

ROSH HASHANAH 5770 (SECOND DAY) SERMON BY RABBI ASHER LOPATIN

THE ORTHODOX UNION INVITED ME AND ABOUT 30 OTHER RABBIS FOR A TRIP TO WASHINGTON TO GO TO CONGRESS AND THE WHITE HOUSE TO LOBBY THEM FOR THE ISSUES THE OU IS TRYING TO PUSH FOR: AMONG THEM HELPING NOT-FOR-PROFITS TO RETROFIT ENERGY SYSTEMS, GET MONEY FROM HOMELAND SECURITY FOR SYNAGOGUE SECURITY – WHICH AN SHE SHOLOM HAS BARUCH HASHEM RECEIVED – AND PUSH FOR MAXIMAL SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL AND FOR AN UNDIVIDED JERUSALEM. NOT THE MOST PROGRESSIVE OR EXPANSIVE AGENDA, BUT WHAT BOTHERED RACHEL WAS THAT THIS ONE AND HALF DAY TRIP WAS SCHEDULED FOR THE WEEK OF ROSH HASHANAH!! AND THIS FROM AN ORTHODOX SYNAGOGUE ORGANIZATION! WHEN I CALLED FROM DC ON MONDAY NIGHT AND TOLD RACHEL THAT I WAS TAKING THE 8:30 FLIGHT BACK TO CHICAGO THE NEXT DAY, SHE DIDN'T GET UPSET ON THE PHONE. I THOUGHT THAT WAS STRANGE – BUT IT TURNS OUT SHE THOUGHT IT WAS 8:30 AM, AND MY FLIGHT WAS 8:30 PM – LUCKILY SHE DIDN'T REALIZE THAT TILL THE NEXT DAY...

THERE WERE SO MANY FASCINATING DETAILS OF THE TRIP THAT I CAN'T WAIT TO SHARE; WE SCHMOOZED WITH ELLIOT ABRAMS, CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN HAWK, AND WITH CONGRESSMAN HOWARD BERMAN, LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC LEADER, AND WITH SENATORS GALORE, WITH DAVID AXLEROD AND DENNIS ROSS AND CHUCK SCHUMAR OF COURSE THE BELOVED JOSEPH LIEBERMAN. WALL TO WALL SENATORS AND REPRESENTATIVES AND WHITE HOUSE OPERATIVES. BUT I WOULD LIKE TO FOCUS ON THE FEW MOMENTS WHERE TRUE CHARACTER CAME THROUGH, WHERE THERE WAS OPENNESS AND TENDERNESS IN FRONT OF OUR GROUP. SUCCESSFUL POLITICIANS, AND SOME EVEN SEASONED POLITICIANS, REALLY SEEMED TO OPEN UP THEIR HEARTS.

WE HEARD OVER LUNCH FROM THE NEW SENATOR FROM NEW YORK – KIRSTEN GILLIBRAND, A YOUNG WOMAN FROM UPSTATE NEW YORK, NOT THAT FAMILIAR WITH THE JEWISH COMMUNITY. SHE TALKED ABOUT HER RECENT VISIT TO ISRAEL AND HEARING FROM A KID IN SDEIROT WHO ASKED FOR JUST ONE THING: THAT THE ROCKETS WOULD FALL LATER IN THE DAY, AFTER CLASSES STARTED SO THAT SHE WOULD NOT ALWAYS HAVE TO WAKE UP AT THE CRACK OF DAWN TO GET TO SCHOOL IN TIME TO BEAT THE SIRENS. AS JEWS, MANY OF US WHO HAVE VISITED SDEIROT, WE KNOW WHAT OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS, ADULTS AND CHILDREN, ARE FEELING. BUT SENATOR GILLIBRAND BEGAN CRYING. AND THESE WERE NOT JUST A FEW SECONDS OF TEARING UP FOR AFFECT; SENATOR GILLIBRAND COULD NOT GET OUT OF THIS CRYING – SHE CRIED THROUGH THE REST OF HER TALK WITH US. SHE APOLOGIZED THAT SHE HAD TWO SICK CHILDREN AT HOME – BUT, CLEARLY, THE CHILDREN OF SDEIROT HAD ENTERED HER HEART – SOMETHING HAD STRUCK HER DEEP DOWN, AND THIS SENATOR WAS OPEN ENOUGH TO FEEL IT – TO LIVE THE PAIN.

