

For Whom Do We Say “Never Again”?

Yom Kippur 5767

Rabbi Neal Gold

Temple Shir Tikva, Wayland, MA

Woody Allen once wrote a caricature of a Jewish college commencement speaker. This is the theme of his speech: He said, facing a crowd of graduates and parents and alumni: “My friends... Today more than at any other time in history, humanity stands at the crossroads. One road leads to total despair. The other—to complete annihilation. Let us pray that we will have the wisdom to choose the right way.”

The sad reality is that many of us come in to the sanctuary this Yom Kippur not in the spirit of confidence and renewal in the year ahead, but with a very understandable sense of worry, trepidation, and fear. For the world in which we live is one that validates worry, trepidation, and fear. Let’s face it: the year that we are leaving behind, 5766, was brutal and cruel in so many ways.

We are reminded more than ever that there are sinister forces afoot in our world that wish to do us grievous harm.

- We remain haunted by this summer’s war in Lebanon. Our summers were shadowed by visions of hundreds of katyushas raining down on the Galilee, and now we confront the disastrous aftermath of the war.
- There is the specter of the madman Ahmadinejad, and his threats to turn Iran into a nuclear power and “wipe Israel from the face of the earth.”
- There is Iraq, which day to day seems to degenerate further into an entropy of violence and terrorism.
- Closer to home, we know that in the American South – in New Orleans, in our sister city of Waveland, Mississippi, and throughout the region – the work of rebuilding from Hurricane Katrina will stretch for years to come. Some communities will never recover.

Terrorism, war, the crisis of real moral leadership... it can be an ugly and fearful world in which we live. It is easy to despair and give up hope for the world that our children are going to inherit from us. Time and again in the past year, it seems as if the forces of such profound evil have seized the reigns, and are directing our planet on a quick path to oblivion.

If there can be such a thing as humor that emerged from the Holocaust, its truth seems as pointed as ever. There’s a story that’s told of a Jewish man who goes into a passport office after the conclusion of the Second World War. He asks for a visa to leave Germany. The German officers tell him, “Sure,” and ask where he would like to go. Seeing a globe on the desk, he points to the United States. “Sorry,” say the officers, “they’re not taking any Jews.” He points to Great Britain. “Sorry, they’re not taking any Jews.” He points to South America, “Nope, none of those countries are taking any Jews.”

The man sighs, looks up and says, [*Ashkenazi accent*] “Maybe you have another globe?” Who hasn’t known that feeling at some point in the past year?

On May 13, 1939, as the Nazis' Final Solution was getting underway in earnest, a ship set sail from Hamburg, Germany for Havana, Cuba. On the ship were 937 passengers. Almost all of them were Jewish, and almost all were German citizens. They were fleeing the persecutions of the Nazis, which had intensified since Kristallnacht.

The story of the journey that the ship and its passengers would make is an important chapter of the Shoah. It is a story that every Jew should know, and every American as well. The name of the ship was the *St. Louis*.

The tragic saga of the *St. Louis* drew the world's attention even before it set sail. The previous week, upon hearing that these Jewish refugees would be seeking safety in Cuba, an anti-Semitic rally drawing over 40,000 people took place in Havana, the protesters demanding that their government close its doors to these homeless strangers. By the time the *St. Louis* arrived in Cuba's waters, the Cuban government announced that there was no way these Jews would be allowed to disembark onto Cuban territory.

American diplomats and Jewish relief workers tried to make a case with the Cuban government, to no avail. American newspapers became swept up in the story up to a point, although virtually none of them went so far as to actually recommend that America might open its borders to the 937 refugees on board. Quite the opposite. President Roosevelt or Congress could have made a special order to admit additional refugees, but determined that to do so would not be politically prudent at the time. The mood of the United States was decidedly anti-immigrant. A bill which would have permitted the admission of 20,000 Jewish children from Germany, above and beyond the existing quota, was quietly tabled in committee in the back rooms of Congress. The president remained silent – on the bill and on the plight of the *St. Louis*. Polls at the time determined that 83% of Americans were opposed to relaxing any immigration restrictions whatsoever.

