

Creative Concert of Remembrance Yom Kippur Afternoon 5774

Before we begin this creative service I again wish to thank our cantor, Talya Smilowitz, for lending her voice to our prayers and lifting our songs toward heaven and to Natalie Tenenbaum, who not only accompanies our praying on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and many Shabbatot, but also arranged all of the music and wrote many of the original pieces for this creative service. We welcome Zsaz Rutkowski for adding the voice of her cello to our prayers.

For those who attended this service in past years, this year's represents a departure from the structure of those creative efforts. I no longer wish to speak of the martyrs of our people. There is too much martyrdom in the world today. I have given up my efforts to redeem the term and rescue our heroes from their deaths. This year the effort is more simple and straightforward. I asked different questions of myself. What must we remember as a community? What must we remember as Jews and as Americans? What collective tragedies must we mark?

At the conclusion of this service we will turn to the words of Yizkor when we will recall our personal losses. Although we recount those names in the context of community and alongside friends and neighbors, all of us are not mourners. The question then for this service is what tragedies have turned all into mourners. There are, in one short year, already too many to recount. There is the Boston Marathon bombing and Hurricane Sandy, the Aurora Colorado movie theatre shooting and the Newtown School massacre. There will always be 9-11 and the pain it conjures even after 12 years. No monument, no new towers can erase that day's pain. There is still after all these years the tragedy of the Holocaust and especially this year on its 40th anniversary, the devastating losses suffered in the Yom Kippur War. I do not know where to begin. We must name our tragedies. We must recall our loss. After years of mourning alongside you and marking these tragedies together, I have learned. Perhaps less words are required and more music and song. They, and they alone, heal our hurt and soothe our loss.

And so I begin in in the not too distant past. I turn to the tragedy that continues to define the modern Jew: the Holocaust.

1. The Holocaust

For modern Jews our tragedies are framed by the Holocaust. Our contemporary stories must include these names. Six million lives are too many to recount. There are too many names we do not know. Still there are stories we know better than others. Many wrote of their experiences. For a precious few their words were somehow saved.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira was the rabbi of a town in Poland and a popular teacher throughout the area. In 1939 his entire family was killed in the Nazi aerial bombardment of Poland. After the German invasion he was shipped to the Warsaw ghetto where he ran a secret synagogue even managing to find a way for people to observe the mitzvah of mikveh, the ritual bath. His teachings and sermons were popular among those trapped in the ghetto. After the uprising the Nazis sent him to the Trawniki work camp where fellow prisoners offered him the opportunity to join them in an escape attempt. He elected to stay with his Hasidim. Following the uprising in the Treblinka and Sobibor death camps the Nazis shot to death the prisoners in Trawniki. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira was shot to death on November 3, 1943.

In the months prior to that day, as the Warsaw ghetto uprising neared its bitter end, Rabbi Shapira prepared for the worst. He hid his sermons and teachings in a milk canister. After the war they were found by a construction worker. His writings continue to be studied to this day. I have spent some mornings in the warmth of Jerusalem's summer pouring over his words. The most famous of his collection is called Esh Torah—The Fires of Torah. In the Warsaw ghetto, on a cold, wintery day of February 28, 1942, he said: "God's worship requires koach-strength and simcha-joy. This is especially true when the troubles carry on for a long time. For then, even someone who at first was able to brace himself and encourage others, also loses strength, becoming weary of comforting himself and others."

In recalling his memory we remember his strength. We think of his teaching to rejoice. We recall his memory, and all those who were murdered during the Shoah, with the words of a contemporary Israeli song, "Dmaot shel Malachim—Tears of Angels" by Yoni Rechter.

There are tears of angels
Why do the angels cry?
Perhaps because it is so easy
for the angels.
The world is so sad.

And here we are
We want to cry with them
What are we to do?
We want to cry
but the tears do not fall
the tears will not flow.

SINGING OF "DMAOT SHEI MALACHIM"

2. Yom Kippur War

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. On Yom Kippur of 5734, October 6, 1973, the Egyptian and Syrian armies launched a surprise attack on Israeli positions in the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights. They crossed the cease-fire lines established following the 1967 Six Day War. Israel forces were surprised. The Jewish world was stunned. Soldiers went from synagogue to synagogue to inform reservists who then struggled to join their units.

The Firdan fortress along the banks of the Suez Canal, made a heroic stand against the Egyptians during the first three days of the war. Nearly two-thirds of the small garrison lost their lives and the rest were taken prisoner. Judah Raviv, a medic serving there, wrote this account, after returning from captivity.

