The Challenge of Forgiveness

Preparing sermons for the High Holy Day season is always a challenge. Some years it is easier than others. Sometimes, the words just flow. Sometimes, the sermons just don’t seem to want to be written. Rabbis find themselves wrestling for each word, each syllable from within. Regular pulpit rabbis typically have all year to build relationships among their flock and, while there are a certain number of once-a-year Jews in every synagogue this time of the year, the rabbi still knows enough people to know that he/she is not speaking to a room full of strangers. Many of my pulpit colleagues figured out months ago what they planned to talk about, which key issue or issues to address for their communities. They still struggle with the desire to be inspiring, the hope they will say something that is well received and relevant, but they generally have the pulse of their community and know what to say.

For visiting clergy, it’s a little different. What can you say that will inspire a room of mostly strangers? How can you help a community to find its footing for the year ahead? It’s more than a little daunting. On the one hand, you can pretty much get away with saying anything – this isn’t your “day job” – but on the other hand a community has placed itself in your hands for the holiest days of the year, so it is a little challenging. Do you risk tackling controversial topics – and possibly alienating your audience – or do you stick to the texts and hope that you don’t bore everyone to death? I thought I’d go the latter route this evening, but after what we all witnessed at the UN Tuesday, I find potential controversy hard to ignore. Allow me a little bit of a digression. Cast your minds back to this time last year as we all prepared for the New Year ahead…

This time last year I was looking forward to the New Year with hope and a certain amount of excitement. My mum, whom I call my first best friend, was nearing her 75th birthday and my younger sister and I had gotten together back in July to plan a birthday surprise. As I was on my way to the airport I called to wish her a happy birthday and told her how much I wished I could be there. She understood, she said, and wished me a good day at work and thanked me for calling. She had no idea I was on my way to catch a flight to Calgary. Once there, I called her on my cell as I was nearing her home to tell her I’d arranged a special birthday surprise for her – you only turn 75 once, after all – so I told her to look out her window, there would be a delivery any minute now. The look on her face when I popped out of the car and waved at her was priceless. Better still was her reaction when my sister, my eldest daughter and I picked her up on Sunday for a “girls’ brunch.” When she arrived at the restaurant and saw her grandchildren, great grandchildren and most of her kids around the table, she was bowled over. It was a fabulous start to the year. I had hoped that it was something of a good omen.

Around the same time of course, the world was watching very closely as the Obama administration was coming to an end and the next U.S. election was nigh. My then 9 year-old granddaughter was following the campaign quite eagerly. She was excited about the prospect of a woman president – you know, the whole “girls can do anything boys can do, even be a world leader” kind of sentiment. Needless to say, she was sorely disappointed by the result. But more than that, I discovered on another visit about a month after the election, she was just plain sore. “I am mad at America,” she said. And then she shared her perspective of what was happening south of the border through a very interesting ethical lens. “Donald Trump,” she said, “is Lord Voldemort. And the Muggles? They’re just the Mexicans.” She swore that she was going to stay mad at America for a very long time. As her Nana and a huge Harry Potter fan myself, I kind of agreed with her. As her Nana the rabbi, I felt compelled to remind her that the High Holy Days would come around again in about 9 months-time and tradition and God would demand that we engage not just in repentance, but forgiveness. You know, you always sound wiser in your head than you actually are in real life. I had forgotten just how challenging forgiveness can be, sometimes.

In the aftermath of that fateful election, I wrote a piece for my organisation’s Facebook page. In the conclusion, I wrote:

“So yes, we live in a world where Donald Trump of all people is now the president-elect of the USA. We also live in a world with principled leaders such as Angela Merkel, Teresa May and Justin Trudeau who have not only signalled a willingness to continue working with our neighbours, but to also adhere to the principles we hold in common and we hold so dear -- equality regardless of faith, gender, gender orientation, skin colour or ancestral origins; a commitment to preserving and improving the environment for future generations so those generations will actually have a future; and keeping the lines of communication and interaction open. That is really all we can do at this point …"

So here we are roughly 9 months after that walk in the snow with my granddaughter and roughly 10 months since that hopeful posting on Facebook. I was sure this evening I was going to talk about faith and community – the sorts of things you expect a rabbi to talk about at this time of the year – but as I sat making preparations last night I was horrified by what I heard and saw on the news and my conversation with my now 10-year old granddaughter kept coming back to me. And I find it just too difficult to ignore it.

The UN, which admittedly is at times a very ineffectual and certainly unbalanced body – particularly where Israel is concerned – was founded in the aftermath of World War II as a replacement for the even more ineffective League of Nations. It is an intergovernmental organisation tasked to promote international co-operation and to create and maintain international order – its central function is to prevent another **such** conflict, i.e. to prevent World War III. At its founding, the UN had 51 member states, including Canada; today there are 193 member nations. In this assembly dedicated to peace, yesterday the president of the United States called out the president of North Korea and threatened utter destruction – to wipe North Korea off the map if President Kim doesn’t back down from his nuclear missiles program. We have heard such language before – outside of the assembly – and usually from someone like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad threatening to wipe Israel off the map. But here, in the assembly of nations, one of the founding member states is threatening not just war, but utter annihilation. How do we even begin to process that?

