

EHR KUMT

First Day of Rosh Hashanah 2010

Sermon delivered by Rabbi Schlomo Lewis of Atlanta

I thought long and I thought hard on whether to deliver the sermon I am about to share. We all wish to bounce happily out of shul on the High Holidays, filled with warm fuzzies, ready to gobble up our brisket, our honey cakes and our kugel. We want to be shaken and stirred – but not too much. We want to be guilt-schlepped – but not too much. We want to be provoked but not too much. We want to be transformed but not too much.

I get it, but as a rabbi I have a compelling obligation, a responsibility to articulate what is in my heart and what I passionately believe must be said and must be heard. And so, I am guided not by what is easy to say but by what is painful to express. I am guided not by the frivolous but by the serious. I am guided not by delicacy but by urgency.

We are at war. We are at war with an enemy as savage, as voracious, as heartless as the Nazis but one wouldn't know it from our behavior. During WWII we didn't refer to storm troopers as freedom fighters. We didn't call the Gestapo, militants. We didn't see the attacks on our Merchant Marine as acts by rogue sailors. We did not justify the Nazis rise to power as our fault. We did not grovel before the Nazis, thumping our hearts and confessing to abusing and mistreating and humiliating the German people. We did not apologize for Dresden, nor for The Battle of the Bulge, nor for El Alamein, nor for D-Day.

Evil – ultimate, irreconcilable, evil threatened us and Roosevelt and Churchill had moral clarity and an exquisite understanding of what was at stake. It was not just the Sudetenland, not just Tubruk, not just Vienna, not just Casablanca. It was the entire planet. Read history and be shocked at how frighteningly close Hitler came to creating a Pax Germana on every continent.

Not all Germans were Nazis – most were decent, most were revolted by the Third Reich, most were good citizens hoisting a beer, earning a living and tucking in their children at night. But, too many looked away, too many cried out in lame defense – I didn't know." Too many were silent. Guilt absolutely falls upon those who committed the atrocities, but responsibility and guilt falls upon those who did nothing as well. Fault was not just with the goose steppers but with those who pulled the curtains shut, said and did nothing.

In WWII we won because we got it. We understood who the enemy was and we knew that the end had to be unconditional and absolute. We did not stumble around worrying about offending the Nazis. We did not measure every word so as not to upset our foe. We built planes and tanks and battleships and went to war to win.... to rid the world of malevolence.

We are at war... yet too many stubbornly and foolishly don't put the pieces together and refuse to identify the evil doers. We are circumspect and disgracefully politically correct.

Let me mince no words in saying that from Fort Hood to Bali, from Times Square to London, from Madrid to Mumbai, from 9/11 to Gaza, the murderers, the barbarians are radical Islamists.

To camouflage their identity is sedition. To excuse their deeds is contemptible. To mask their intentions is unconscionable.

A few years ago I visited Lithuania on a Jewish genealogical tour. It was a stunning journey and a very personal, spiritual pilgrimage. When we visited Kovno we davened Maariv at the only remaining shul in the city. Before the war there were thirty-seven shuls for 38,000 Jews. Now only one, a shrinking, gray

congregation. We made minyon for the handful of aged worshippers in the Choral Synagogue, a once majestic, jewel in Kovno.

After my return home I visited Cherry Hill for Shabbos. At the oneg an elderly family friend, Joe Magun, came over to me.

"Shalom," he said. "Your abba told me you just came back from Lithuania." "Yes," I replied. "It was quite a powerful experience." "Did you visit the Choral Synagogue in Kovno? The one with the big arch in the courtyard?" "Yes, I did. In fact, we helped them make minyon." His eyes opened wide in joy at our shared memory. For a moment he gazed into the distance and then, he returned. "Shalom, I grew up only a few feet away from the arch. The Choral Synagogue was where I davened as a child."

