

A Vision for Tomorrow: Now Let's Begin to Dream
Yom Kippur Morning
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North Shore Synagogue
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Envision, for a moment, the Kotel – perhaps one of the holiest places for Jews throughout the world. Whether you have been personally to the Kotel, seen pictures of the Kotel, or never even heard about the Kotel, I invite you to imagine a large stone wall, literally stuffed with notes of prayers, and a courtyard surrounding it, filled with Jews and other tourists from all over the world. If you travel to Israel for four days or four weeks, the Kotel is a destination on any itinerary. Whether you come from an ultra-Orthodox background or a secular upbringing, visiting the Kotel is an awe-inspiring moment, knowing how many millions of Jews have stood where you are standing. The Kotel is a place that bridges time and space.

The Kotel is literally the western support wall of the Temple Mount Plaza, which surrounded the Temple. In the year 37 BCE, Herod was appointed king in Jerusalem and he soon initiated a huge renovation project for the then Temple. He hired many workers who toiled to make the Temple more magnificent and to widen the area of the Temple Mount by flattening the mountain peak and building four support walls around it. The Kotel is one of those walls.

The Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, and despite the great destruction that took place, all four of the Temple Mount support walls remained standing. Throughout the years, the Kotel was the remnant closest to the site of the Temple's Holiest of Holies. Therefore, it became a place of prayer and yearning for Jews from around the world.

For some, your relationship with the Kotel, your vision of it, began before Israel became a Modern State. Prior to 1948, the return of the Jewish nation to its land caused tensions around the Kotel. And so a divider was placed at the Kotel, and a rabbi was asked to oversee the happenings of the Kotel. For some of you, this was your introduction to the Kotel.

In 1948, with the War of Independence, the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem fell to Jordanian hands. The Jewish homes were destroyed, and during the 19 years of Jordanian rule, Jews were not able to reach the Wall and pray in front of its ancient stones. All that was possible was to climb up to Mount Zion and glance at the Kotel from afar. Thus is the way some of you were introduced to the Kotel.

And during the 1967 Six Day War, paratroopers broke through to the Old City, and the Kotel and Temple Mount were liberated, the city of Jerusalem was reunified, and the Jewish people were once again able to come to the Kotel in prayer and in song. This is the vision of the Kotel that many of us have come to know. ¹

This is the Kotel I have always envisioned. A wall with two sections, one for men and one for women. A wall that is approximately 200 feet long in the Prayer Plaza section, though now we can see the Kotel in the Southern Excavations, and even more can be seen in the Kotel Tunnels. A wall that was always overseen by someone appointed by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, and in recent days, we see a growing orthodox rule at the Kotel.

As a young woman, and certainly as a Reform rabbi, I dreamed that some day, women's voices could be heard more loudly at the Kotel, at least on the women's side. I dreamed that the Southern section of the Kotel would be viewed by the world as holy, in equal measure to that of the Kotel in the Prayer Plaza, since this is where men and women can pray together, and often where I choose to celebrate B'nai Mitzvah and other life cycle events. I dreamed of a Kotel Plaza that could once again be filled with secular singing and dancing, and not so occupied by the ultra-Orthodox community, who don't respect me as a Jew or a woman, let alone as a rabbi.

But I NEVER dreamed of a Kotel that would have one section for the Orthodox, to be overseen by the Chief Rabbinate's disciple, and one section for the rest of the Jewish community, an egalitarian section, to be overseen by someone from within

¹ This section was adapted from information found on thekotel.org.

the secular government. I NEVER dreamed that women might be allowed to pray at more than 50% of the Kotel, for if the Kotel is divided in half, and a piece of the Orthodox section is reserved for women, even a very small section, then this will be the case. And I NEVER dreamed that a former member of the K'nesset, Natan Sharansky, the current chairman of the Jewish Agency, would be shouting from the treetops: One Western Wall for One Jewish People.

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But now, I can dream. And I can imagine. I CAN imagine a Kotel where my children and children's children can dance and sing and celebrate, WITHOUT worrying who might throw stones at them, who might block them from celebrating their Judaism. I CAN imagine a Kotel where women can wear tallitot and read Torah and pray openly, all hours of the day, and not just once a month, at 7:00 in the morning on Rosh Chodesh, in fear of being arrested. I CAN imagine a Kotel where words of prayer can be spoken aloud from MY prayerbook, with MY language, using MY prayers.

U'vacharta b'chayim – In this morning's Torah portion it says: I have set before you life or death, blessing or curse – choose life, that you and your descendants may live. I now dream of a Kotel that chooses life and blessing – for all Jews.

But why did I not dream of a Kotel such as this one prior to Sharansky's proposal just a few months ago? Why was I so willing to think only within the boundaries of life as they have been put before me? How often we limit our visions and our dreams by what we know, instead of pushing ourselves to dream, to vision, to imagine BEYOND that which is reality.

Fifty years ago, some 250,000 people marched as one in Washington, and heard words of vision. Martin Luther King Jr., Rabbi Yoachim Prinz and others envisioned a world where race no longer defined who you were or how you could exist in this world. They marched for civil and economic rights for African-Americans, and for the values that inspired our nation's founding: the promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all.