The *St. Louis* sailed on. In the most heartbreaking chapter of its saga, it sailed so closely to the Florida coast that all its passengers could see the lights of Miami. The passengers directly cabled President Roosevelt asking for refuge; FDR never answered the cable. The State Department and the White House had already decided to deny them entry to the United States. A State Department telegram sent to a passenger on the ship stated that the passengers must “await their turns on the waiting list and then qualify for and obtain immigration visas before they may be admissible into the United States.” Very few voices in the media dared suggest permitting the *St. Louis* to enter the U.S. on a humanitarian basis.

And so, on June 6, 1939, the *St. Louis* – which had been in the port of Havana; which had seen the lights and beaches of Miami – turned and rounded back to Europe. Its passengers were disseminated to a handful of western European countries, most of which soon found themselves under Nazi rule. More than two-thirds of the *St. Louis*'s passengers were subsequently slaughtered in the death camps.¹

I remind you of the so-called “Voyage of the Damned” today for a variety of reasons. First, because it is part of our history that every Jew and every American should know. And second, because we are a generation weaned on the phrase “Never Again,” yet there are many today making a voyage similar to the *St. Louis*, and I wonder if the world is not giving them the exact same response.

¹ See the article “Voyage of the *St. Louis*,” at the on-line encyclopedia of the Shoah, at the website for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/>. Also, the entire story is told in Gordon Thomas & Max Morgan Witts, *Voyage of the Damned*, 1974 (reprinted in 2006).

“Never Again” has been our rallying cry since the liberation of the camps after World War II. It is part of the very soil of the State of Israel, and it is enshrined in a U.S. Holocaust Museum on the nation’s mall. The question for us is, what do we mean when we say ‘Never Again?’ Do we mean never again will we let it happen to us? Or do we mean something much broader: that we have learned to say, never again will we allow the world to remain neutral, on the sidelines, while tyrants try to make another nation, any nation, extinct from this earth?

Genocide.

It’s a horrifying word. It was coined, of course, in the wake of the Shoah, after Winston Churchill gasped in 1941, “We are in the presence of a crime without a name.” The word was invented by a Polish Jew named Raphael Lemkin, a lawyer who needed to fill the gap that Churchill observed. It was word created to convey accurately the experience of millions of Armenians slaughtered by the Turks, by the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis. He recognized that other words for these uniquely 20th Century disaster didn’t work: “mass murder” was inadequate; so was “denationalization” and, the sentimental favorite, “germanization.” None of those words accurately conveyed the sense of complete biological destruction that was this new contribution to modern civilization.²

And today it is clear that even though the Shoah was unique in many ways, attempted genocide is no longer unique. Consider Rwanda, consider Bosnia... and consider Darfur.

We know what is happening in Darfur, Sudan fits the definition of genocide. Genocide is defined by the UN Genocide Convention as committing certain criminal acts – such as killing or causing serious bodily or mental harm – with the specific intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a nation, ethnic, racial, or religious group.³

And for years, that is precisely what the Sudanese government has been doing to the Islamic tribes in and around Darfur. They work hand-in-glove with vicious militiamen known as the *Janjaweed*, who have been called the Arab *Einsatzgruppen*.

The roots of the situation are complicated. A 21-year civil war has been taking place and, in 2003, rebel groups began demanding an end to their marginalization from the Arab government of Sudan. In response, the government has funded and encouraged the *Janjaweed* whose goal is to target and terrorize the locals. You know the familiar litany of tools at their disposal: mass murder, rape, ethnic cleansing.

The story in numbers is stark. 450,000 dead and rising every day. 2.5 million people homeless. 3.5 million people at risk of starvation. Refugee camps and mass starvation. And the prognosis for the end of 2006 is that things could rapidly get worse, as the rations and funding of the world begin to run out. The worst devastation, of course, has been wrought against children and women, the famous “Lost Children” of Sudan.