He paused for a moment and once again was lost in the past. His smile faded. Pain filled his wrinkled face. "I remember one Shabbos in 1938 when Vladimir Jabotinsky came to the shul" (Jabotinsky was Menachim Begin's mentor – he was a fiery orator, an unflinching Zionist radical, whose politics were to the far right.) Joe continued "When Jabotinsky came, he delivered the drash on Shabbos morning and I can still hear his words burning in my ears. He climbed up to the shtender, stared at us from the bima, glared at us with eyes full of fire and cried out. 'EHR KUMT. YIDN FARLAWST AYER SHTETL – He's coming. Jews abandon your city.' "

We thought we were safe in Lithuania from the Nazis, from Hitler. We had lived there, thrived for a thousand years but Jabotinsky was right -- his warning prophetic. We got out but most did not."

We are not in Lithuania. It is not the 1930s. There is no Luftwaffe overhead. No U-boats off the coast of Long Island. No Panzer divisions on our borders. But make no mistake; we are under attack – our values, our tolerance, our freedom, our virtue, our land.

Now before some folks roll their eyes and glance at their watches let me state emphatically, unmistakably – I have no pathology of hate, nor am I a manic Paul Revere, galloping through the countryside. I am not a pessimist, nor prone to panic attacks. I am a lover of humanity, all humanity. Whether they worship in a synagogue, a church, a mosque, a temple or don't worship at all. I have no bone of bigotry in my body, but what I do have is hatred for those who hate, intolerance for those who are intolerant, and a guiltless, unstoppable obsession to see evil eradicated.

Today the enemy is radical Islam but it must be said sadly and reluctantly that there are unwitting, co-conspirators who strengthen the hands of the evil doers. Let me state that the overwhelming number of Muslims are good Muslims, fine human beings who want nothing more than a Jeep Cherokee in their driveway, a flat screen TV on their wall and a good education for their children, but these good Muslims have an obligation to destiny, to decency that thus far for the most part they have avoided. The Kulturkampf is not only external but internal as well. The good Muslims must sponsor rallies in Times Square, in Trafalgar Square, in the UN Plaza, on the Champs Elysee, in Mecca condemning terrorism, denouncing unequivocally the slaughter of the innocent. Thus far, they have not. The good Muslims must place ads in the NY Times. They must buy time on network TV, on cable stations, in the Jerusalem Post, in Le Monde, in Al Watan, on Al Jazeera condemning terrorism, denouncing unequivocally the slaughter of the innocent – thus far, they have not. Their silence allows the vicious to tarnish Islam and define it.

Brutal acts of commission and yawning acts of omission both strengthen the hand of the devil.

I recall a conversation with my father shortly before he died that helped me understand how perilous and how broken is our world; that we are living on the narrow seam of civilization and moral oblivion. Knowing he had little time left he shared the following – “Shal. I am ready to leave this earth. Sure I’d like to live a little longer, see a few more sunrises, but truthfully, I’ve had it. I’m done. Finished. I hope the Good Lord takes me soon because I am unable to live in this world knowing what it has become.”

This startling admission of moral exhaustion from a man who witnessed and lived through the Depression, the Holocaust, WWII, Communist Triumphalism, McCarthyism, Strontium 90 and polio. – Yet his twilight observation was – “The worst is yet to come.” And he wanted out.

I share my father’s angst and fear that too many do not see the authentic, existential threat we face nor confront the source of our peril. We must wake up and smell the hookah.

“Lighten up, Lewis. Take a chill pill, some of you are quietly thinking. You’re sounding like Glen Beck. It’s not that bad. It’s not that real.” But I am here to tell you – “It is.” Ask the member of our shul whose sister was vaporized in the Twin Towers and identified finally by her charred teeth, if this is real or not. Ask the members of our shul who fled a bus in downtown Paris, fearing for their safety from a gang of Muslim thugs, if this is an exaggeration. Ask the member of our shul whose son tracks Arab terrorist infiltrators who target – pizza parlors, nursery schools, Pesach seders, city buses and play grounds, if this is dramatic, paranoid hyperbole.

