Sept 2015 Kol Nidre by Sandy Berland

Good Yontif.

Sixty million – sixty million! – the figure is mind boggling. It was called to my attention recently, and at first I thought I must have misheard. The figure alone is hard to comprehend, but in context, it’s almost completely unimaginable: it’s the number of people around the world today who have been forced to leave their homes, who have been displaced by war, persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and, yes, flat out human cruelty. Half of these refugees are children.

Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Iraq, Sudan, Libya, Somalia, Myanmar, Colombia, Nigeria, Congo. Et cetera. The names of these places are familiar. As is the debate over what to do about them. But while the range of responses to this growing mass of tragedies is both as complex and as simple as the things that cause them, one thing is clear: as human beings, and more specifically, as Jews who have so often during our long history been displaced and exiled and in need of refuge, respond we must. And in the weeks ahead, we will be coming to you with the many ways you can be of help in mitigating the effects of this growing, tragic, human crisis. It is our obligation.

Thankfully, we today, in this sanctuary – and it is a sanctuary – are spared the direct impact of the unspeakable horrors that are consuming so much of the world. We lead secure, comfortable lives. Sure, we have reason to kvetch from time to time – some of our reasons are good ones, others not so much. But the reality is that we are, in fact, truly blessed, and we come together on this occasion not just to atone for our shortcomings and failings, but also to express gratitude and appreciation for all the good things, the abundance of good things, that we and our families have. That we today, here in this place, are blessed with comfort and security is an undoubted truth.

But another truth, one that is no less accurate and no less important to who and what we are, is that we are only two or three generations removed from the greatest deliberately inflicted horror humankind has ever experienced. Millions perished, and we will never forget them – may the memories of each of them be for a blessing. But we, as a people, survived. As we have, time after time, across the millennia. And we have prospered. Yet we cannot honestly say that the tragedies that tens of millions of people are suffering through today have never and could never happen to us. Because they have. It is our story, repeated.

As I said last year, whatever our backgrounds, whatever our individual back stories, we share a common history. We have grown from the same soil.

Naturally, when things are going well, when all is good in our lives and the world seems in order, it’s easy to take so much for granted. We have our friends and our families, of course, and treasure them, and we have our jobs and businesses, but our part in the larger community – and its part in our lives – may not loom so large when things are good.
But when our sense of order is shaken, we remember and we feel just how important community is to us. How nourishing it can be, how comforting it can be when we need comfort and how affirming it can be when we need affirmation. How it contributes to our sense of identity and worth and security.

In times like these, we hold our children closer. We cherish our friends and family more than ever before. And our temple truly is the sanctuary we need, a place that protects and sustains us. It’s our connection not only to our Jewish neighbors. It’s our connection to the larger Jewish community from which we have emerged and to which we belong. It’s truly a key part of what we are.

Unfortunately, since we last came together for Kol Nidre, the world has not been healed. Not only have the ranks of those seeking refuge grown, but threatening new acronyms have been added to the old ones – ISIS and BDS are just two of them – and lately, disagreement over how best to rein in the nuclear ambitions of an Ayatollah who has sworn to destroy both Israel and America has created deep divisions among our own people.

You can continue that debate tomorrow night if you want to, after you break the fast. But that’s not why we’re here tonight. Tonight we are here, joined together as a community, to seek atonement, to pray, together, for the world to be repaired, and to pledge, individually and collectively, to do our part as Jews and human beings to make the world a better place, to help our fellow human beings, and to support our Temple and its work.

The challenges we face are many. The intense diversity of modern suburban life is in many respects a wonderland for any kid, but for our “over-programmed” children – and our endlessly chauffeuring parents – religious education and youth group compete for shelf-space with a welter of so many other, at-the-moment-important, things. And when our children reach adolescence, and then go off to college, there is an ever-growing array of challenges to their commitment to Judaism and to Israel. But it is our responsibility to see to it that they have, at their core, a true appreciation for their faith and the tools to stick to their beliefs. If we as a people are to survive, then our children, and their children after them, must understand and truly value the specialness and comfort, the connection and inheritance, that come from recognizing their Jewishness and taking it into their hearts and into their lives.

Which is one of the key reasons our Temple is so important. Temple Beth Torah is a place where our kids – and I mean “our kids” in the broadest sense, that is, all of the children who surround us – can and do feel good about themselves and come to value their Jewishness in a way that is not really possible anywhere else in their lives. It truly does take a congregation, a temple, a shul to raise and nurture a Jewish child. And the Jewish education, identity and values our children receive here stay with them, and nourish them, for life.