Given the scope of the tragedy, and knowing that we have Iraq to worry about it, is it really realistic to think that we can do anything? Can someone in Wayland really make life different for someone suffering in northern Africa?

It is possible. Of course there are many things that stand in the way of decency. Most pernicious is the simple lack of will. Most damaging is the point of view that says, “Sure, it is awful, but what can we possibly do about it?”

² Samantha Power, “A Problem from Hell”: *American and the Age of Genocide*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2002, p.41

³ Andrew B. Loewenstein, “Words Fail,” *The New Republic*, May 15, 2006, p.14-15. The entire issue is devoted to the genocide in Darfur.

The simple fact is, when the U.S. exercises its moral leadership in the world, we can do something about it. Consider the grotesque history of the 1990's. Three attempted genocides took place in the 90's. There was Rwanda, and the world did nothing, and the genocide against the Tutsi people was successful. There was Bosnia, and the world came too late, but when it came, it brought the brutality to a halt. And there was Kosovo, and the world acted, and genocide was averted.

There is a learning curve here. 800,000 people in Rwanda were butchered while the world did nothing. The massacre of the Bosnians was brought to a halt. And in Kosovo, NATO's bombs in 1999 liberated 1.7 million Albanians from the tyranny of Serbia.⁴ There is a learning curve here, and Darfur just might be our final exam.

It is not clear that the suffering is going to capture the imaginations and the hearts of America. But it should. The *St. Louis* is on our doorstep once again, and the Darfuris on board want to know if we are going to repeat our history of sending them back into the guns of their oppressors.

Today, communities around America are mobilizing to say "Never Again means Never Again." We saw at the national rally in Washington, DC last April that the American people are prepared to hold the world accountable. We saw that two weeks ago with the rallies in front of the United Nations demanding action and moral culpability on behalf of the world's leaders. These are signs of hope that the world can learn from its mistakes, and people can make their leaders take notice. Here are the words of Samantha Power, whose work *A Problem from Hell* is the definitive study of America in the age of genocide, commenting on the rally in Washington last April:

If the pattern of the 20th century was that the American public abetted official indifference to genocide by not speaking out (like in the *St. Louis* episode), here was that pattern defied (at the rally in April). Over the last three years, in response to the slaughter of more than 400,000 Darfuris, an American anti-genocide movement has taken form. Although the Bush administration has not done nearly enough to respond, it is thanks to this movement that the United States has done more than any other country.⁵

She's right – just consider the awesome power that we have when we work together as a community. Consider the great civil rights revolution of the '60's, and the remarkable coalitions that formed. Consider the massive waves of us that lobbied for Soviet Jewry in the 70's and 80's. I know that I am not the only person whose Jewish soul was awakened by being part of those ultimately successful demonstrations when we demanded that the Soviets *let our people go*. The anti-genocide movement deserves our passions today.

So what are we supposed to do? That's the problem, isn't it? There has been much consciousness-raising but not as much pointing towards solutions. There is so much more to know and we have so much to learn. Therefore, I want to let you know about what is happening at Shir Tikva in the weeks to come. Our Focus: Darfur task force has organized a **Day of Learning and Action** for our entire Temple community on Sunday, October 29, and I hope you will make it your top priority to join us that day. We will have experts, survivors, and heroes of

⁴ Power, "A Problem from Hell," p.507

⁵ Samantha Power, "The Void," *The New Republic*, May 15, 2006, p.16

the crisis here to teach, answer questions, and share their stories firsthand with us. It is an opportunity for all of us to bring our literacy of the Darfur genocide from *here* to *here* and therefore we will be empowered to act.

For a community that has learned together and has a shared vision of what needs to be done has an extraordinary amount of power.