Ask them, ask all of them – ask the American GI’s we sit next to on planes who are here for a brief respite while we fly off on our Delta vacation package. Ask them if it’s bad. Ask them if it’s real.

Did anyone imagine in the 1920’s what Europe would look like in the 1940’s. Did anyone presume to know in the coffee houses of Berlin or in the opera halls of Vienna that genocide would soon become the celebrated culture? Did anyone think that a goofy-looking painter named Schickelgruber would go from the beer halls of Munich and jail, to the Reichstag as Fuehrer in less than a decade? Did Jews pack their bags and leave Warsaw, Vilna, Athens, Paris, Bialystok, Minsk, knowing that soon their new address would be Treblinka, Sobibor, Dachau and Auschwitz?

The sages teach – “Aizehu chacham – haroeh et hanolad – Who is a wise person – he who sees into the future.” We dare not wallow in complacency, in a misguided tolerance and naïve sense of security.

We must be diligent students of history and not sit in ash cloth at the waters of Babylon weeping. We cannot be hypnotized by eloquent-sounding rhetoric that soothes our heart but endangers our soul. We cannot be lulled into inaction for fear of offending the offenders. Radical Islam is the scourge and this must be cried out from every mountain top. From sea to shining sea, we must stand tall, prideful of our stunning decency and moral resilience. Immediately after 9/11 how many mosques were destroyed in America? None. After 9/11, how many Muslims were killed in America? None. After 9/11, how many anti-Muslim rallies were held in America? None. And yet, we apologize. We grovel. We beg forgiveness.

The mystifying litany of our foolishness continues. Should there be a shul in Hebron on the site where Baruch Goldstein gunned down twenty-seven Arabs at noonday prayers? Should there be a museum praising the U.S. Calvary on the site of Wounded Knee? Should there be a German cultural center in Auschwitz? Should a church be built in the Syrian town of Ma’arra where Crusaders slaughtered over 100,000 Muslims? Should there be a thirteen story mosque and Islamic Center only a few steps from Ground Zero?

Despite all the rhetoric, the essence of the matter can be distilled quite easily. The Muslim community has the absolute, constitutional right to build their building wherever they wish. I don't buy the argument — "When we can build a church or a synagogue in Mecca they can build a mosque here." America is greater than Saudi Arabia. And New York is greater than Mecca. Democracy and freedom must prevail.

Can they build? Certainly. May they build? Certainly. But should they build at that site? No -- but that decision must come from them, not from us. Sensitivity, compassion cannot be measured in feet or yards or in blocks. One either feels the pain of others and cares, or does not.

If those behind this project are good, peace-loving, sincere, tolerant Muslims, as they claim, then they should know better, rip up the zoning permits and build elsewhere.

Believe it or not, I am a dues-paying, card carrying member of the ACLU, yet from start of finish, I find this sorry episode disturbing to say the least.

William Burroughs, the novelist and poet, in a wry moment wrote — "After one look at this planet, any visitor from outer space would say — "I want to see the manager."

Let us understand that the radical Islamist assaults all over the globe are but skirmishes, fire fights, and vicious decoys. Christ and the anti-Christ. Gog U'Magog. The Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness; the bloody collision between civilization and depravity is on the border between Lebanon and Israel. It is on the Gaza Coast and in the Judean Hills of the West Bank. It is on the sandy beaches of Tel Aviv and on the cobblestoned mall of Ben Yehuda Street. It is in the underground schools of Sderot and on the bullet-proofed inner-city buses. It is in every school yard, hospital, nursery, classroom, park, theater — in every place of innocence and purity.

Israel is the laboratory — the test market. Every death, every explosion, every grisly encounter is not a random, bloody orgy. It is a calculated, strategic probe into the heart, guts and soul of the West.

In the Six Day War, Israel was the proxy of Western values and strategy while the Arab alliance was the proxy of Eastern, Soviet values and strategy. Today too, it is a confrontation of proxies, but the stakes are greater than East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Israel in her struggle represents the civilized world, while Hamas, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, Iran, Islamic Jihad, represent the world of psychopathic, loathsome evil.

