

AND I DO NOT KNOW WHAT TO DO?<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Peter S. Knobel

It is great to home. I want to thank Rabbi London for inviting me to give the Dvar Torah this morning. Elaine and I want to wish each of you a New Year of good health and fulfillment. “In the world torn by violence and pain,” it is our sincere prayer that this be a year of healing and peacemaking. For me, the recitation of *Unetaneh Tokef* is among the most powerful spiritual moments of Yamim Noraim rivaled only by *Kol Nidre*. When I read, “On Rosh HaShanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed Who shall live and who has die,” I am always brought up short. Today we stand between what was and what is yet to be. I know of no more dramatic awesome and frightening question than this. What will the next year bring? Our mortality casts a huge shadow over our unconscious journey through life. Only retrospectively will we know what this year will bring. It remains an unfolding mystery until we stand here again next year. This is a time for serious reflection and a time of preparation for an indefinite and potentially frightening future. We ask, “What will be our lot?” ever aware that much of what will happen is beyond our control. This long liturgical poem ends with words “*uteshuvah utefillah utzedakah maavirin roa hazezeirah Repentance, Prayer and Tzedakah temper the evil decree.*” Reminding us that all we can control is how we respond to the exigencies of life.

I remember as child listening to the dramatic sermons of my Rabbi Ely Pilchik as he proclaimed in the name of Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah that God demanded we speak truth to power, pursue justice, seek peace, and care for the widow, orphan and stranger. The power of his rhetoric and the cadence of his speech made it seem that we were listening to the prophets themselves. His intellectuality and his commitment to prophetic Judaism propelled me into the rabbinate. I am proponent of an activist Judaism which requires us to take the message of the prophets from sanctuary into our homes, our workplaces and our politics. Prayer and ritual observance reinforce our identity and reinforce our values. Important as they are, they are not the essence of Judaism. Of course, in times of crisis I want my Judaism to bring me comfort and solace. I want my community to be present and stand by me. But now we are living in a world where the pronoun ‘I’ drowns out the pronoun ‘we.’ In my view, too many people are asking, “what can Judaism do for me” rather than asking, “What does Judaism demand of me?”

Almost every Shabbat that I am in synagogue I turn to the following reading from *Mishkan T’filah* .. “Disturb us, Adonai, ruffle us from our complacency. Make us dissatisfied with the peace of ignorance, the quietude which arises from shunning of the horror, the defeat, the bitterness and the poverty, physical and spiritual of humans.” It concludes with the words “Disturb us God and vex us; Let not Your Shabbat be a day torpor and slumber; let it be a time to be stirred and spurred to action.” Today we should say, let not Rosh HaShanah this day of judgment, be a day torpor and slumber. let the sound of the shofar stir us and spur us to action.

Recently I listened to a recording of sermon by Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf delivered on Yom Kippur 1998 entitled “Age of Catastrophes”. The sermon was set to music as part of a commemoration of Rabbi Wolf’s fifth Yahrzeit. His words were powerful, prophetic and at the

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<sup>1</sup> In Memory of Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf

same time devastating. After naming each catastrophe he said, “And I do not know what to do?” How much the more so today! The easy confidence of an earlier era when we could easily distinguish the good guys from the bad guys is gone. We always knew if a cowboy wore a black hat he was a villain because the white hats belonged to the good guys. We live at time of unintended consequence. We build up one regime only to have it become our enemy. Today we could easily create a new *Unetaneh Tokef* a litany of potential catastrophes for the coming year. Who shall die by Ebola and who by beheading etc. Today anti-Semitism which seemed on a steady decline has resurfaced in troubling ways. Anti-Israelism, Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism have been conflated. Israeli-Palestinian peace has never seemed so distant. The rise of a radical political Islam has a medieval quality about it. The Russian bear has stood up on its hind legs. Americans are arming in what for me are alarming numbers. Thank God! Beth Emet has placed a no firearms sticker on the door. I guess that means I do not have to wonder how many of you are packing and if controversial words will put me at risk. Faith in government is at an almost all-time low. The nuclear threats of Iran and North Korea as well as the reminder from President Putin that Russia is a nuclear power mean that mushroom cloud of omnicide has not dissipated. The political divide in this country seems more like the biblical struggle of Jacob and Esau but with little hope for reconciliation. Racism remains rampant. Violence is pervasive. Our infrastructure is crumbling. Our education system is inadequate to the changing realities. Women’s rights are under attack. Access to voting is in jeopardy. Gerrymandering has increased polarization. Climate change is threatening the ecosystem. Ebola is latest in series of diseases that poses a national security threat. Our technology threatens our privacy. The list is endless. And to quote Rabbi Wolf “ “I do not what to do?””

