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wasinger*

Subject: from uzi
Date: Fri, 19 Sep 1997 00:31:03 -0400 (EDT)
From: Benuzi@aol.com
To: nlaam@ibm.net

Dear Rabbi Lamm,

During the past month I have been traveling in the US, visiting Mesa, a suburb of Phoenix, AZ, and Los Angeles. Along the way I had the opportunity to teach Torah, and early next week I will send you "Words that Heal, Words that Hurt," a sermon that I delivered in three shuls.

Today's message is a unique one, in that it does not look at a text but contains some thoughts and feelings about current events, specifically about how Jews treat Jews. There are now close to 30 Rabbis, educators and academics who receive these divrei Torah 1-2 times a month. The list cuts across denominational lines, and includes Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and Jewish Renewal. (There are also some Christian readers.) This serves as an important reminder that whatever our differences, we can find common ground studying Torah in an environment of mutual respect.

Some of my non-Orthodox colleagues have indicated to me that they will speak on Rosh Hashanah about religious pluralism in Israel and the tension between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews. Many have personally experienced, or have congregants who have personally experienced, verbal or physical abuse from ultra-Orthodox Jews this past summer in Jerusalem.

This is a very, very painful subject for me. The morning after Shavuot, when I saw the headlines describing the abuse of Jews at the Kotel, I was sick to my stomach. Shortly thereafter I had the opportunity to speak with a Jewish Renewal couple, a husband and wife who came to Israel to live more fully as Jews. They were at the Kotel on Shavuot night, and listening to them describe what they were subjected to that night, and how they felt poisoned by it, was one of the saddest experiences I have had. Two months later, on Tisha b'av night, the TV cameras brought into my home the sights and sounds of Jewish police physically evicting Jews from the Kotel in the middle of davening ma'ariv. This was followed by the burning of the Reform kindergarten in a Jerusalem suburb. It has been a very difficult summer.

My own struggles in matters of faith over a period of many years, and the many discussions I have had with colleagues of all denominations, have led me to understand that no one denomination has a lock on truth. Rather, we are each holding onto a part of the truth. If we listen to each other with respect, not recrimination, with compassion, not condemnation, if we are patient with each other rather than persecuting the "other," we can be profoundly enriched by the dialogue that ensues.

With whom can I have such a dialogue? My personal experience is that it is with anybody who is connected to the three things that the world stands on. One who looks to the Torah as a source of wisdom and inspiration ("torah"), learning it and struggling with it; who sees him/ herself standing in the pres-

ence of the Unfathomable, listening for the Divine voice ("avodah"); and who strives to live a life of personal ethics ("gemilut hasadim"). More than that is not necessary.

Having said that, I wish to return to the subject of High Holiday sermons that will address the subject of pluralism and ahavat yisrael. Some of you have shown me drafts of High Holiday sermons, sermons that reflect deep pain, hurt and anger. Precisely because this is such an important issue, there are some points I wish to make.

First, by way of clarification, even the most fanatic Orthodox Jews do not deny the Jewishness of the non-Orthodox. They do not accept their theology or their understanding of halakhah, and therefore do not accept their converts. But unlike what has sometimes appeared in the media, nobody denies the Jewishness of Jews.

Second, the Orthodox world is not monolithic. Many Orthodox Jews, and many ultra-Orthodox Jews, are appalled at the latest developments. They shudder at the thought of what will come next. The shameful silence of much of the Orthodox leadership does not reflect the very powerful revulsion that many rank-and-file Jews feel about this. There are still Orthodox institutions of higher Jewish learning that maintain a respectful dialogue with other Jews. I will teach this coming year in Israel at some of them. (Part of the tragedy is that these institutions are not getting the funding they need, neither from the government nor from Diaspora Jews, and are unable to run a full complement of programs.)

This does not take away from the very real crisis that we face, and I am not sure that it diminishes the anguish of those who suffered abuse for their beliefs. However, overstating things will only create more gratuitous hatred, and Jewish ethics of speech call upon everybody, and certainly upon wise people, to be mindful of what we say.

Third, the ultra-Orthodox would not have their way in Israel if not for the fact that most secular Israeli Jews also do not grant legitimacy to non-Orthodox Judaism. The police who refused to protect the right of Jews to pray at the Kotel, and who ultimately physically removed them, are secular Jews accountable to secular officers and a secular minister. The shul that most secular Israelis do not pray in is an Orthodox one. This has to do with many factors, among them the lack of a meaningful non-Orthodox presence in Israel, the fact that most Israelis had zaidies and bobbies who were Orthodox, and the general tendency in Israel to delegitimize the "other." (I find this last quality the most difficult one to deal with in daily life in Israel.) This, too, must be borne in mind as we consider the very sad events of this past summer.

Lastly, Rosh Hashanah is a time when Jewish hearts are open to calls for self-improvement and renewed commitment. If our entire message consists of pointing fingers at the shortcomings of others, we will have squandered a

once-
in-a-year opportunity. Our congregants will go home feeling wonderful about themselves, when they should rather be challenged to explore their own ethical and ritual commitments.

I offer a suggestion, as food for thought, that those who raise the issue of pluralism and tolerance do so with a wide-angle lens. Very few people are entirely free of disdain for those whose ideology or practice they disagree with strongly. Two Conservative colleagues recently shared with me their sadness about the way that many of their congregants speak about Jews of other non-Orthodox denominations. This is not just about how Orthodox Jews treat others, but about how all of us treat others. The issue of loving other Jews and/or gratuitous hatred can be a powerful vehicle for spiritual growth when it is raised in a context not of self-righteousness but of the need for all of us, Jews of all denominations and ideologies, to revisit our attitudes about the Jewish "other."

Best wishes,

Uzi

PS As always, I welcome your feedback, especially on a piece like this. But please send it ONLY at your convenience, and I do know that you read even if you do not respond.

Subject: from uzi
Date: Mon, 28 Jul 1997 10:57:24 -0700
From: Uzi Weingarten <benuzi@isracom.co.il>
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References: <33DBEEA6.39B@ibm.net>

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Dear Rabbi Lamm,

Your "broken record" is music to my ears. (It is a veritable symphony to my mom...)

Your reaction is significant to me. And I don't need more than the few sentences you wrote. So at risk of my sounding like a broken record, thank you for your feedback and your kind words.

You may recall that around a month or two ago you sent me some thoughts on emunah, to which I promised you a response. I have done some work on this, and will IYH send it out to you later on this week.

On a different note, I will coming in to NY just after Tisha b'av, and will be leaving on Aug 20 for Mesa, a suburb of Phoenix AZ, where I will be scholar in residence for the weekend of parashat ekev. Would meeting you on Aug 18 or 19 be convenient for you?

From Mesa I will be continuing on to LA and Olympia WA. If the Aug dates are not good, can we meet in September when I get back from the West Coast?

Thanking you again for your feedback, and wishing you a good week,

Uzi

nlaam@ibm.net wrote:

>
 > Dear Uzi:
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 > Excellent!
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 > I think it is a correct analysis, and I personally enjoyed it. I may be
 > sounding like a broken record when I say this, but it is true: you're
 > writing good stuff, and improving with age...Both the exegetical insight
 > into the difference between Joshua/Pinchas and Kanaut in the precincts
 > of the Bet Hamikdash and in the wider community is both compelling and
 > relevant.
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 > Yeyashar Kochakh!
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 > NL