“As the afternoon wore on, we began putting things in order for the eve of Yom Kippur. The little ark that held the Torah was taken from its alcove in one of the bunkers and set up in the dining room. Haim prepared the final meal before the fast and the soldiers filed in reverently, each taking his place at one of the tables. After the meal, each of us washed and prepared to usher in the holiest day of the year—this time coinciding with the Sabbath—Yom Kippur. Two candles had been lit and stood on one of the tables opposite the Torah. Then something happened which left a feeling of foreboding. Out of the stillness of the evening came a sudden slight gust of wind that extinguished one of the candles. One of the men relit the candle but within seconds it was extinguished again and the service continued. The Day of Judgment had begun.

“Yom Kippur morning dawned. It was a beautiful and quiet morning. All was still. All was peaceful.

“Though all of us along the line were on military alert, no one dreamed that the next few hours would bring death and desolation. At 1:30 pm ...the war had begun. For the garrison at Firdan, the war was a complete surprise. The fighting continued. Some fought with their Uzis and other with rifles and machine guns at close range. The Egyptians stormed us from all sides but every time they came we drove them back. Monday morning was a dreadful day. We had received notification over field radios that the reinforcements couldn't get through...that we would have to hold out as best we could. On the third day, after many losses and much fighting we were then captured from the fortress and taken to Egypt as prisoners of war. Of the twenty-one men who served and fought at Firdan, eight are alive.”

Israel struggled to regain the upper hand and after nearly three weeks of war had crossed the Suez Canal and neared Damascus. The Syrians and Egyptians pressed for a cease-fire. Few know that the same unit comprised of the same men who liberated Jerusalem's Old City and its Western Wall during the Six Day War were the same unit and the same men who charged under the leadership of Ariel Sharon across the Suez Canal eventually sealing Israel's victory in 1973. The cost of the war was unimaginable. Israel suffered over 2,500 casualties. Over 8,000 were injured. The psychological blow

was devastating. The vaunted IDF who had routed the armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan only six years before was completely surprised. Moshe Dayan, then Defense Minister and Golda Meir, then Prime Minister, eventually resigned.

Victory would never again come so easily. But then, a few short years later, Anwar Sadat flew to Jerusalem and a peace agreement was brokered between Israel and Egypt. It now appears tentative following the Arab Spring. Until this past year the Yom Kippur War seemed to guarantee relative quiet along Israel's border with Syria.

Israel has known far too much war. It has suffered far too many losses. And still it sings of peace.

Only a few years before the Yom Kippur War Stephen Stills wrote a protest song in reaction to the shootings at Kent State. It was released by Crosby, Stills Nash & Young alongside their more familiar "Ohio." It is a haunting song, "Find the cost of freedom, buried in the ground. Mother earth will swallow you. Lay your body down."

There remains far too much death. Far too many soldiers fell on battlefields defending Israel's borders. Far too many of our youth have given their lives. As Yitzhak Rabin said, "We, the soldiers who have returned from battle stained with blood, we who have seen our relatives and friends killed before our eyes, we who have attended their funerals and cannot look into the eyes of their parents, we who have come from a land where parents bury their children, we who have fought against you..."

We say to you today in a loud and a clear voice: Enough of blood and tears. Enough."

SINGING OF "FIND THE COST OF FREEDOM"

3. Ambassador Christopher Stephens

Only a few short days ago we marked the tragedy of September 11. Last year we saw its lingering effects when Ambassador Christopher Stephens was murdered at the US Embassy in Benghazi, Libya. It seems clear now that Al Qaeda affiliated terrorists carried out this coordinated attack in which the Ambassador and three others were killed. Was the attack revenge for the US involvement in Libya's civil war and the killing of Qaddafi? Was the attack timed to coincide with 9-11? We cannot know.

What we do know is that Ambassador Stephens gave his life in the service of his country and in the pursuit of diplomacy. He was a career diplomat who frequented the markets in Benghazi to mingle with the locals and practice his Arabic. During the early morning hours of September 12, 2012, as fires raged on the embassy compound, fellow employees and security personnel could not find the ambassador. It was instead locals, who had come to love Chris Stephens, who found him and carried him to a nearby hospital. It was there that he was pronounced dead from smoke inhalation.

The smoke still lingers from 9-11. The fires still burn. We sing a song composed by our cantor. Its chorus is structured around the biblical book of Lamentations. 2,500 years ago, the prophet Jeremiah lamented the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians with the words:

Alas!

Lonely sits the city

Once great with people!...

Bitterly she weeps in the night,

Her cheek wet with tears.

There is none to comfort her

Of all her friends.

All her allies have betrayed her;

They have become her foes..."

Words spoken millennia ago. Still they touch a chord within our souls. "All her allies have betrayed her; they have become her foes."

And still the diplomat continued to walk through the market place.