MANY HAVE PROBABLY HEARD THE STORY OF DAVID AXLEROD'S DAUGHTER— WHO SUFFERED FROM SEVERE AND CONSTANT EPILEPTIC SEIZURES UNTIL AFTER MANY YEARS OF THESE SEIZURES, THEY FINALLY FOUND A PILL— KEPRA — TO STOP THEM. SHE IS DEVELOPMENTALLY DISABLED, AND SHE REMAINS BEHIND IN CHICAGO WITH MR. AXLEROD'S WIFE. HE SPOKE MOVINGLY ABOUT HOW DIFFICULT IT WAS TO SAY GOODBYE TO HIS DAUGHTER— SHE WANTED TO KNOW WHY PRESIDENT OBAMA NEEDED HER DAD'S HELP SO MUCH. CERTAINLY DAVID AXELROD IS A MASTER POLITICIAN, AND HE CERTAINLY HAS USED THIS STORY MANY TIMES. BUT THE CONSENSUS OF THE RABBIS THERE WITH ME WAS THAT HE REALLY WAS SINCERE. “DVARIM HAYOTZIM MIN HALEV NICHNASIM EL HALEV” — THINGS LEAVING THE HEART ENTER THE HEART. EVEN IF MR. AXLEROD WAS MANIPULATING US, IT WAS BECAUSE HE UNDERSTOOD THAT BEING IN TOUCH WITH HIS OWN DIFFICULTIES IN LIFE— FEELING THEM, RECOGNIZING THEM, AND BEING WILLING TO OPEN UP ABOUT THEM — IS THE HUMAN BEING AT HIS OR HER STRONGEST, NOT WEAKEST. THAT GOD MAKES US POWERFUL WHEN WE CAN REALLY FEEL THE JOY AND THE SADNESS AROUND US — THE JOY OF ISRAEL AND THE SADNESS OF THE CHILDREN OF SDEIROT OR OF A CHILD WITH SEIZURES. MR. AXLEROD IS POWERFUL AND SUCCESSFUL— BECAUSE HE IS REAL AS WELL.

WE HEARD FROM A GREAT FRIEND OF ISRAEL, SENATOR MIKE JOHANNIS FROM NEBRASKA, WHO TALKED ABOUT HIS TRIP TO ISRAEL AS A GOVERNOR DURING THE CELEBRATION OF JERUSALEM'S 3000TH ANNIVERSARY. HE IS A RELIGIOUS CHRISTIAN, WHO QUOTES THE BIBLE IN SUPPORT OF ISRAEL, BUT WHAT WAS MOST TOUCHING ABOUT HIS PRESENTATION IS THAT HE TALKED ABOUT HOW POWERFUL THIS TRIP TO ISRAEL WAS BECAUSE HE WENT WITH HIS WIFE, AND HOW MUCH HE BECAME CONNECTED TO ISRAEL BECAUSE OF HER. THIS WAS A MAN SPEAKING HONESTLY: ISRAEL PENETRATED HIM; HE SPOKE ABOUT IT IN A PERSONAL WAY, AS A FAMILY AND A PERSON WHO SHARES THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS WITH THE WOMAN HE LOVES AND SHARES HIS LIFE WITH. HE TALKED ABOUT HOW ISRAEL'S SECURITY AND WELLBEING MATTERED TO HIM. WHEN HE SAID, “I CARE ABOUT ISRAEL,” 30 CYNICAL RABBIS FELT HE CARED; WE BELIEVED HIM. AND HIS SINCERITY AND HUMBLeness WERE PALPABLE BECAUSE HE, TOO, SEEMED LIKE HE REALLY FELT SOMETHING INSIDE, AND WAS REALLY TALKING ABOUT WHAT PENETRATES DEEPLY INTO HIS SOUL.

DENNIS ROSS, ON THE OTHER HAND, COULD HAVE TOLD US SUCH A HEARTWRENCHING STORY ABOUT HOW HE HAD WORKED ON PEACE AND OSLO FOR SO MANY YEARS ONLY FOR IT TO CRASH AND BURN WITH ARAFAT'S REJECTION OF CAMP DAVID AND THE BEGINNING OF A WAR OF TERROR ON ISRAEL WHICH CLAIMED OVER A THOUSAND JEWISH LIVES. BUT DENNIS ROSS DIDN'T SHARE ANY OF HIS FEELINGS OF FAILURE, OR DOUBT, EVEN ABOUT DEALING WITH IRAN. HE WAS A CLOSED BARREL, AND NONE OF US FELT ANY CONNECTION TO WHAT HE SAID. IRAN, ISRAEL, THE MIDDLE EAST, SDEIROT— IT ALL SEEMED TO NOT BE A REALITY, BUT A BUNCH OF ECHOES THAT ARE SENT SCAMPING AWAY THROUGH SMOOTH, DIPLOMATIC STATEMENTS. WHAT ABOUT THE DEADLINE OF DEALING WITH IRAN

BY THE END OF SEPTEMBER? NO, THAT WAS ONLY A DEADLINE WHEN THE G-8 WOULD “TAKE STOCK” OF THE SITUATION. HMM, “TAKE STOCK”.

