

Rabbi James Mirel
Yom Kippur 2008/5769

Every holy day in Judaism revolves around a different central mythic story from the tradition. Passover focuses on the Exodus narrative, the redemptive story of our passage from Slavery to Freedom. For Purim it is intricate story of Esther and Mordecai, archetypical Diaspora Jews who must use a mixture of artifice, flattery, bravery and sheer luck to defeat an irrational foe planning their destruction. Rosh HaShanah focuses on the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac as a divine test of his loyalty and obedience. But what is the central narrative of Yom Kippur? Tonight, let me suggest a tentative answer to that question while conceding that there is no consensus in our tradition.

Let me turn your attention to the second creation narrative in the Torah, not the majestic first story of God's creation of the world in six days, rather Chapter 3 of Genesis, the much more ambiguous story of the first sin Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It is worth listening to it in its original language, granted in translation:

The Torah offers no straight forward explanations and that is why this brief story has the subject of more commentary than any other throughout the centuries. Tonight I will leave the close reading and the discussion to the Shabbat after Simkhat Torah during our usual 9:00 am Torah study group. For Yom Kippur there is only one word of the story that truly matters, one word in Hebrew that is that terse highly inflected language. It is the first word God speaks to Adam after his eating of the fruit *AIY-YE-KA*: Where are you? Clearly God knows where Adam and Eve are, as God knows the location of each person on earth throughout the generations. This is not a question of location; it is a question of intention. In this Hour of Decision, choosing between Good and Evil, between Life and Death, *aiyeka*: where are you and you and you and me? In the presence of all the errors and sins we have committed. Where are you today as you are given a new lease on life?

It is a question each of us must answer now and each Yom Kippur, but not only then, each and every day we make countless choices and each choice is engraved in our soul and in the universe.

If this was the totality of my reflections tonight it would be fair to say it would be no different than most Yom Kippur sermons: a call to self-examination and a change of direction where it is needed. Not a trivial message but not a radical one either. Tonight, I will choose to turn the question around in the spirit of Rabbi Levi of Berdichev and Elie Weisel. This year has been a particularly trying year for our world and so many in this sanctuary. If God has the absolute right to challenge us with the question: *Aiyeka*, do not we too have the right to ask the same question Of God? Where are you? Where have you been?

Many of you know that a recent sociological study found that a majority of American Jews do not believe in God. Without delving into methodology and examining what the respondents understood by the question, I accept that as a given. For many of us, the

world is best explained by reference to science in the broadest sense without a theological overlay. We do not know everything about the world, but what we do not know can be discovered in time through scientific methodology. For others, 50% or less, the idea of God still remains a statement of our world-view. A faith that in the midst of the vastness of the universe, much too vast to fathom, there is a deep and abiding divine presence, which we subsume under the word God, which means different things to each of us, but something essential to each believer.

I respect the large collective of the first group which includes some of my family, many of my friends, and probably a good percent of those here tonight. But it is those of us in the second group in which clearly I include myself for whom these words are intended. The others may listen or may choose not to.

We believers must have the same privilege at this time of the year to challenge God with the same word that God challenged Adam and Eve, and each of us who have sinned during the past year. *Aiyeka?* where are You?

God, *aiyeka?* Where are you when we see our loved ones taken from us by death, some all too young, some after years of needless and painful suffering? The best and kindest among us, who had so much to live for, the heart of our hearts, the soul of our souls, children, young people, people in the prime of life, for no rhyme and no reason. *Aiyeka?*

God, *aiyeka?* When we experience the diseases that zap our strength or the strength of our loved ones, horrible diseases like ALS which traps us in our bodies, unable to move or speak, or the unspeakable frustration of Alzheimer's disease robbing us or our loved ones of memory, speech and meaning, the unutterable pain when our own mother or father cannot remember our name or even recognize us in any way. *Aiyeka?*

God, *aiyeka?* When hundreds of millions of children go to bed hungry every night, when there are hundreds of thousands of orphans in Africa whose parents have died from AIDS and many of these children are also infected. When children are neglected and abused by those who should care for them and love them. When tsunami, earthquake, and hurricanes leave so many dead and so many more homeless, *aiyeka?*

And God, *aiyeka?* When less than a century after the Holocaust, a President of a civilized nation can come to the United Nations spewing hateful lies about Israel and Jews, calling us murderers and vermin and receiving applause and accolades in that international forum with hardly any dissent, *aiyeka?*

God, *aiyeka?* When good hard-working Americans and some in this very sanctuary lose their nest eggs and jobs in spite of valiant effort and following the rules, facing foreclosure and even homelessness with no relief in sight, *aiyeka?*

On this Yom Kippur eve, we are overwhelmed with the suffering in our world; individuals, nations, our very planet filled with pain and need, perhaps even imminent

destruction of our eco-system and those of us who believe deeply in a Good God are puzzled and dismayed. *Aiyeka?* Where have you been God and where are you now?

But even as we believe God forgives our sins when we sincerely repent, our only hope is to extend the same gift to God. Let us put aside blame and vow to work together to mend this world one life one soul at a time. Death is the ultimate mystery, but we can hope that a loving God cradles our dead in everlasting peace and that each one is still part of this vast universe in some ineffable way. With the strength God gives us and our own we will conquer disease in time, and lift people out of abject poverty, broken cities can be rebuilt, nest-eggs restored, jobs lost can be replaced and love can encompass even those who are struggling.

The challenges of life can seem more than we can bear, sometimes they are, but for some maybe most we can say with the Psalmist, weeping may tarry for the night but joy comes in the morning. I know for many here tonight, that night has been so very long and difficult, weeks, months even years but I beg you not to despair, for those who have faith please do not give it up. For those without faith in God, please maintain your faith in the goodness of your fellow human beings, loved ones, friends, counselors and even the kindness of strangers at the most trying moments.

We cannot return to Eden prior to the fall, a world without death, without illness, without poverty or need, but slowly step by step we can make a little bit of Eden in each life with a kind word, a warm embrace and through extraordinary gifts of time and wisdom.

There are people in this sanctuary who know that so well within them a kidney or liver or bone marrow of another human being the very gift of life itself and there are spiritual and emotional transplants of no less generosity and grace.

Will the coming year be free of pain or tragedy? Sadly not. But this will also be a year when faith in God or faith in each other will carry us through whatever fate has in store for us. Of this you can be absolutely certain and it is also our fervent prayer.