We want simple straight forward solutions. Arm the Syrian rebels! Bomb Isis! No boots on the ground! Close the borders! Remove the settlements from the West Bank! It is all Obama’s fault. No it is the recalcitrant Republicans. The voices are loud and shrill. The blame game is more popular than Minecraft. Within this complex of problems Can Judaism give us guidance?

This reminds me of a call I received from my son Seth. His daughter Lily asked him how long does it take for a chrysalis to become a butterfly. Seth said he did not know. Lily said, ”Let’s call Poppa. He is rabbi he will know because everything in the Torah.” Seth called me to warn me about Lily’s question. I checked the internet not the Torah and found the answer (by the way it is 5 to 10 days. I know using the internet was cheating.) However, the real, profound and perplexing question is what can our sacred texts and tradition teach us that will help us know what our role as individuals and as members of Jewish people and as citizens of the United States should be as we confront the reality of a world in turmoil.

All is not well even if we here are living reasonably well. Let us remember admonition of the Prophet Amos “Oh You who are at ease in Zion!” We dare not turn a blind eye to the storm clouds that threaten us.

In our heart of hearts we know we are in real danger. Anxiety and fear can be powerful motivators but they can also paralyze us or cause us to act irrationally. Rash action can lead to disastrous results as can too much caution. When we are overwhelmed, we may turn away from the world and seek interior consolation. We may pursue pleasure to distract us from reality or withdraw into self-absorbent mystical states to take our minds away from the whirlwind which is approaching. If we remain paralyzed or turn our eyes and hearts away we will be swept away

by the storm. Judaism offers us a partial shelter. It does not guarantee success but it offers direction and hope. Hope should not be confused with optimism as Rabbi Rick Jacob points out quoting Jerome Groopman in this book *Anatomy of Hope*

But hope differs from optimism. Hope does not arise from being told to 'think positively,' or from hearing an overly rosy forecast. Hope, unlike optimism, is rooted in unalloyed reality... Hope is the elevating feeling we experience when we see - in the mind's eye - a path to a better future. Hope acknowledges the significant obstacles and deep pitfalls along that path. True hope has no room for delusion."

There is no better to begin than the well-known words of of Rabbi Tarfon.

רבי טרפון אומר, היום קצר והמלאכה מרובה, והפועלים עצלים, והשכר הרבה, ובעל הבית דוחק:  
The day is short the work is great the workers are lazy the reward is great the boss is impatient

טז הוא היה אומר, לא עליך המלאכה לגמור, ולא אתה בן חורין לבטל ממנה  
It is not incumbent upon you to complete that task but you are not free to desist from it.

God summons us to do this work. God will not do it for us. We have learned the often bitter lesson that when we most want or need God to intervene, God is seemingly absent and silent. The truth is that God is present only when we are present. "Pray as if everything depends on God and act as if everything depends on you."<sup>2</sup> The most spiritually adept among us know how to tap into energy flowing from the heart of the universe which causes them to act with a profound commitment to transform the world. Revelation does not come to them from hearing voices but knowing that at the core of the universe there is something which demands, as my father used to say, that we act as *menschen* true human beings. It comes from remembering our story that we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. Our history our texts and our tradition teach us. We need wisdom, courage and commitment. We need leadership that trembles with fear and acts with courage. We need to reward politician who in fighting for justice, equality and peace are willing not to be re-elected. We need more of us to be willing to speak truth to power. None of this is easy. We all have personal obligations. We all have our own trepidations. As I look back at my life I know that I have hesitated when I should have been decisive. I made excuses for not being present when I should have been. I know I was cautious when I should have been bold. But with all our weakness and trepidation, we must not disengage. It is not Jewish to disengage. We all know the story of Nachshon which reminds us the Red Sea did not split until Nachshon chose to step into the raging waters.