Established through an act of defiance against the British Crown – the crown to which Canada still swears allegiance – America is a nation founded on the principles of democracy, freedom of speech, and, in a very real sense, Biblically- based morality. The U.S. constitution begins with some very lofty words:

*We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity …*

It is clear their founding fathers had very high aspirations for their fledgling nation and the world has come to expect an ongoing striving to live up to those aspirations. More importantly, it was hoped, and to a certain extent expected, that the holder of the highest office in the land would be the embodiment of such lofty principles – that he would be an example of the best that America has to offer not just to Americans, but to the world. So, as the year has progressed my hopeful “let’s wait and see” attitude has morphed into disappointment, sadness, and, to some extent, anger. Like my granddaughter I find myself often feeling mad at America for having made such a poor choice – a choice that is impacting people right around the world. When the titular “leader of the free world” says he is banning transgendered individuals from serving in his armed forces, it gives tacit approval to their oppression elsewhere. When the same leader brands all Muslims as terrorists, or turns a blind eye to racism within his own borders, it gives free range to bigots who will spout out hatred and foster violence against all minorities around the world. He is not the only leader turning a blind eye to racism within this week. Look at what is being ignored in Burma by a Nobel prize-laureate who is also an honorary Canadian citizen. Why is she still an honorary Canadian?

A few months back a friend of mine, a former colleague, was visiting from China where he has been studying and teaching for the past year. At that time, the situation with North Korea hadn’t escalated to its current state, and pressure was being put on China to get the North Koreans in line. He laughed at the very notion. You see, he said, from China’s perspective, the question is not “what can we do to curtail North Korea?” The question is “what gives the U.S., the U.N. or anyone in world the right to say who can or cannot have nuclear power?” The genie is out of the bottle so to speak. Nuclear technology exists. Canada is technically a nuclear power. Now, instead of figuring out how many people we can kill with it, we took a more pragmatic approach of what use can be put it to and hence, the CANDU reactor, which was designed to generate electric power, not power weapons of mass destruction. So he thought pressure from China would be minimal.

If one country can’t or shouldn’t have nuclear weapons, none of them should. This what strategic arms limitation treaties are all about. This is probably what we should be aiming for in the current North Korean situation, but rhetoric like we heard yesterday could very well put those kinds of options out of reach. Perhaps that’s why the U.S. foreign secretary sat with this face covered by his hand throughout most of the speech.

It’s hard to blame the North Koreans – the people I mean, not the government – they live in an Orwellian *1984* kind of world. They don’t choose their leaders. They haven’t for decades and they only know what their government tells them. It isn’t a democracy by any stretch of the imagination, so while I would certainly hold its leader morally accountable for his actions, I can’t really blame the North Koreans.

But, America – America is a different story. Americans *do* have a choice about who leads them, and so I find myself on this eve of the Days of Repentance, Forgiveness and Return, challenged to forgive them for choosing someone who, by many Americans’ accounts, is so woefully unsuited to the office. So what do I do about my conundrum? I know I am going to have to find a way to forgive – tradition and God will demand it. How do I find my way back to the hope, to the potential of another new year?

Several months ago, Angela Merkel noted that in light of the “America First” philosophy, which now seems to be rapidly morphing into an “America only” policy as economic, environmental and diplomatic relationships all seem up for grabs, that Europe could not rely on the U.S. and should be prepared to go it alone. I think she was both right and wrong. Right to accept that she can’t rely on the U.S. to solve Europe’s problems; wrong to think Europe needs to go it alone.

The world does not have to let itself be defined or even driven by the agenda of any single nation. We are stronger and better when we stick together, when we stick to our principles, keep the lines of communication open, commit to believing there is a greater good that matters more than the interests of any single individual, and continue to strive toward peace. This is no easy task, but it is what we must do. That is the only way we can fulfill the prophetic vision (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3):

לֹא-יִשָּׂא גוֹי אֶל-גּוֹי חֶרֶב, וְלֹא-יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה.

*Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they study war anymore.*

So, on this eve of the season of repentance and forgiveness, I admittedly am struggling with the forgiveness, but I nonetheless remain committed to the struggle. I won’t give in to anger, to hatred, because that will only lead to more pain. I shall continue to speak out for the principles of justice, of peace, of compassion, of forbearance and, yes, forgiveness and to let these principles be the things that drive me. And hope, I will relentlessly and stubbornly hang on to the hope that one day (Micah 4:4)

וְיָשְׁבוּ, אִישׁ תַּחַת גַּפְנוֹ וְתַחַת תְּאֵנָתוֹ-וְאֵין מַחֲרִיד

“Every man shall sit beneath his vine, beneath his fig tree and none shall make them afraid”.