And in truth, our Darfur efforts are the tip of a much greater iceberg, a great adventure that we're about to embark upon here at Shir Tikva. In the year-to-come, we are launching a Temple-wide Tikkun Olam initiative that will place issues of caring for the world around us at the very center of our core identity. Whatever your passion, we invite you to contribute to this conversation that we have begun. In the coming months, our steering committee is going to begin a series of parlor meetings in our members' homes, to talk about the very real power that is within our reach. In partnership with the JCRC of Greater Boston, this is frankly going to transform our Shir Tikva community.

Approved unanimously by our Board of Trustees, our social action initiative is going to draw the bonds of our community more tightly, to harness the real power that we have together. I hope that every member of our community, in the coming year, will be able to participate in at least one of these home conversations, so together we can discover the core issues that motivate us for justice and peace.

Let me be clear: This is not a push to paste new projects onto our already existing social action program. It is something quite different: It is the opportunity to launch a Temple-wide dialogue on what issues are at the core of our conscience and are in our very real grasp to change. It is an opportunity to talk together with one another and ask, what drives us absolutely mad with passion and disgust about this fearful world in which we live? You'll be hearing from us in the months to come. Do seize the chance to become part of this incredibly exciting dialogue that is just beginning.

Let it not be said about us that they built a beautiful Temple and then used it as an escape from the needs of the world around them. Let it not be said that they tended to their own needs but turned a blind eye to the suffering – the real suffering – that was all around them.

Look and see: I invite you to take the corners of your tallit and look at them for a moment. Look at the shape of the eight fringes, the *tzitzit*, that are attached to each corner of a tallit. The Mitzvah of wearing a tallit is really, from the perspective of the Torah, the Mitzvah of wearing these fringes on the corners of our garments.

The Torah says:

וְעָשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצִית עַל־כַּנְּפֵי בְּגָדֵיהֶם לְדֹרֹתָם ... וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וְזָכַרְתֶּם
אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוֹת ה' וְעִשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם

[The people of Israel] shall make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages... When you look at it, you shall recall all the commandments of Adonai... and be holy to your G-d (Numbers 15:38-40).

How does looking at the Tzitzit remind us of all G-d's commandments?

Well, consider what it is to be a fringe. A fringe is the opposite of a solid, impermeable border. It is the opposite of a wall. A fringe says: the edge, the border, is ambiguous, indistinct. When we put a fringe on the corner of our garments, we state that the border between where we end and the rest of the world begins is not so sharp and defined; it is gradual and slow. I know

that there's a ME and a REST OF THE WORLD, but the exact place where one of those things ends and where the other begins is unclear.

What an incredible statement of living that is. The fringes on our Tallit tell us: Where we as individuals end and the community begins... is indistinct. Where Our Temple ends and the wider community begins... is indistinct. Where our community ends and the world begins... is indistinct, unclear. We are connected and interrelated and ultimately responsible for one another.

We hear in the stories of suffering and need and we hear our own stories, for the line is not so clearly drawn. We see the faces of the Lost Children of Sudan and say to ourselves: We know this story. How many of our families at some point came over here as refugees? G-d forbid we should ever become so gated, so comfortable, so affluent in America that the face of the other really becomes other, alien, unrecognizable to us. Then we will know we are lost.

Some 900 years ago, the great sage Maimonides wrote these words, perhaps originally in the context of a Yom Kippur sermon to the Jews of Egypt. He said:

**If you can do something about your sins and do not,
you are responsible for your sins;
If you can do something about the sins of your country and do not,
you are responsible for the sins of your country;
and If you can do something about the sins of the whole world and do not,
you are responsible for the sins of the whole world.⁶**

The world indeed has many sins, but together as a community, we have an enormous amount of power to transform it. Let Yom Kippur be the day when we say, "Never Again means never again – for everyone."

Let Yom Kippur be the day of our Declaration of Interdependence – when we let the sacred fringes of our community allow our spirit of justice and freedom that permeates our lives to spill over to the world around us.

May this Yom Kippur began a season of light that will illuminate this world which knows so much darkness and fear.

Kein yehi ratzon.

Amen.

⁶ See Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* Chapter 3