How can the synagogue help us ? It can do it by being both *beit kneset* (a place for community to gather) and *beit midrash* (a place for serious learning and searching.) The synagogue must call us together to engage in profound and disturbing conversations. (For me this has been one of the great strengths of Beth Emet THE FREE SYNAGOGUE.) It must open our eyes to the ills that affect the world and teach us Jewish texts which will help guide us. It

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Ferdinand Isserles

must help us become champions of justice and expert healers. It must be a place of ferment and debate which challenges us to do what is good and what is right. It must take us out of our comfort zone and teach us listen carefully, thoughtfully and respectfully to those with whom we disagree. It must strive to endow us with wisdom, commitment and courage.

We must become like the disciples of Hillel who remained respectful in their controversies with the disciples of Shammai. We read in Talmud (Eruvin 13b)

R. Abba stated in the name of Samuel: For three years the House of Shammai and that of Hillel disputed one another, the former claiming, ‘halakha (the law) is in agreement with our views’ and the latter contending, ‘halakha (the law) is in agreement with our views’. Then a heavenly voice issued forth announcing: ‘These and these are the words of the living God, yet halakha (the law) is in accord with the House of Hillel’.

Talmud now asks, “Why is the Halacha according to the house of Hillel?”

It answers:

Because they were easygoing and humble, and would not only consider the rulings of the “House of ’ Shammai together with their own, but would give precedence to those of the Shammaites in relation their own

The Jerusalem Talmud offers an even more profound response

R, Yudah b. Pazi asked, Why does halakha follow the House of Hillel?: because they would not only give precedence to the rulings of the Shammaites in relation to their own, but would [often] see the Shammaites’ point, and retract their own position. (*Yerushalmi, Sukkah*, 53b).

In analyzing these passages Menachem Fisch<sup>3</sup> with whom some of us studied here and in Jerusalem makes it clear that “the Hillelites are upheld by Talmudic Judaism’s formative canon as *actively seeking and exposing themselves to* the potentially ambivalating normative critique of others, and when ambivalated, as intentionally confronting the sources of their religion’s authority, not unwittingly, but as a matter of religious principle!”

What a great word ‘ambivalate’! In other words Hillel’s method creates a principled receptivity to potentially revising even long and strong held views in the light of truly listening to the critique of others with long and strong held views. According to Prof. Fisch, this type of openness is what The Talmud means by the expression being faithful to the word of God. It means the word of God is open to revision. It is a rejection of fundamentalism. Reasoned argument must trump dogmatism. The Talmudic model for community decision making is pluralism and respect for difference. Would that this would become the way of the world! It can and should be the way of the synagogue.

After vigorous and rigorous conversations and debate the synagogue, in my view, should take positions on the great issues facing our country and our world even when to do so will

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<sup>3</sup> **“The Dialogical Rationality of Judaism’s Formative Canon”**

[Read at the “Rationality: Inside–Out” workshop, Goethe University, Frankfurt, Oct, 2013]

alienate some of its membership. I have always believed that people respect places with conviction and values even when in specific instance they must personally demure. This has been the tradition of Beth Emet. I hope that some of you will remember Victor Rosenblum of blessed memory who was a strong and important right to life advocate. When Beth Emet decided to reaffirm its stand on a woman's right to choose, we invited Victor to present his views to the Board of Trustees which he did with passion and cogency using the *Union Prayer Book* offering a profound Jewish argument on the sanctity of life even though he knew in the end the congregation would reaffirm its position. This was a fine example of the congregation at its best. Victor remained a proud and active member of Beth Emet even though he strongly disagreed with the stand of Beth Emet on one his most fervently held positions. It was truly an Elu veElu moment. In our struggles to find out what to do we must exemplify the principle that these and these are the words of the living God.

We cannot control what will happen but we can control our reaction. Our fate and the fate of the world hang in the balance today. We may not know exactly what to do. But we all know where to begin! "Seek peace and pursue it." "Justice Justice you shall pursue." Protect the widow, the orphan and the stranger. "Love your neighbor as yourself" "Love the stranger as yourself." "If you see your enemy's ox broken down help to lift it." Take care of the planet! "Do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds." Finally as Isaiah taught us "This is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, And untie the cords of the yoke. To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, And to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin. **Then** shall your light burst through like the dawn And your healing spring up quickly;

We may be afraid and we may not know exactly what to do or where we are going so let us take each other's hand and march together for we cannot get from here to there walking alone.