

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 2007/5768
Rabbi James Mirel, Temple B'nai Torah

This is a time of sacred reflection-this is a place filled with divine blessing-this is a moment of life-changing possibility. If you are willing to open your heart to the opportunities these next ten days, you will emerge at the end of Yom Kippur with a fresh perspective on what your life can be. But it is up to you.

Let us set the stage for this sacred process by listening to a modern prayer-one which you may know quite well:

God grant us the serenity to accept the things which we can not change; courage to change the things we can; and wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

This prayer-in a variety of forms-has been recited by millions of people throughout the world. It has been adopted by those in 12-step programs as the serenity prayer-though that name does not capture- essence of it; it speaks of serenity, courage and wisdom It was composed-most scholars believe-by a 20th century Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr-but even that is not certain. But if it was written by a progressive Christian-it is one of the most Jewish prayers I can imagine. Because-it evokes God's help-but puts the onus squarely on the individual to take responsibility for his or her life. It is a prayer that is firmly this-world centered-again a Jewish perspective. Finally, the prayer focuses on wisdom and action and not on faith, alone. Another very Jewish balance.

Of course, it is so widely known and inspiring-because it is neither Christian, nor Jewish, nor even exclusively religious-

it is, in fact, a reflection of a universal perspective that everyone can embrace.

Tonight, and briefly as always-let me share with you-three things we must try to accept ideally with serenity which we can not change-and three aspects of life that we can, should and must try to change as we begin this new year of 5768.

The first thing in life that we can not change, and must try to accept, is the behavior and personalities of other people, especially those we love. Trying to change other people is the source of the greatest frustration and disappointment in human life. And sadly we spend so much energy trying to do just that. The reality is that if we spent one-tenth of the energy improving ourselves as we expend on the absolutely frustrating and even counter-productive energy we put out trying to change others, we would be so much better and so much happier. That does not mean we have no influence on others we do by example. But as soon as you hear yourself saying, "if only he would," or, "I wish that she could be different," recite that prayer ten times, "things I can not change." If you and I could really embrace this wisdom this year will be so much more serene for ourselves and also for those we want to change.

Another aspect of life it behooves us to accept is the past. We can not undo the past and if we live with anger or regret about the past we will only be harming ourselves. This does not mean we can not learn from history global or personal, it is simply that we can not undo the past. Much of who we are for positive or negative was determined by our genetic make up at the moment of conception, that moment is past. We all have had disappointments, all have been treated unfairly, all have been denied what may have been rightfully ours, those moments are past. There are two kinds of people: those who

live in the present and those who live in the past. Those who live in the past will never be serene, never be at peace. The past is simply that, what has gone before, never to be changed. Letting go of past hurts and injustices even if they have not been resolved, even if we have not been made whole, is not only wise, it is essential for a productive and meaningful life. In many respects this is what teshuva is all about.

The third aspect of life, which all of us need to see as unable to be changed is death itself. A central theme of these holy Days is the inevitability of death, of those we love and of ourselves. There are three kinds of religious philosophies: there are those like Buddhism which teach us to avoid attachments to worldly things because they will ultimately be taken from us, there are those like classical Christianity which teach that life here is corrupt and true happiness is found only in life after death, and there are those like Judaism which teach that although life is tenuous and although there are many troubles in earthly existence, embracing this life and being lovingly attached to others is the only path to choose. Oovakhearta bakhayim, embrace life. But as we embrace life in the here and now, we must learn the wisdom of accepting death when it comes. Not being shattered by it whether the death of those we love or our own impending death. We need not love death but our serenity and peace lies in our acceptance of it no matter when or how it comes. Easy to say, very difficult to do; but absolutely crucial to being serene.

This leads us to consider what aspects of reality can and should be changed. And while we must learn to accept death as an inevitable aspect of all life. That is not to say we should not strive to overcome illness and other threats to life when they come this way. In our congregation, we send out

encouragement to hundreds of survivors of cancer and other life-threatening illnesses. We send out deep thanks to many medical professionals, social workers and researchers who are engaged in the active holy work of keeping us and our loved ones going even when our bodies have provided overwhelming challenges. This year-several of you have been given the shocking news you have a terminal illness- whatever the current medical ethics may say all of us are facing death but we can do everything in our power to extend life and improve our quality of life. The Jewish way is seek treatment, and avail one's self of every reasonable treatment. Yes, as indicated, there is a time to accept even embrace death but if there is a chance for a cure or a remission, we should seek it out. For those here tonight fighting that fight and those supporting those in treatment, positive change is the goal and seeking the wisdom to know when to continue to strive to live and when we must accept the inevitability of death, the end of all life on earth.

Another call for courageous action is the quest for a more just and compassionate world through acts of loving-kindness and tikkun olam. As Jews and as human beings we are obligated to spend a considerable amount of our energy in the dvarim shein lahem shiur-actions that have no limitations. As a temple we have embraced that charge and many here have a personal stake in some aspect of making thus global society more just. Some of the challenges are monumental: reversing global warming, overcoming poverty and hunger, stopping Genocide, combating a world wide AIDS epidemic. But as overwhelming as these may seem, brilliant people have devised answers and charitable people and foundations have provided the funds. Temple B'nai Torah is not the Gates Foundation, but we understand that justice is pursued in incremental actions. We can not do everything, but each of us can do something. The courage to

change the things that can and should be changed. This year let us find new ways to demonstrate that courage.

Finally, just as we not to accept other people as they are more and more the exact 180 degree opposite applies to ourselves. We need to find courage to change ourselves in a variety of ways. But no one can tell you what it is you need to change or improve. These ten days provide on opportunity to deep self-scrutiny in Hebrew Kheshbon ha nefesh, an accounting of the spirit. Tonight, as I will, try to focus on a single personal deficit and take courage to confront it and change a life denying addiction; take a new direction in work or education; focus on a relationship that is in desperate need of healing; or an area of self-growth. If you are able to isolate one important change that you wish to make in your life, articulate it to yourself, plan a strategy and most importantly dig deep within for courage to follow through; then you will not have come here in vain. I pray for you in your efforts and your struggles, and may God be with you.

This new year of 5768 has amazing potential for all of us. Our prayers are for serenity, for courage and for wisdom and also for a world of greater justice, sustenance and peace. We recall the admonition of our ancient rabbis, you are not expected to complete the task, but you are not exempt from participating in it in some meaningful way.

And so let us pray, as so many others have done before us:

God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change; Courage to change the things we can; And wisdom to distinguish the one from other. Amen