

Talking 'Bout My Generation

Erev Yom Kippur
5769/2008
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It is the fate of all rabbis' children that their lives are never entirely their own but end up being used as raw material for sermons to the congregation. For almost twenty-five years, I have shared with you the various stages of my daughter's life. She is now, in what seems to be so characteristic of her generation, in a period of time between college and serious professional life. Though I have been supportive of and even encouraged her travels and various experiences over the last few years, I also find myself increasingly worried for her. It's not just the practical issue of what she's going to do for a living but that the work world she is now living in seems to be a more difficult one than the work world we experienced when we left school. In fact, I've found myself pondering this year about the world that she is about to inherit. I've been thinking about the legacy that we are leaving for the next generation because the next generation is now in the wings, ready to take our place.

Neither Sarah Palin nor Barak Obama are baby boomers but rather the next cohort. Put simply, they were five and

eight years old when Woodstock was held, pre-teens when the Vietnam War came to an end. Our generation's time of influence is coming to an end. We have, roughly, ten more years, one decade, before our term comes to its close.

How will we be judged, we who started out with such great, enormous and optimistic expectations? We were going to overthrow the Military Industrial Complex, eliminate the tired bourgeois conventions; free love, free dope, world peace. How will we be judged? How will we judge ourselves?

Though Yom Kippur is the time when we are to take a personal inventory, a really hard, tough look at our private lives and relationships, I want us this evening to also have us scrutinize our public life, to examine our generation. For increasingly this year, "the world is too much with us", it has pressed itself upon us in a way that we cannot ignore and that impacts upon our personal lives. So tonight, I want to talk with you about my generation, our generation and to say that there is much for which we must atone.

Never, it seems to me, has there been a generation with so much: so much education, wealth and freedom, yet never has a generation squandered its gifts the way that we have. No, I will go even further, for not only have we

squandered, we have ruined and destroyed, we have depleted. We need to strike our chests in contrition and say, "al chet: we have sinned", not merely for failing to make the world better, but for what our generation has done to make life worse for our children.

As a generation, learned, in the 60s, how to politically organize. We learned that community grass roots efforts could bear fruit, we learned that large gatherings could help sway votes, we learned that the domestic and foreign policies of our nation could be changed. We knew how to do this. But then we went our own ways, into our own lives and concerns, and suddenly, for too many in our generation, the lives of others didn't seem to matter as much. Somehow we felt that the task was too great, the effort too much, and so all that too many of us took with us from the 60s was the pleasure principle and not our obligations to others.

There is the story of two men in a boat, fishing in the middle of the lake. Suddenly, one of them takes out a sharp knife and begins to carve a hole in the bottom of the boat. "What are you doing?!", yells the first fisherman. "If you make a hole in the bottom of the boat, we'll drown!" "Don't worry", replied the second, "I'm only making the hole under my seat." The sin of our generation is that

we closed our eyes while others around us made holes. For 40 years we have closed our eyes. And now, the holes that others have made in the boat are coming to destroy our children.

We knew, in a way that our parents' generation did not, that our planet was a fragile ecosystem. It was our generation who grew up with the picture, never seen before in the history of humanity, of the earth floating in space. We grew up, almost 40 years ago with Earth Day, with theories of Gaia, with the understanding that what happened in one part of the globe effected other parts, as well. But despite that knowledge, it is our generation that has allowed the ozone layer to be reduced. It is our generation that has allowed the carbons to be sent up into the atmosphere. It is our generation, despite Sarah Palin's denial, that has created the crisis of global warming.

The ocean is dying. Its ecosystem is being irrevocably destroyed by the pollutants that we have been dumping into it. Huge numbers of American streams and lakes are no longer useable because of our poisons, the poisons of this generation. We have fouled the skies, tainted the land, and altered the chemistry of the animals which graze upon it. Scarcely a month goes by without some

major food group recalled because of toxins. We have destroyed the great forests which produce oxygen for this planet. We should blush with shame to the roots of our being that we who knew better have allowed this ecological disaster to occur through our complacency.

Sarah Palin was right when she said in the vice-presidential debate that the American people have a hunger for oil to run our world. It is a hunger; the hunger of an addict who needs a fix. A hunger that won't stop until it's satisfied, that will cheat and steal, and manipulate and destroy and "drill baby drill" to satisfy that addiction. We will despoil the landscape, we will invade other lands, we will do whatever it takes to satisfy that gourmandizing hunger. And make no mistake, it is our hunger, the hunger of this generation. We will deplete the natural resources of the earth until that last sucking sound is heard from its bottom so to satisfy our hunger and then we will leave the collapsed shell for future generations to come.

