

YK PM 5774

If you heard a loud “Thunk!” coming from the vicinity of the Temple this morning, I know what it was. It was the sound of a completely written, pristinely edited, compellingly rehearsed, Kol Nidre sermon hitting the bottom of the trash can.

I have stood here roughly fifty times on the High Holy Days, hoping to share a message of insight, intellect and inspiration. Sometimes I have been more successful; other times less so. The preparation is neither easy nor quick. By the time I stand here the text has been vetted, polished and rehearsed out loud multiple times.

Tonight’s a little different. So if my words are not as smooth, my thoughts not as clear, as I like to think they usually are, I ask your indulgence.

This morning, I realized that what I had intended to talk about, while important, was not really what was on my mind. Or probably yours. My heart wasn’t in it. I always follow the news closely. This week, all Syria, all the time. The events unfolding have significance for us, as Americans to be sure, but also as Jews. For that reason, even tonight, I think it important we raise them.

Syria is, alas, a nightmare. The war between the Assad government and the rebels has been intense and bloody. Our reaction has been complex. I note, as one example, that the opposite extreme views are found within one political party. John McCain and Lindsay Graham advocated an active, intense presence from the outset on the side of the rebels. Rand Paul says, not our fight. Stay clear. Politicians from both parties are all along the spectrum between those two poles. And probably we are as well. Perhaps, even within ourselves.

On the one hand, real evil is taking place in this land. Horrible bloodshed which seems unending. How can we not do something? On the other hand, after Iraq, and Afghanistan, and Libya? What’s the point. What can we hope to accomplish that would actually be good. That would actually be useful.

And there are other complexities as well. Bashar el Assad, whether he really is running things or whether he is, as some believe, a puppet of the generals, his government is inflicting terrible evil upon its own citizens. On the other hand,

while they have certainly not been friends, Israel and Syria have essentially enjoyed a stable border for a long time. Just compare it to the border with Lebanon.

Another complexity. In the early days of the conflict the large public impression of the rebels was the good guys vs the bad guys. Cops vs robber. Choose your cliché. But look at Paul Mulshine's column in yesterday's *Star Ledger* for a different perspective. He quotes Mike Ghassali, a Montville Councilman who is a Syrian Christian by origin and who maintains close ties with the Christian community in Syria, which numbers two and a half million. Regarding one of the more radical rebel groups, Ghassali reports that, "The rebels lined the Christians up and asked them to switch to Islam or be beheaded."

The biggest complexity of all? Who is telling the truth? Or better, whom can we trust as a source of accurate information? This morning on public radio I listened to an interview program with four different "experts" on Syria. Four people. Four totally different conclusions.

But the current crisis came to a head with something specific. On August 21 – coincidentally, my birthday – President Assad gassed his own people. Thousands died. Men, women, children. We have seen the photographs. You can't ignore them. The small bodies wrapped in white, row upon row upon row....

Yes, in yesterday's *NY Times*, Russian President Vladimir Putin wrote that "there is every reason to believe the poison gas was used not by the Syrian army, but by opposition forces, to provoke intervention by their powerful foreign patrons." Ridiculous. No credible source shares that view.

Tuesday night, President Obama told the nation what he believed we should do.

The key question is what do we do, but first let's ask why. The subject is not an inappropriate one for this day of deep Jewish reflection. My own answer is rooted in my Judaism.

Jewish law has much to say on the subject of violence. In general, our tradition teaches that violence is acceptable, but only as a last resort.

The Talmud explains that there is something called a milchemet mitzvah, a divinely commanded war, which is thoroughly justifiable. However, since God has not commanded us to take to the battlefield since the Bible, we can consider that category obsolete. Maybe the whole idea of a milchemet mitzvah is that, since it only existed in the Biblical age, any kind of milchama, any kind of war, any kind of conflict, is since then to be avoided.

More realistic, perhaps, is the milchemet reshut, the discretionary war. This is a war that an Israelite king may wish to wage, be it for defensive or offensive reasons. However, a milchemet reshut could only be declared with the approval of the Sanhedrin, the rabbinic body of 71 sages who served as ancient Israel's ultimate court. No doubt, approval would come only after close, close scrutiny.

Throughout, a key concern of Jewish law was that war be waged as compassionately as possible. That sounds like an oxymoron, but it really isn't. Maimonides, notes that when a town was under siege, it was to be surrounded by three sides, not four, to allow those who wished to escape to do so safely.

And the Israeli army strives to adhere to a policy of tohar neshek, purity of arms. Among the declarations every Israeli soldier must make, is this one: "The soldier shall make use of his weaponry and power only to fulfill the mission and solely to the extent required; he will maintain his humanity even in combat. The soldier shall not employ his weaponry and power in order to harm non-combatants or prisoners of war, and shall do all he can to avoid harming their lives, body, honor and property."

We search our texts for relevance and it becomes clear, that what is taking place in Syria now is not only horrific to our senses, but grossly violates the moral strictures that Judaism places even on something as unmanageable as the waging of war. Our horror is not mere visceral recoil; it is rooted in our very tradition.