We forget what the world was like in 1963. Push button phones were introduced, first class postage cost five cents, and the population was half of what it is today. Most importantly, there was a high level of black unemployment, work that offered most African Americans only minimal wages and poor job mobility. African Americans still sat at the backs of buses, had their own restrooms, and were treated officially as second class citizens.

Today we forget how visionary these words were then, but the words of Martin Luther King Jr, and the man who spoke just before him at the March on Washington, Rabbi Yoachim Prinz, were visionary, they were prophetic. Dr. Prinz came first, the then president of the American Jewish Congress, by saying:

“I speak to you as an American Jew.

As Americans we share the profound concern of millions of people about the shame and disgrace of inequality and injustice which make a mockery of the great American idea.

As Jews we bring to this great demonstration, in which thousands of us proudly participate, a two-fold experience -- one of the spirit and one of our history.

In the realm of the spirit, our fathers taught us thousands of years ago that when God created man, he created him as everybody's neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity.

America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent. Not merely black America , but all of America . It must speak up and act, from the President down to the humblest of us, and not for the sake of the Negro, not for the sake of the black community but for the sake of the image, the idea and the aspiration of America itself.

Our children, yours and mine in every school across the land, each morning pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States and to the republic for which it stands. They, the children, speak fervently and innocently of this land as the land of ‘liberty and justice for all.’

The time, I believe, has come to work together - for it is not enough to hope together, and it is not enough to pray together, to work together that this children's oath, pronounced every morning from Maine to California, from North to South, may become a glorious, unshakeable reality in a morally renewed and united America.”

No question, Dr. Prinz was a dreamer, as was his friend, colleague and supporter The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. They dared to speak about a dream, a vision for tomorrow. We all know Dr. King’s words, ending so eloquently with these words taken from his poetic vision:

“I have a *dream* today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; ‘and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.’

This is our hope, and this is the faith...

And when this happens, and when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when *all* of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

There is no question the Dr. King and Dr. Prinz were prophets. They, like Natan Sharansky, could imagine a world different from the one they knew. They dreamed of a better tomorrow, and even if they were not to see it in their lifetimes, they worked tirelessly to make our world a better place, a richer place, a healthier place, a holier place, than the world they knew. And so, today, fifty years later, we have come a long way.

Our journey is by no means complete, but we have traveled a far road. And because of people like Dr. King and Dr. Prinz, we are able to U'vacharta b'chayim. And so I can now dream of a world where people are treated equally, not just blacks and whites, Jews and gentiles, but all people, regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, financial capability or more. And what has not yet been accomplished today, we continue to strive to accomplish tomorrow. To dream of a place beyond where we are today.

And now let us turn from 50 years ago to more than a century ago. Imagine if Theodore Herzl had not dreamed of a land where Jews could be without persecution or hatred. Herzl first experienced anti-Semitism while studying at the University of Vienna, at which time he understood the Jewish problem as a social issue. And then imagine if Herzl had not been sitting in the courtroom in 1894 when Captain Alfred Dreyfus was being tried for treason in France, simply because he was a Jew and the Jews were all hated. His book, truly his vision of the future, *The Jewish State*, was published in 1902. It only became a reality many years later, and Herzl himself never even witnessed his creation. He only stepped foot on Israel's soil but one time in his life. And yet, it was his life's work, and the legacy he left behind. He was a dreamer, and a visionary, and he understood the importance of building for a better tomorrow. Herzl taught us *im tirzu, ain zo agadah* – if we will it, it will no longer be a dream.

We know we must continue to dream of an Israel that will live in peace with her neighbors, not fearing chemical warfare or constant war. This year we observe the 40th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. On October 6, 1973, hoping to win back territory lost to Israel during the third Arab-Israeli war in 1967, Egyptian and Syrian forces launched a coordinated attack against Israel on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar.

Taking the Israeli Defense Forces by complete surprise, Egyptian troops swept deep into the Sinai Peninsula, while Syria struggled to throw occupying Israeli troops out of the Golan Heights. Israel counterattacked and recaptured the Golan Heights, and a cease-fire went into effect on October 25, 1973.

It would be easy to think this year, with all that is currently happening in Syria and the Middle East, that we have not made much progress from forty years ago, that

Israel is still at war with her Arab neighbors, and here we are, once again, on Yom Kippur, reserve forces having been called back to the IDF and many Israelis spending the Holiest of Holy days contemplating and praying for a true peace. And yet, we have moved forward. Israel knows never to be surprised by her enemies, and Israel works in partnership with the United States and other nations to create a Middle East where respect for other human beings and life in general is the top priority.

Even as we sit in our chairs this Yom Kippur, our President and our great leaders are contemplating how best to respond to Syrian authorities' illegal and morally reprehensible conduct, not only to others but to their own people. We yearn and dream for the arrival of the days to come, as Isaiah our prophet describes, when nations shall beat swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and nation shall not take up sword against nation, nor shall they know of war anymore.

