

## **Rabbi Jackie Redner - Special Needs Sermon**

Rosh Hashanah Day – 5770/2009

Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services, Los Angeles, CA

In 1547 in Poland, someone who took the life of a Noble would have to pay 60 zlotys, the life of a commoner 30 zlotys, the life of a soldier, 15 zlotys and a peasant, 10 zlotys.

By 1588 these fines were inflated and prison sentences introduced. Someone who took the life of a noble would spend 58 weeks in the dungeon and be required to pay 240 groats.

The Polish historian, Norman Davies writes, “By this time, there is no mention of fines paid for the murder of a peasant. Presumably, no one would think of taking such trifles to court.”

In 1906, in New York City, Otto Benga, a Congolese pygmy was featured in a human zoo exhibit at the Bronx zoo. He was kidnapped from Africa after his wife and children were murdered.

How can one human being claim to know the worth of another? How can one treat another as an animal or as a mere object?

History books are filled with stories like these, and also genocides, slavery, and other ways that human beings degrade one another.

Our human potential for cruelty is truly shocking. In our world today, genocides are still happening. Mass rapes along side mass graves. Pictures of maimed and murdered human beings cover the pages of News magazines.

These are the big indignities. Human beings and ants are the only species that will kill one another for no apparent reason.

But there are small indignities too, which may even set us apart from the ants....They are the ones that go unnoticed by the majority and most of us participate in them daily:

the way we erase a life with an averted gaze,

with a look to the floor,

with a brush of the hand,

with a pretending not to see –

with a hiding from the life that is before us... and in the process, hiding from ourselves,

from the holiness of our own beings – closing off our own hearts from the flow of human life in which we exist.

This was recently illustrated in the most profound way by a young man named Kevin Connolly. Born without legs, Kevin was raised as a normal boy by his parents. Using a sort of leather body boot, Kevin hikes, camps, and skis and lives a normal life. The amazing thing about Kevin is that being born without legs is not crippling for him.

It is however, as his camera shows, crippling for *us*.

Traveling around the globe by skateboard, Kevin shot photographs of people as they looked at him – 32,000 photos. One sees shocked faces, tight lipped faces, angry and confused faces, sad faces, closed faces.

Can you imagine what it must be like to be the recipient of these looks, day in and day out? To be made to feel so much on the outside of life... so alien.... your being so devalued, so unembraced by humanity.

I know that some of you sitting here today have felt this way and I am so sorry....

Today is RH, the Jewish New Year which celebrates and remembers the 6<sup>th</sup> day of creation – the day the first human beings were birthed into the world.

And though it is joyous and sweet - we appreciate our lives and our loved ones, it is also serious in nature because on it, we are called to reflect on all aspects of our humanity. It is for this reason that we join together as a community to examine our hearts and to rediscover what it means to be human.

In the beginning of the book of Genesis, we read that human beings are created in the image of G-d, *B'tzelem Elokeem*.

Created from the dust of the earth, humans are breathed into life by the creator's own breath, in G-d's own image.

And whether you believe in the Torah literally or not makes no difference. It is the *teaching* that is important.

It is the *teaching* itself that is meant to dwell within our beings. *B'Tzelem Elokeem*, in the image of G-d.

The preciousness of each and every life is *the* radical notion introduced into this world through Torah. It is the Torah's foundational teaching and the cornerstone of the Jewish life. Indeed, it is the seed which gives impetus to institutions like this one – like Vista Del Mar.

Let us feel within our selves now.. how close or how far we are from this awareness – the awareness of our own lives as sacred – as holy - as precious.

You may be thinking, “Oh Rabbi ....with everything going on in our world, with the difficult economic situation, people losing their homes and businesses, and the tensions in the Middle East... you want me to focus on my own preciousness? My own being as holy!! Come on!”

Well... Yes. Yes, I do. Yes I do want you to focus on this. And if I had it my way, you would focus on it everyday, everyday ... until every cell of you was certain of its truth.