And we knew better. Is there anyone here who doubts that if we had put money into this, that American technology and know-how over the past 20 years could not have developed efficient solar and wind energy sources? Did we have to wait until now to start seeing alternative

fuels and hybrid vehicles? Because of our neglect, American foreign policy will be dominated in the years to come by the issue of maintaining, safeguarding and controlling oil supplies not just through diplomacy but through war, as well. This is the future we have left our children.

We have closed our eyes as our highways crumble, our bridges sag and our dams collapse. We have turned away as national math and English scores plummet, as public education in so many of our cities became a disaster. We have been content to go along as the market place was deregulated, and as regulatory agencies received less and less money for oversight, and now, we're going to be paying the bill for a long time. But hopefully they'll be just enough left in Social Security for us to get ours, before that whole system crumbles as well.

What is our legacy to the next generation that belongs to our children? Jobs that have no long term security, pensions that crumble away overnight, reduced health care, rising costs of homes. Joe Biden didn't go far enough in the question he asked the other night: It's not just asking ourselves whether we think we're better off after these last eight years, it's whether we think we're better off after three decades of both Democratic and Republican

governance; it's whether we think we've created a better world for ourselves and our children?

What have we done? The Age of Aquarius has been replaced by the huge, monstrous swollen ego of "my life", "my money", "my pleasure" and to hell with everyone else. It's the baby boomers' Gotterdammerung: We'll take it all down with us when we go.

We are responsible for closing our eyes, for being complicit while others have made the holes. We have one decade left, before judgment is passed on our generation. We have one decade left to do something and not sit complacently by while the air, the sea, the land, the animals, the livelihoods, the health, the security of the next generation is destroyed.

"I put before you this day, life and death, blessing and curse", says God in our Torah portion for tomorrow morning. "Chose life", says God, "so you and your children may live." On this Yom Kippur eve, I tell you that this generation is guilty, you and I are guilty, we are guilty of standing by as the future of our children, our very own, becomes darker and darker. We are guilty of turning away from the choice of life.

My friends, we have one decade left to turn the tide. We need to be supporting and voting for measures on our

ballots that will make a difference and we need to be voting for elected officials who will make a difference and we need to be instructing our leaders what is morally right to do.

The problems that threaten our lives and the lives of our children are too critical to entrust to an average hockey mom. Experience and wisdom matters. Programs and plans are critical. It doesn't matter whether one candidate declares that he's a "maverick" and the other declares that he's for "change", the issue is what are they going to do? What is important to them and what is not? What are they pledged to safeguard?

Tonight begins our period of judgment, and this generation's, our generation's sins are laid bare before our eyes. "Do not stand by while your neighbor bleeds", says our Torah, yet we have stood by and let it happen. "Do not put a stumbling block before the blind" but we have put it before our children. We have left them stumbling blocks piled high in festering dumps, in despoiled lands, in water that we can no longer swim in.

Tonight begins, as well, our period of atonement. We need to stand before the ark and cry out: "Aveinu Malkeinu, O God, Source of Life of the universe, we have sinned, we have depleted, we have poisoned, we have wasted, we have

despoiled, we have destroyed so much of the future for our children. Help us turn back, help us to undo what we have done, help us to halt our destruction of all life, so that we may live, so that we, and our children may live."

Two thousand years ago, Choni, one of our rabbis, was walking down the road and saw an old man planting a tree. And he said, "Old man, what are you doing? Don't you know this tree will take years to bear fruit? You'll never live to see that." The old man answered, "When I came into the world, it was full of trees that those before me had planted. I, now, in turn, plant this tree, for those who will come after me."

We need to start planting, now, the seeds of hope for our children. They will take a decade to flower, they will take years to bear fruit, it will take over a century to repair the damage we have caused to our world, but we must start now, by planting those seeds.

"I put before you this day, today", says God, "I put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, so you and your children may live!" May we plant those seeds, take those steps, raise our voices, contribute our time and resources, may we open our eyes, may we refuse to turn away, may we do our part in this year and in the time ahead to choose life for us and for the generations to come.