SINGING OF "BITTERLY SHE WEEPS"

4. 9-11: Musical Interpretation

9-11. What words can be offered to remember this day or honor those who died? Every word falls short, every sentence lacks poignancy. It was beautiful, September day, the sky a perfect blue. On September 11, 2001, at 10:28 am the twin towers fell and lower Manhattan was covered in a cloud of dust and ash. 2,976 people were murdered. Families continue to grieve. A city struggles to move forward. 10 years later the memorial was completed with its beautiful and haunting twin reflecting pools. Soon the Freedom Tower will be completed. But the rebuilding and repair will always remain incomplete.

Perhaps music can heal our broken hearts. We offer a musical interpretation of that day of 9-11.

MUSICAL INTERPRETATION

5. Newtown Massacre

And then this year tragedy struck even closer to home. On December 14th a young 20 year old marched into an elementary school and shot and killed 20 children and six staff members. Why? How could this be? Our hearts remain plagued by questions. It was reported that teachers saved countless lives by barricading doors and throwing

themselves in front of the shooter. Sandy Hook Elementary School became a name etched in our collective conscience, a place of learning turned into a marker of national tragedy. Newtown, Connecticut a town like ours, a suburb where families build homes and raise families, expecting there the peace and quiet of any suburban town. And now it has become a town forever weeping, continually crying for the young lives lost. How could someone so disturbed or ill gain access to such powerful weapons? Too much remains unchanged. Our children practice lock down drills. Their deaths haunt our schools.

Years ago Bob Dylan wrote "Forever Young." This is the prayer we dedicate to these young lives.

May God bless and keep you always
May your wishes all come true
May you always do for others
And let others do for you
May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung
May you stay forever young
Forever young, forever young
May you stay forever young

We are left to mourn.

We recall the dedicated teachers:

Rachel D'Avino, teacher's aide
Dawn Hochsprung, principal
Anne Marie Murphy, teacher's aide
Lauren Rousseau, teacher
Mary Sherlach, school psychologist
Victoria Leigh Soto, teacher

We mourn the first grade students:

Charlotte Bacon
Daniel Barden
Olivia Engel
Josephine Gay
Dylan Hockley
Madeleine Hsu
Catherine Hubbard
Chase Kowalski
Jesse Lewis
Ana Marquez-Greene
James Mattioli
Grace McDonnell
Emilie Parker

Jack Pinto
Noah Pozner
Caroline Previdi
Jessica Rekos
Avielle Richman
Benjamin Wheeler
Allison Wyatt

“May you stay forever young.” That remains our prayer for these young souls.

SINGING OF “FOREVER YOUNG”

6. Hurricane Sandy

We turn now to our own troubles. We turn to nature’s fury and, although we might wish to pretend it a distant memory and that such storms can never again occur, we recall the recent tragedy of Hurricane Sandy. 285 people were killed. The United States suffered 65 billion dollars in damage. Neighborhoods remain broken. Communities struggle still to rebuild.

Weakened trees continue to fall. Branches continue to collect on our lawns. We recall these darkened days now in our own hearts.

SILENCE

Our tradition prays: “Ufros aleinu sukkat shlomecha—spread over us Your sukkah of peace.” We sing a contemporary version of this prayer as we look for strength and shelter from nature’s fury and its storms. Oh, dear God, guide our steps. Protect us. Shield us. Shelter us.

SINGING OF “OH GUIDE MY STEPS”

7. Oseh Shalom

And now at the conclusion of our service we turn to a song and prayer that exemplifies our faith, Oseh Shalom. Throughout the generations, and throughout our long sufferings and endless tragedies, we have held fast to its words. We conclude with peace. We always end our prayers with shalom. “May the One who makes peace in the high places, bring peace to us and to all Israel. And let us say: Amen.”

The angels’ tears may indeed fall from heaven, but peace remains in our hands. We sing our prayer for peace and gain strength from our tears.

SINGING OF “OSEH SHALOM”

8. Yizkor

We turn now to the Yizkor service, when we recall our own personal losses.

There are two types of tears.

There are the tears of pain. These tears burn our cheeks when death stands before us, when the weight of the heartache and loss feel crushing. These are the tears of despair when we feel like we will never be able to live without our loved one. We look back at these tears and wonder how we ever summoned the strength to place a shovel of earth into our loved one's grave.

Later the tears of memory begin to roll down our cheeks. These tears do not sting. Instead they are sweet. We find that we laugh and smile when recalling stories of our father or mother, husband or wife, brother or sister, child or grandparent. These tears bring with them the memories of loved ones. They hurt, but do not sting. Their taste is not the salt of bitterness but the sweetness of memory.

There will always be tears.

Some will sting.

Others will be sweet.

These later tears will bring with them memories, stories, images, pictures, words and values.

We cry when we remember.

But we also gain strength from these tears.

Our tears are no longer incapacitating, but resuscitating.

May God help us transform all of our bitter tears into the sweet tears of memory.

SINGING OF "WANTING MEMORIES"

We turn from the contemporary to the songs and prayers of our tradition.

***Rabbi Steven Moskowitz
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