As Israel, imperfect as she is, resists the onslaught, many in the Western World have lost their way displaying not admiration, not sympathy, not understanding, for Israel's galling plight, but downright hostility and contempt. Without moral clarity, we are doomed because Israel's galling plight ultimately will be ours. Hanna Arendt in her classic Origins of Totalitarianism accurately portrays the first target of tyranny as the Jew. We are the trial balloon. The canary in the coal mine. If the Jew/Israel is permitted to bleed with nary a protest from "good guys" then tyranny snickers and pushes forward with its agenda.

Moral confusion is a deadly weakness and it has reached epic proportions in the West; from the Oval Office to the UN, from the BBC to Reuters to MSNBC, from the New York Times to Le Monde, from university campuses to British teachers unions, from the International Red Cross to Amnesty International, from Goldstone to Elvis Costello, from the Presbyterian Church to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

There is a message sent and consequences when our president visits Turkey and Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and not Israel.

There is a message sent and consequences when free speech on campus is only for those championing Palestinian rights.

There is a message sent and consequences when the media deliberately doctors and edits film clips to demonize Israel.

There is a message sent and consequences when the UN blasts Israel relentlessly, effectively ignoring Iran, Sudan, Venezuela, North Korea, China and other noxious states.

There is a message sent and consequences when liberal churches are motivated by Liberation Theology, not historical accuracy.

There is a message sent and consequences when murderers and terrorists are defended by the obscenely transparent "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

John Milton warned, "Hypocrisy is the only evil that walks invisible."

A few days after the Gaza blockade incident in the spring, a congregant happened past my office, glanced in and asked in a friendly tone –

"Rabbi. How're y' doing?"

I looked up, sort of smiled and replied – "I've had better days."

"What's the matter? Is there anything I can do to cheer you up?" he inquired.

"Thank you for the offer but I'm just bummed out today and I showed him a newspaper article I was reading.

"Madrid gay pride parade bans Israeli group over Gaza Ship Raid." I explained to my visitor – "The Israeli gay pride contingent from Tel Aviv was not allowed to participate in the Spanish gay pride parade because the mayor of Tel Aviv did not apologize for the raid by the Israeli military."

The only country in the entire Middle East where gay rights exist, is Israel. The only country in the entire Middle East where there is a gay pride parade, is Israel. The only country in the Middle East that has gay neighborhoods and gay bars, is Israel.

Gays in the Gaza would be strung up, executed by Hamas if they came out and yet Israel is vilified and ostracized. Disinvited to the parade.

Looking for logic?

Looking for reason?

Looking for sanity?

Kafka on his darkest, gloomiest day could not keep up with this bizarre spectacle and we "useful idiots" pander and fawn over cutthroats, sinking deeper and deeper into moral decay, as the enemy laughs all the way to the West Bank and beyond.

It is exhausting and dispiriting. We live in an age that is redefining righteousness where those with moral clarity are an endangered, beleaguered specie.

Isaiah warned us thousands of years ago – "Oye Lehem Sheh-Korim Layome, Laila v'Laila, yome – Woe to them who call the day, night and the night, day." We live

on a planet that is both Chelm and Sodom. It is a frightening and maddening place to be.

How do we convince the world and many of our own, that this is not just anti-Semitism, that this is not just anti-Zionism but a full throttled attack by unholy, radical Islamists on everything that is morally precious to us?

How do we convince the world and many of our own that conciliation is not an option, that compromise is not a choice?

Everything we are. Everything we believe. Everything we treasure, is at risk.

The threat is so unbelievably clear and the enemy so unbelievably ruthless how anyone in their right mind doesn't get it is baffling. Let's try an analogy. If someone contracted a life-threatening infection and we not only scolded them for using antibiotics but insisted that the bacteria had a right to infect their body and that perhaps, if we gave the invading infection an arm and a few toes, the bacteria would be satisfied and stop spreading

Anyone buy that medical advice? Well, folks, that's our approach to the radical Islamist bacteria. It is amoral, has no conscience and will spread unless it is eradicated. – There is no negotiating. Appeasement is death.