But in the very least, I want you to focus on it now –on this one day a year that our tradition has set aside for us to examine our humanity at a deeper level – on this one day of Rosh Hashanah.

Because friends, without a deep understanding of our own holiness... the sanctity of our own lives, we cannot, no matter how hard we try, truly see it in those with whom we share our world. We can not truly see it in our children, in our spouses, our parents, our friends – the very people we are closest too. It is impossible.

And if we can't truly see it in them, how will we be able to see it in our brothers and sisters who appear different than we do, whether from another culture *or* like Kevin Connolly

... as well as those made invisible by poverty or illness - by war and famine.

Let us admit to ourselves today that we have lost touch with our sacredness... with our own intrinsic worth as a human being. And so we are left instead to find it outside of ourselves - in our *titles*, our *jobs*, our *incomes* and through *consumption* - the *cars* we drive, the *gadgets* we have and even things we *wear* – and (oh, how I love my shoes and my clothes!)

Friends, there is nothing wrong with liking and enjoying the things we have... it is the assigning a special value to ourselves (or others) because we have them...that I am speaking of. In essence, when we do this, we inadvertently affirm the idea that a Noble has greater worth than a commoner, and that commoner has greater worth than a Peasant.

Worth becomes determined by external man-made definitions – the very idea that Torah's radical notion of *B'Tzelem Elokim* is trying to overthrow!

A small example of this... I remember when I was in junior high, how special I felt when I got this shirt, the kind with the little reptile on the upper left side.

It was a big deal in my circle of friends in Simi Valley and seemed to give me automatic access to the cooler, more hip, echelons of Junior high society.

There was this unspoken rule that this shirt somehow made me “special” and so, you can imagine how devastated I was, when this girl, (I won't name names – Sheryl Thompson – bumped into me with a plate of spaghetti and meat sauce staining my beloved shirt forever- sending me back to the level of plain old ordinary folk.

And though I am older, and no longer... quite so bitter about this incident...( wink ) there is still something of that 14 year old in me which makes me ask myself... “What was it about that shirt that made me feel so special?”

After all, I am a child of G-d... I shouldn't need a shirt with a little reptile on it to make me feel special or worthy.

Each of us exists in a sea of universe. In each moment, the eternal vastness which some call G-d or Adonai breaths into our beings – and sustains us. Our bodies are made up of trillions of cells that work together marvelously so that we can live upon this earth and thrive... In every moment...we are being held in the arms of the Infinite...in every moment.

It is not just by chance that we are here. Our lives are nothing less than miracles... each and every one of them. Here at Vista, I am privileged to see the miracle of human life and its mighty transformations again and again. I look at the faces of our choir residents and staff, at our Nes Gadol students and their siblings who are here and the children of our Vista families and friends who join us.

I look at all of you sitting here today – ... at all of you...

Your being is beautiful... You are holy... and precious...

And you were created to acknowledge this first in yourself and then in others. And once you know this, nobody can take it away from you. This knowledge deep within can fill you with an unshakeable love and compassion towards yourself and the other humans you interact with each day.

An open heart is more beautiful than all the external things we seek to find ourselves in and define ourselves by.

*B'Tzelem Elokeem* – In the image of G-d... If we could really take in the idea that each life is sacred...

This foundational teaching from the Torah, *B'Tzelem Elokeem* – this radical... radical understanding of human life... would transform our world for we would see divinity in each life.

The Talmud teaches, “We don't see others as they are. We see them as we are.” Therefore we must start with ourselves, no matter how difficult . . . and begin to fathom that in some mysterious way, I too, am created *B'Tzelem Elokeem* – in the image of G-d. I, too, am precious.

And if I can begin to know this deeply within myself,

I will see it in others as well...

And lo and behold... the utter holiness of our world becomes apparent...and finally, the *knowing* that each and every human life is a miracle...is sacred... is created *B'Tzelem Elokeem...* will a resting place within the human heart.

This is my prayer for all of us sitting here today...

*Shannah Tovah oo Metookah.* May the sweetness of the New Year be upon you..