And nourish us as well. Our mission is to educate our children, to provide solace and support in times of need, to be a place of learning, of stretching our minds, to be a
community, and much, much more. Yes, Temple Beth Torah is a place of worship, but it is not just that – it is a place of learning, of comfort and community, with a commitment to Tzedakah, to working together, to Jewishness and Tikun Olam, to healing the world.

And we exist only because of the support, the commitment, the active involvement and the generosity of a generation of congregants, clergy and lay leaders who have made this special place a reality. And it can continue to do be that kind of place only with your ongoing support, commitment and involvement.

The year behind us was indeed a special one. Rabbi Gellman – who preached so brilliantly and movingly to us on Rosh Hashanah – became our Rabbi Emeritus and passed the torch of leadership to Rabbi Susie Heneson Moskowitz, who has taken on and performed her new role brilliantly, with sensitivity, passion and intelligence. We have continued old traditions and begun new ones. We have been challenged to think critically, to examine ourselves and the world around us, to make ourselves into better, more socially and spiritually involved people. We celebrated our new Senior Rabbi, joined together for a series of fun (and very successful fundraising) events, and raised money for an ambugycle, which (with its new operator) is hard at work saving lives in Israel. And so much more.

[To repeat myself,] isn’t that what a Temple should be all about? Nurturing us, yes, but also nudging us out of our comfort zones, making us better parents, better children, better citizens and better Jews.

We intend to make the year ahead at Temple Beth Torah even more welcoming, involving and fulfilling. Our innovative religious school and youth group and JTV programs have become models for all of long Island. Our adult speakers program has been nothing short of remarkable and is already off to an extraordinary start in 5776 – [as you know if you joined us this past Friday evening to hear Congressman Steve Israel talk about his novel, The Global War on Morris.] Rabbi Gellman will be back with us in November to preach and teach, and will return again in the spring. We will, as a community, be writing our own, new Torah. Comedy night is coming in October and Casino Night in January. And that’s just a sample of what’s in store.

None of this happens by itself. Our clergy – Rabbi Moskowitz, Rabbi Gellman, Rabbi Wiesenfield and Cantor Appelbaum – our Music Director, Dr. Joe Graffeo, the Director of our David Joshua Berg Pre-School, Jennifer Fusco, our officers and trustees, committee chairs and members, volunteers – and, of course, especially on the high holidays but also throughout the year, our truly extraordinary choir, our teen band, our ushers, and our office and maintenance staff all deserve special thanks. And, of course, there’s Frannie Friedman, Charlie Holzberg and Arthur Wasserspring, who make our high holiday services happen flawlessly and on schedule.
Please support your Temple and your Temple community, both by giving generously today and by becoming even more actively involved in the life of our temple and in its many activities and events.

I ask you to support your Temple financially – dues, fees and tuition pay only a part of our budget; we are dependent upon your generosity to make up the difference, which is crucial to paying our expenses – mortgage, utilities, salaries and wages, all those mundane but essential things – and to providing for those in need – we turn no one away; to offering the many services and activities that bring this sacred place to life; to educating our young people; and to carrying out the many, many other tasks that are essential to the cultural, religious and social life of our temple and our congregation.

It’s easy to give financially. Punch out the appropriate “dot” on your High Holiday ticket, put it – again, the ticket, not the dot - into one of the envelopes that the ushers will be passing down the aisles, and pass the envelope back to the ushers. I ask you to be as generous as you can be. On behalf of the Board of Trustees and the Officers of our congregation, I thank you for your generosity.

But there’s more we’re asking of you. We ask you to engage more than ever before in the life of our temple community. Yes, we need and want your money, but no less importantly to us, we want you to participate in everything we do. Volunteer for our charitable and fundraising projects, come to services, attend our speakers series, study with our clergy, join several of our committees – become part of our Temple leadership. Help build our Sukkah this Sunday, participate in Sukkot services, come to our marvelous Simchat Torah celebration, come to Comedy Night and Casino night and the many other social events that are on our calendar. Bring your friends and family.

Learn, have fun, explore and celebrate your Jewishness, and, most satisfying and fulfilling of all, do your part in helping to repair the world

The ushers are coming. Again, punch out your ticket – and please be as generous as you possibly can. We need, and value, your support.

Good Yontif. Tzom Kal – an easy fast.

And most of all, thank you.