I was no great fan of George Bush – didn't vote for him. (By the way, I'm still a registered Democrat.) I disagreed with many of his policies but one thing he had right. His moral clarity was flawless when it came to the War on Terror, the War on Radical Islamist Terror. There was no middle ground – either you were friend or foe. There was no place in Bush's world for a Switzerland. He knew that this competition was not Toyota against G.M., not the Iphone against the Droid, not the Braves against the Phillies, but a deadly serious war, winner take all. Blink and you lose. Underestimate, and you get crushed.

I know that there are those sitting here today who have turned me off. But I also know that many turned off their rabbis seventy five years ago in Warsaw, Riga, Berlin, Amsterdam, Cracow, Vilna. I get no satisfaction from that knowledge, only a bitter sense that there is nothing new under the sun.

Enough rhetoric – how about a little "show and tell?" A few weeks ago on the cover of Time magazine was a horrific picture with a horrific story. The photo was of an eighteen year old Afghani woman, Bibi Aisha, who fled her abusive husband and his abusive family. Days later the Taliban found her and dragged her to a mountain clearing where she was found guilty of violating Sharia Law. Her punishment was immediate. She was pinned to the ground by four men while her husband sliced off her ears, and then he cut off her nose.

That is the enemy (show enlarged copy of magazine cover.)

If nothing else stirs us. If nothing else convinces us, let Bibi Aisha's mutilated face be the face of Islamic radicalism. Let her face shake up even the most complacent and naïve among us. In the holy crusade against this ultimate evil, pictures of Bibi Aisha's disfigurement should be displayed on billboards, along every highway from Route 66 to the Autobahn, to the Transarabian Highway. Her picture should be posted on every lobby wall from Tokyo to Stockholm to Rio. On every network, at every commercial break, Bibi Aisha's face should appear with the caption – "Radical Islamic savages did this." And underneath – "This ad was approved by Hamas, by Hezbollah, by Taliban, by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, by Islamic Jihad, by Fatah al Islam, by Magar Nodal Hassan, by Richard Reid, by Ahmanijad, by Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, by Osama bin Laden, by Edward Said, by The Muslim Brotherhood, by Al Queda, by CAIR."

"The moral sentiment is the drop that balances the sea" said Ralph Waldo Emerson. Today, my friends, the sea is woefully out of balance and we could easily drown in our moral myopia and worship of political correctness.

We peer up into the heavens sending probes to distant galaxies. We peer down into quarks discovering particles that would astonish Einstein. We create computers that rival the mind, technologies that surpass science fiction. What we imagine, with astounding rapidity, becomes real. If we dream it, it does, indeed, come. And yet, we are at a critical point in the history of this planet that could send us back into the cave, to a culture that would make the Neanderthal blush with shame.

Our parents and grandparents saw the swastika and recoiled, understood the threat and destroyed the Nazis. We see the banner of Radical Islam and can do no less.

A rabbi was once asked by his students... "Rebbi. Why are your sermons so stern?" Replied the rabbi, "If a house is on fire and we chose not to wake up our children, for fear of disturbing their sleep, would that be love? Kinderlach, 'di hoyz brent.' Children our house is on fire and I must arouse you from your slumber."

During WWII and the Holocaust was it business as usual for priests, ministers, rabbis? Did they deliver benign homilies and lovely sermons as Europe fell, as the Pacific fell, as North Africa fell, as the Mideast and South America tottered, as England bled? Did they ignore the demonic juggernaut and the foul breath of evil? They did not. There was clarity, courage, vision, determination, sacrifice, and we were victorious. Today it must be our finest hour as well. We dare not retreat into the banality of our routines, glance at headlines and presume that the good guys will prevail.

Democracies don't always win. Tyrannies don't always lose.

My friends – the world is on fire and we must awake from our slumber. "EHR KUMT."