IN TRACTATE ROSH HASHANA, THE MISHNA TELLS US THAT THE MITZVAH OF SHOFAR IS NOT BLOWING THE SHOFAR BUT HEARING THE SHOFAR: HATOKEIAH L'TOCH HAVOR – ONE WHO BLOWS INTO A PIT, OR INTO A CISTERN OR INTO A BARREL, IF HE CAN HEAR THE SOUND OF THE SHOFAR – PURE – HE HAS PERFORMED HIS DUTY, BUT IF HE HEARS ONLY THE ECHO, HE HAS NOT PERFORMED HIS DUTY. IT'S NOT ABOUT HOW IT'S BLOWN, IT'S A MATTER OF WHAT YOU HEAR. – **quoting the Tur.** “LAV BITKIYA TALYA MILTA ELAH B'SHOME'AH” SO THE B'RACHA ACCORDING TO ALMOST EVERYONE IS “LISHMOA KOL SHOFAR” – TO HEAR THE SOUND OF THE SHOFAR... TO REALLY HEAR THE SOUND OF THE SHOFAR – TO LET THOSE SOUNDS THAT WE HEAR **really** PENETRATE US; TO TAKE THEM SERIOUSLY RATHER THAN DEFLECTING THEM.

THERE ARE ALWAYS SHOFAROT GOING OFF: WHETHER THEY ARE IN ISRAEL, SIRENS FROM ROCKETS, OR WHETHER THEY ARE IN AMERICA – FROM ANTI-SEMITIC GRAFFITI, VIOLENCE IN GENERAL, OR THE VOICES OF THOSE AROUND US WHO ARE HURTING FROM THE ECONOMY – THE QUESTION IS WHETHER WE HEAR THOSE SHOFAROT, AND WHETHER WE LET THOSE QUIET OR LOUD SHOUTS TOUCH OUR HEARTS, OR DO WE TURN THE SHOFAR SOUND INTO MERELY AN ECHO.

LISHMOA KOL SHOFAR IS ABOUT MAKING OURSELVES VULNERABLE, PULLING DOWN OUR DEFENSES, NOT KEEPING OUR INSIDES – OUR KISHKES – SAFE... GOD COMMANDS US TO TAKE THAT RISK – THE RISK OF TAKING REALITY SERIOUSLY, TAKING THIS DANGEROUS AND TUMULTUOUS WORLD SERIOUSLY.

IT'S EASY TO LET THE EXPERIENCES OF LIFE, THE SAD ONES, THE FUNNY ONES, EVEN THE JOYOUS ONES, BOUNCE OFF OF US, AS AN ECHO DOES, OR TO COMPARTMENTALIZE THEM AND BOTTLE THEM UP UNTIL THEY GO AWAY. BUT WE NEED TO BE BRAVE TO BEGIN THE NEW YEAR BY REALLY HEARING, ALLOWING THE SHOFAR OF LIFE TO PENETRATE TO THE DEEPEST CORNERS OF OUR HEARTS AND SOULS.

T'KA B'SHOFAR GADOL LE'CHERUTEINU – WE ASK GOD TO BLOW THE SHOFAR, BUT IT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO HEAR THE SHOFAR – WHAT DOES IT TELL US? TO RETURN TO ISRAEL? TO RETURN TO A MITZVAH WE DID AS A KID BUT HAVEN'T DONE SINCE? TO REACH OUT TO SOMEONE WE HAVE BEEN AVOIDING? ONLY WE CAN FIGURE OUT WHAT IT IS TELLING US, AND WE START BY OPENING UP AND LETTING THE SOUND OF THE SHOFAR IN. SO AS WE NOW HEAD TO THE MITZVAH OF HEARING THE SHOFAR, MAY GOD BLESS US ALL WITH THE STRENGTH TO HEAR THE SHOFAR OF LIFE AND TO TAKE THE RISK OF LETTING THEM PENETRATE OUR SOULS, TO HEAR GOD'S MESSAGE FOR US AND TO BE TRANSFORMED BY HONESTLY LISTENING – LISHMOA KOL SHOFAR – TO HEAR THE SOUND OF THE SHOFAR DESPERATELY TRYING TO GET IN AND MAKE US LIVE THIS YEAR OF 5770 WITH HONESTY AND

INTEGRITY, NOT AS AN ECHO, NOT HIDING IN A BARREL, BUT AS A REAL JEW AND A REAL HUMAN BEING.