanction bigotry, not when we know the history of our people's suffering because of bigoted anti-Semitism. It was not long ago in Boca Raton that neighborhoods and even hospital staffs were not open to us simply because we were Jews. We know all too well as Jews what can happen when a society tolerates bigotry and prejudice.

Forty-five years ago, on the steps of the Lincoln memorial, stood the Reverend Martin Luther King who said in his famous speech, "I have a dream that one day, my children will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." On a day when G-d will judge us by that criteria, may we be inspired to work harder for the day when all will see only the light that lies in the heart of his neighbor, and find that light reflects back to us only love, compassion, understanding and peace.