

SERMON ON THE DEDICATION OF A SANCTUARY PLAQUE

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Rabbi Gordon Tucker

I am very grateful for this moment, and for the physical artifact with which T.I.C. is memorializing the 24 years we had together in this community. My thanks extend first and foremost to my colleague and successor on this Bimah, Rabbi Annie Tucker, and to her clergy partners, Rabbi Adir Yolcut and Hazzan Rabbi Shoshi Levin Goldberg. And in equal measure, I am so appreciative of our President, Renana Rosenbloom, the Executive Committee, the Trustees, our Past Presidents, and our wonderful Executive Director Yael Slonim and the entire staff she supervises and inspires. This event is as meaningful and as valued as it was unexpected.

But anticipating it raised an obvious question: Having been invited to speak from the Bimah this Shabbat, what to say? In thinking about it, I took to joking a bit. When some people asked what I would be speaking about, I said to them, "I don't know for sure, but I do know what the first six words would be." "Really? What six words?" "Simple -- 'Now the truth can be told'". As you might imagine, it always elicited a nervous giggle.

But seriously, it seemed to me that the real point of this plaque is as a marker of what I have tried to teach here at TIC. Now, speaking of truth, here's a genuine one that you may not have ever realized. I believe that any rabbi who is effective gives at most maybe four or five sermons. Even over 24 years. Because think about it: any example of preaching will only have a chance of succeeding, in turning thoughts and hearts, if it reflects truly passionate commitment on the part of the preacher. And if a person -- any person -- has more than four or five things that they claim to be passionate about, then that person is clearly being spread too thin. Different weekly scriptural readings may provide different garb for ideas that have been on offer before, but the core idea is likely to be part of that very finite cluster of matters that are deemed crucial for edified and righteous living.

So I asked myself: what are four things that I probably pounded away at, even if you weren't always aware of the pounding? Another way to put it is: What kept motivating me during our quarter century together, feeling that a certain finite number of things could not be stressed too much or too many times? Happily, as I thought about it, the list almost wrote itself. So here they are, and not in any essential order:

I. I point first to something that has animated me for more than 50 years, and that you have heard from me in various contexts and with diverse formulations. It is our relationship to truth. It has, of course, taken on a greater urgency nowadays, though it has always been with us as a challenge to our human activity. It has perhaps become easier to point out this issue in recent years, because we can see more clearly two dangerous tendencies at opposite poles from each other. One of these is the phenomenon of those who lay claim to having the whole truth. In the grip of such a conviction, people are capable of extraordinary acts of cruelty: like the woman who was witnessed telling a Jerusalemite Arab on Thursday (when Yom Yerushalayim was observed) that "this is a Jewish land and we don't need or want Muslims here." She could say that because she knows the truth of what God's will is for the Land of Israel. Or, like the legislators who are prepared to introduce a measure of torture into the lives of transgender human beings because they too know what God wants.

So I frequently reminded us of the constant need for humility, in order to keep us from believing we have arrived at the full truth, and no longer need to attend to other views. "Think it possible you may be mistaken" is what Oliver Cromwell pointedly said, and that is the foundation of humility, perhaps the most ennobling human character trait. And, not incidentally, it is what is so religiously important about the conviction that the Torah is a product of human hands. You heard that from me repeatedly as well. Now for some, such historical views of the biblical text tends to be seen as controversial and undermining of faith. But the exact opposite is the case. It promotes the humility that keeps us from using the Torah itself to further the idolatry of believing that we truly know the thoughts of God.

What about the other pole in these two dangerous tendencies regarding truth? There lies the despair and cynicism that comes from recognizing that different people will apprehend truth differently, and then taking that insight to the extreme of denying the existence of truth altogether. And, for some, deciding that lying about everything is somehow acceptable. But Hannah Arendt warned us about this very discerningly -- and chillingly -- decades ago. She observed that "The ideal subjects of totalitarian rule [are] people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, and the distinction between true and false no longer exist.....this deprives a people not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please."