But tradition has something else to teach us as well, though in an indirect fashion.

(Deuteronomy 22:1-2) "If you see your fellow's ox gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your fellow. If your fellow does not live near you or you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home and it shall remain with you until he claims it. Then you give it back to him."

Okay. So it's not a daily occurrence.

But what's going on here. You may recall that on Rosh Hashanah we spoke about the Pshat and the Sod, the surface meaning and the deeper meanings of Biblical verses.

The Pshat is clear. If you find something that belongs to someone else, you cannot simply stand by. You cannot be passive. You have to take the bull by the horns – literally! – and do what you can to see that this piece of property is returned to its rightful owner. You cannot just stand by.

The Sod, of course, is more subtle. There is more at stake here than property. We are taught that if the one who sees the ox does nothing he has committed a sin...even though he has not done anything! The Talmud teaches, that this sin of omission he has committed is every bit as serious as if he had stolen the ass himself.

From this the Talmud derives a *clal*, a general principle, and it is this. One who has an opportunity to perform a mitzvah and does not, it is as if they have transgressed the mitzvah. In plainer language, if we see a wrong that we can do something to right, and do not...then we bear some responsibility for that wrong in the first place.

The question becomes, there is horror in Syria...can we do something about it?

President Obama believes so. And I admit. His remarks Tuesday night touched me as a Jew.

There is something about the use of gas. We know that. There is not even a pretense of a military objective or a territorial dispute or an action against an enemy combatant. This is about killing people. Innocent people. Non-combatants, to use the technical term. The Jewish soul cannot see evidence of this without feeling sick.

The early 1940s. The Nazis begin to gas the Jews. We find out, only years later. The American government knew. President Roosevelt knew. Had the Allies only

bombed a few key rail lines. And they knew which those were. Yes, some on the ground would have perished in the effort. But the Zyklon B chambers would have been stymied. The Holocaust would still have been a Holocaust. But likely with so many fewer victims. Many of us sitting right here might have had larger families than we do.

I cannot count the number of Holocaust victims I have heard speak about their experiences. Dozens, if not hundreds. And no matter the story they tell, no matter how different the personal narrative, one element is always present. We must learn from this. We must not let this happen again. Neither to ourselves, nor to anyone else.

There may be situations where there is nothing we can do. But what about the situation where there is?

President Obama announced his willingness Tuesday night to launch a military strike against Syria if Syria does not voluntarily get rid of its chemical weapons. His intention is the correct one, and I hope that should that mission prove possible, we support it.

Yes, there is diplomacy taking place right now in Geneva, talks are ongoing, the United Nations is poised to become involved, and if there is action in these days right now, it will have to do with the president's words earlier this week, and the belief that he is serious...which I hope he is. Diplomacy is always most effective if the threat in the wings is genuine. On the other hand, diplomacy has a way of...taking time, time and more time.

One can ask a most logical question. These gas attacks took place in the context of broader, wider hostilities that have killed thousands, hostilities that tragically continue. Why should we care about this one, isolated aspect of the broader picture?

First, it speaks to us as Jews. We know chemical weapons. We know what gas can do. Second, perhaps only a glimmer, but there is a glimmer of hope that addressing this one aspect forcefully and seriously will have some desired impact. Third, as the president noted, if there is no response, even no attempted response, who will be next? Is it really so hard to imagine some despot,

somewhere in the world watching, and thinking, gee, if that is all the world is going to do.... Fourth, as many in the media have pointed out, especially in the last two days, Syria is not just about Syria. It is about Iran as well, which means of course....it is about Israel. If diplomacy drags on without action, Israel becomes more and more vulnerable. The danger posed by the conflict in Syria is substantial, ominously more so as we recall that this moment occurs on the 40th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War.

A final thought. After this, I will no doubt receive a few strong emails of disagreement, like I always do after any sermon in which I offer a perspective on something going in the real world. But please understand. I do not share these views with the intention that it is my job to convince you to see things a particular way.

My job is to do my best, insofar as I am able, to take our tradition, to understand its teachings, to plumb its values, and to apply them to the world around us. We may find they fall short. We may find they are archaic. We may find they do not apply. And obviously that is our right.

But I would remind you not to reject those teachings too hastily. They have kept us together for some 5,000 years. There must be at least something to them.

O God we find ourselves in a world that once again roils. A world of conflict and strife and evil of the basest kind. We Jews know these things all too well. We know where they can lead.

We ask for your blessing on those who lead us, that they be graced with insight, vision and purpose.

Bless those who on our behalf serve in harm's way, protect them and shelter them as they protect and shelter us.

Guard the souls of those who perished as innocent victims, whose lives were cut short by the most nefarious of man's handiwork.

Your prophet Micah laid out for us a vision of a world that can be, *va-ya-ashvu eesh tachet gafno v'tachat v'ae'ma-toe v'aen machareed*, where each shall sit

under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make them afraid. May it be your will, O God, that that day comes.