

High Holiday Message 5772 from Chancellor Arnold Eisen, JTS

Writing shortly after this year's 10th anniversary commemoration of 9/11, I am struck by the response our tradition makes—year after year, day by day—to the attack on hope and meaning that stands at the heart of terrorism. Judaism does its best to elicit hope, nurture confidence in the future, and rally our forces to defeat complacency and despair. In the face of a litany of personal, societal, and global woes that has seemed particularly long this year; in the face of our nation's inability to shake the economy loose or defeat our enemies or work together despite our differences, the Jewish calendar insists there is something new in store—or that there *can* be, if we together do as the Torah commands. This message is welcome at any season. Right here, right now, it literally seems a godsend.

Consider the book of Deuteronomy, the stirring conclusion of which we read in the Torah cycle as the High Holidays draw near. Moses gets one last chance to speak to the Children of Israel. When the speech ends, he will die and they will cross over to the Promised Land. Moses's need for the Israelites to listen has never been more imperative. "Hear, O Israel," he says again and again. Moses has to make his words (*Devarim*, the title of this book of the Torah) adequate to the reality he will never know, the facts to be built on the ground, the things to be done (*devarim*, in the other meaning of the word) on the far side of the Jordan. The Israelites, once they cross the river to new possibilities, have the task of making all they say and do adequate to the teaching that God and Moses gave them in the wilderness—and still give them, give us, every day.

This message is utterly stirring to me. Jews of every generation, including ours, stand with those Israelites each Rosh Hashanah. "I make this covenant not with you alone," Moses tells the Israelites, "but with both those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day." You and I are the heirs to the story the Torah tells about what the world should be. Your work and mine—done singly and together—is required to carry forward the chapters that conclude with Moses's blessings and bring those blessings to life. The conversation that began at Sinai, and continued century after century as Jews taught and lived Torah, now awaits our word—when we lie down and when we rise up, when we are sitting in our house and when we walk upon the way.

Deuteronomy is relentless in its insistence that everything we do or say matters, or can be made to matter: The weights and measures used in the marketplace. The treatment of enemies and strangers. The rules that govern divorce and

inheritance. What we eat. How we argue. How we imagine God and worship God. How we live as a community.

I used to chafe at the sheer detail of this and the other law codes in the Torah, or be put off by the aspects of Deuteronomy's legislation or vision that do not seem right for the present day. No longer. I am grateful that the book's determination to help us pursue justice more than matches the determination of the forces of terror to undermine both justice and the belief that justice can ever be achieved. I understand that it is our job to alter the details of the Torah's guidance to suit changed conditions, while making sure that we do not veer left or right from the path on which Moses set us. (The Rabbis did this many centuries ago when they encountered the law ordaining death of the rebellious son by stoning at the hands of his aggrieved parents—and made sure the law could never be put into effect.) I welcome the book's repetitions now as a spur to work constantly on doing good—for suffering, ignorance, and evil are the most repetitious things imaginable. They seem to recur and grow at every moment, thwarting our best efforts to counter them.

You *can* counter them, Deuteronomy insists. Be a community that attends to the details. If you can't make right the precise wrong that you have recently caused, whether as a group or as an individual, do right elsewhere. There are an infinite number of wrongs in need of our efforts at repair. Set to work on one of them. Don't use the fact that you can't figure out the ultimate questions as a reason to sit back and do nothing. None of us can picture how or when things will get totally fixed in the world. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the revealed things are ever given to us and our children to do the words of this Teaching."

Doing good is not rocket science, as we would say. "This Instruction which I enjoin upon you is not too baffling for you, not beyond reach," not in the heavens, not across the sea. "No, the *davar* is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart and mind, to do it." Most important of all—Moses makes this the climax of his address—the Torah sets a choice before us and sets us before a choice. Good or evil. Blessing and curse. Life and death. "Choose life, so that you and your children can live!"

Remember college days when we had the luxury of debating for hours—as if the matter were an abstract and abstruse metaphysical issue—whether human beings have free will or all is determined? I still enjoy a good philosophical debate as much as the next person, and more than most perhaps, but as the years of middle age slip by and the world seems to slide further into hopelessness, I have less patience for anything that gets in the way of doing good—for only when we do good together, and see ourselves doing it, will we have hope. God needs us to do this.

There is a ground of meaning, a Land and soil across the Jordan, on which Israelites of every generation—and human beings of every faith and nation—can choose life. And there is another ground, well-named *Ground Zero* because it signifies the attempt to wipe out hope and meaning along with life. As complicated as things are much of the time, I think we generally know the difference between the two. May we have the strength to give each other hope in the coming year by working together to choose blessing. May we be inspired by the peace visible in the Heavens to bring a greater measure of peace to our homes, our communities, our society, and our world.