What you heard from me in this respect stemmed from my special worry about all of our grandchildren and great grandchildren: that it will not be a simple matter for them, as they grow up in today's world, to learn the difference between true and false. So, alongside the exhortation to humility, I reminded us that we mustn't for that reason give up on the search for truth, because there is a truth to be sought. When God told Moses that he could not see the divine face but could follow behind the elusive God, we were all being told that it may be that to be human means to have only a finite and fallible understanding, but a truth of the matter there surely is, and we can know when we or others are far away from it. And of course, this is just why I have often spoken and preached about God, because I do not give up on the idea that the always unreachable God is indeed real.

That this humane approach to truth can be learned and lived is what gives me hope for my -- and all our -- grandchildren.

II. Here's a second sermon I gave many times, and not just on that intense Shabbat in 2006 when I gave you the essence of what I was about to submit to the Rabbinical Assembly Law Committee regarding what we today call LGBTQ Jews.

The message is what is summed up in an antique rabbinic text, which says, remarkably: רְצוֹנָךְ לְהִכִּיר אֶת מִי שֶׁאָמַר וְהָיָה הָעוֹלָם? לָמַד אֶגְדָּה -- Do you wish to encounter the One who spoke and the world was -- that is, God? How do you encounter God? The answer is: Study Aggadah, narratives. Not Halakhah, mind you, but Aggadah. Stories. And not only the stories told in Scripture, though they are important, but the stories of life as it is lived in the world, and not simply in the law books. One of the things I learned, and tried to teach here, is that in interpreting Torah, and the laws of Judaism, one of the most crucial questions that must be asked again and again is: “Are innocent people being hurt by this interpretation of law?” Because if they are, it cannot be God’s law.

Heschel, who lived a strict halakhic life, but also decried what he called “pan-halakhism”, summed this up as follows: “Judaism is not another word for legalism. The rules of observance are law in form and love in substance. The Torah contains both law and love. Law is what holds the world together; love is what brings the world forward.”

III. A third teaching and exhortation you have heard from me concerns Israel, and Israel and the Diaspora in particular. You’ve heard me brag about the number of Ben Gurion Airport visa stamps I have in my passports (nearly 80, though they don’t give those stamps any longer, and it takes more effort to keep track of the number of visits one makes in a lifetime). The point is that I am a committed Zionist, as I believe we all should be.

But we here are a Diaspora community. What could that mean? Almost forty years ago, Elie Wiesel wrote this when asked why he doesn’t live in Israel:

“just as a Jew by definition and by tradition can live in more than one period, so he can attach himself to more than one geographical community. [*It’s worth a brief digression just to think about that idea of a Jew living in more than one period.*] Whoever opposes Israel to Diaspora or the Diaspora to Israel will end by destroying them both. Neither of these two collectivities will be able to replace the other or substitute for the other. Despite the love – unconditional

– that I feel for Israel, I am not ready to sacrifice the Diaspora for her. And if certain Israelis demand such a sacrifice, they are in the wrong...”

Or, as the great scholar Shimon Rawidowicz expressed it: The Jewish world is like the geometrical figure known as an ellipse. Ellipses have two foci, not a single center like a circle. And the beautiful thing about it is that wherever you are on the path of the ellipse, the sum of the distances from the two foci never changes. It is quite a metaphor. Wherever you are in the Jewish world you are in a relationship to the two foci of Jewish life, close to one or the other at a given time, but with the distances having an invariant sum.

And this entails one more thing: if we are indeed all tied together in our destiny and we can never sever ourselves from being measured by either focus, then it necessarily follows that we all have not just the right, but the responsibility, to speak up in loving tribute and defense of one another, and, when necessary, in loving critique of one another. It can be unpleasant to offer those critiques. But core convictions are often worth unpleasantness. And that is why you have heard defense and critique from me over the years, intertwined with one another, with love being the essential common denominator. A bit more on this on Thursday night at the Tikkun.

IV. And finally, number four. You’ve heard of the Sermon on the Mount? Well, 20 years ago on Yom Kippur, you heard what became known as the “sermon on the ramp”.