And so, it is now on our shoulders to dream, to vision, and to create a world, particularly a Jewish community, one that is beautiful, spiritual, meaningful, challenging and based on Torah and great teachings of our past, as they apply to the world in a community yet to be.

On Yom Kippur, we spend the day contemplating teshuvah, not just how to repent, but actually doing repentance. There is a talmudic teaching on teshuvah by the great scholar Reish Lakish, who teaches: “great is repentance, for it transforms one’s deliberate sins into merits.”² Typically, we think of teshuva as a way of achieving expiation for our wrong doings. The Great Rabbi Soloveitchik interprets this as an example of elevating past misconduct into the inspiration for a new and better life. In just a few minutes, we will offer the prayer of Viddui, the Confession of Sin. Perhaps this year, when we read this prayer, we will think not only of the wrongs we have done, but we will also ask forgiveness for that which we have NOT done. Perhaps THIS year, the process of teshuva will enable us to vision for a better tomorrow – a different tomorrow – a brighter tomorrow.

² BT Yoma 86b

We must become dreamers, visionaries, and even prophets, to imagine what COULD be, and not simply watch as life marches by. Our Torah portion this morning teaches us outright: U'vacharta b'chayim –I have set before you life or death, blessing or curse – choose life, that you and your descendants may live.

We are given a charge today – to choose life, to define what it means to really choose life, not simply to live life, but to CHOOSE life, to choose to make each day count, just a little bit more. To choose to help people who might need our help, with a smile, as a mitzvah, as a part of a community. On Rosh Hashanah I invited you to Lean In to your Jewish community, to your synagogue, to being Jewish, and today, I invite you to vision a better Jewish community, an even better synagogue, a better world.

During each of our High Holy Day Services, we read or sing the stirring words of Avinu Malkeinu. This prayer repeatedly invokes the gracious favor of a God who is conceived of as both distant and approachable, both stern and merciful. During these High Holy Days, we view ourselves as both dependent and unworthy of favor, and so we ask God to deal graciously with us and to be our help, since we have little merit.

The great teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches about Avinu Malkeinu that Israel exists not in order to be, but in order to dream the dream of God. Our faith may be strained, but our destiny is anchored in the ultimate. Who can establish the outcome of our history? Out of the wonder we came and into the wonder we shall return.

And so we vision a world that matters – a world where we truly understand that every action counts and we must find meaning in each and every day. We cannot allow ourselves to get so bogged down in the mundane, in that which is inconsequential and unimportant. Of course we need to do the mundane things required of us to live each day, we are human, and that is part of being human. But don't wait for a loved one to be ill, a family member to die, a hurricane to come for us to realize the preciousness of life. During our silent confession today, and in the silent moments throughout the day ahead, as we fast and withhold food from our

bodies, as our stomachs begin to growl, let that be a reminder of our requirement to choose life, to dream of a better tomorrow, to not be satisfied with the mundane, but to strive for that which is holy.

A final thought from Rabbi Harold Schulweis.

“Think ought. Not what is a Jew, but what ought a Jew to be.

Not what is a synagogue, but what ought a synagogue to be.

Not what prayer is, but what prayer ought to be.

Focus from is to ought, and our mindset is affected.

Is faces me toward the present; ought turns me to the future.

Ought challenges my creative imagination, opens me to the realm of possibilities, and to responsibilities to realize yesterday’s dream.

Ought and is are complementary.

Without an is, the genius of our past and present collective wisdom is forgotten.

Without an ought, the great visions of tomorrow fade.

Ought demands not only a knowledge of history, but of exciting expectation.

Is is a being, ought is a becoming.

Ought emancipates me from status quo thinking.

Ought is the freedom of spirit. Ought we not Ought?”

As we sit here on this holiest of days, let our fasting be not easy, but meaningful.

As we deprive ourselves from food and luxuries, let us think how we might best replenish our souls and our beings. Many have been prophets and visionaries in the past. Now the burden, or the gift, is upon us.

We must dream of a better world, a world where the poor are fed, the homeless have homes, the environment is protected, animals are guarded.

We must dream of a better world, a world where we spend more time celebrating and consoling our family and friends than we do speaking ill of them or in vain.

We must dream of a better world, a world where we don’t need to be awakened by the difficulties of life in order to realize how fragile life can be.

We must dream of a better world. We may not be able to control illness and tragedies, but we CAN control how we respond.

Last Yom Kippur we sat in our synagogues, never dreaming that weeks later, Long Island would be hit by Hurricane Sandy, the worst hurricane to hit our area in many years, if not ever. We never dreamed that we would be living without power, heat, water and more. And yet, so many rose to the challenge. People set aside their differences and helped one another, the children, the stranger, the elderly in our midst. When our synagogue opened its doors to serve three meals a day, to provide lodging when necessary, office space and charging centers, we heard over and over again how proud people were of our synagogue, and of our community.

We need not wait for another hurricane. Let us dream together, of a world where relationships, love and righteousness matter. When the gates of heaven close later today, let us be proud of what we have accomplished in our lives, for we have power over today, and we can dream for tomorrow, but we must begin to make that dream come to reality. Now and Forever.