It was about the essentiality of accepting obligation and commitment that goes beyond the autonomy that is so easily celebrated in contemporary society. The autonomy is precious. But if everything is measured by what moves us at a given time, then a community, and what it needs to count on in order to thrive as a community, suffers in the process.

I’ve been studying this matter with some very smart colleagues this year at the Hartman Institute. And one of the things we have come to understand is that it is not a choice between my autonomous choices and what seeks to

impose itself on me from a transcendent source. It is rather a matter of social contract. If it truly matters to me to be part of the Jewish story -- and the large majority of Jews still say that it does matter to them -- then that autonomous choice to call oneself a Jew entails a covenant with others who do so as well. And that is why, to take the simplest example, the need of a member of the community to say Kaddish should call one to a minyan even if davening doesn't quite do it for me today. For it is not, and cannot be, only about each one of us, but of what larger frame defines us and gives us our lives meaning.

My son, Rabbi Ethan Tucker, shares this concern with me, and he recently told me that a survey of one aspect of Jewish religious life on American campuses showed this: a regular Shabbat morning minyan in the Conservative egalitarian mode in which we believe exists -- as a weekly occurrence -- in only two campuses nationwide. And that, clearly, is a symptom of a failure of too many of our young people to gain an understanding that obligation fuels meaning.

What those who were in shul that Yom Kippur heard from me, that is, to ascend at whatever pace the upward ramp of obligation, is what you have heard many many times. Because I do believe that if personal autonomy cannot ever be subjugated to a community's tradition, it will end up being a hollow foundation for a meaningful life.

I have one more thing to say. I'm back at Jewish Theological Seminary now, as you know. I love the students there. Not just for the extraordinary human beings and committed Jews that they are, but also because I see them as the beyond-life extensions of everyone in my generation who has labored for the J. Community.

In working to draw such talented young people into the vital careers of Jewish religious leadership, we've had some danger signals of lower enrollments of late. I'm not by nature an alarmist, as you know. But we do need to think about this. If my work here, and the work of my two predecessors Rabbis Gelb and Turetsky, was important enough to the people in this community to

warrant memorialization on the plaques at the rear of this Sanctuary, then remember -- always remember -- that our children and grandchildren are also going to need rabbis, and cantors, and Jewish educators. You, by testifying to how your religious leadership has enriched your lives, will be able to encourage young people with promise at least to consider seriously this calling. And to know what satisfaction and fulfillment it will give them years from now. I know that young people today have many options before them. Some are a good deal more lucrative than others -- at least along one particular metric. But I have also long believed that when we are faced with different choices, there is an argument to be made that greater weight should be given to the one path that may not be taken by others if I do not take it.

Law, and finance, and a host of other professions are important, and contribute much. And there are surely young people for whom that is the best choice, because they can do it better than anything else, and better than others can. And yet, it is a safe bet that there will always be many lawyers, and financial analysts, and so on through so many other professions. If Jewish religious leadership is not high on the list of options for the young people we nurture here and elsewhere, that will not be nearly as safe a bet, and there may not be as many of these Jewish leaders as the generations already born and those yet unborn will need.

And that brings me to the plaque. I want you to know why I am so filled with gratitude today. It's because I think about the many many plaques I have seen in my life. Sometimes I knew the people whose names appeared there. Most often, however, I did not. They lived, worked and flourished before I was born. But in many of those cases, I asked. And because of that, I learned that what they stood for did not die with them, its relevance did not pass with them, and the love that they brought to their missions and their passions, is there to be felt and to inspire.

I am, as you see, alive and well today. But none of us are meant to be eternal. That is why I am so thankful that you are putting up what I hope will be not so much a plaque as it will be a prompt in this sanctuary. So that years from

now, a young member of this congregation will get bored in shul and will get up, walk around, look up, and see my name. And then maybe say to whoever is nearby, perhaps to a grandparent, even to one of you sitting here now: "Who was that guy"? And that, I pray, will be the beginning of a conversation that will bring forth determination and commitment from that young person. It's what the whole community of people on plaques, what we might call the "community of bronzed names", hopes for. And you honor me by making those future conversations possible. Todah mi-kerev lev -- a heartfelt "thank you" to you all.