

Rabbi Lisa Edwards

Rosh Hashanah 1st Day 5766

October 4, 2005

Beth Chayim Chadashim

“Reaching Out”

Okay, it's true I don't much get compared to Ellen Degeneres. She's a better dancer, and way funnier. But Harriet Perl loves both of us, and we both love Harriet Perl - so that's a common ground anyway.

And then there's this other thing, which is why I'm bringing this up at all. The last two times she was scheduled to host the Emmy's? First 9/11 happened, and then Hurricane Katrina (in her hometown no less). She was quoted as saying she's going to think twice before she'd accept another invitation to host. And you know I'd been thinking the same thing about hosting, I mean leading High Holy Day services...

And then there's what she actually said at the September 2001 presentation, just days after Bush sent bombs over Afghanistan. Do you remember? She said,

- "What would bug the Taliban more than seeing a gay woman in a suit surrounded by Jews?"

And I'm thinking - hey, me too, Ellen! Me too!

This morning I want to continue a conversation I began with you last night. Oh yeah, here's another difference between me and Ellen? When she has a conversation on her show with someone - she actually let's them talk too...I never do that!

A couple of weeks ago, as the first survivor stories from New Orleans began to trickle in, I heard a woman talk about what it was like not to have a drop of water for over two days. She described the terrible pain in her mouth and a horrible metallic taste. I immediately conjured up what my mouth feels like at the end of Yom Kippur, but I knew that was nothing compared to what she was describing. I can see some of you getting thirsty as I talk - me too (drink?) - aren't you glad I'm talking about this on Rosh Hashanah morning instead of on Yom Kippur morning? Her description reminded me of a lecture I once heard where the lecturer simply noted that thirst is not only in the mouth, if it were, he said, it would be quenched the moment water touched it. I was so struck by that at the time, that I have remembered it ever since. I thought about it last

week, when the Santa Ana's were blowing and I was drinking quarts of water without quenching my thirst.

Having only recently heard the New Orleans story, I was particularly appreciative of the easy availability of delicious water - as much as I wanted.

Mayim chayim - living waters - water of life.

There is nothing quite like a fast, or enforced deprivation of food and water, to make one appreciate both - it should also remind us that what is for us the simplest need to fulfill - a glass of water - is for huge numbers of the world's population a chronic deprivation reaching crisis proportions in many parts of the world.

Speaking of fasting, did you know that for the first time in decades Rosh Hashana and the start of Ramadan are falling this year on the same new moon (along with, as it happens, also the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, celebrated with the blessing of the animals).

Shana tova and
"Ramadan Mubarak" (which means "Blessed Ramadan")

I'm sure some of you know more about Ramadan than I do, the Muslim month of fasting and spiritual contemplation. But I am struck by some of the similarities to our holy days. It begins - just as Rosh Hashana and Rosh Chodesh do -- by the sighting of the new crescent moon. Muslims believe it was in the month of Ramadan that their holy book, the Qur'an, was sent down from heaven. Similar to Shavuot for us, which commemorates the handing down of Torah on Mt. Sinai.

Like Yom Kippur, Ramadan is a fasting time, but they fast in the daylight hours every day for a month, breaking the fast each evening with a special meal and time with friends and family. The intent in fasting is much like ours - to create a time to focus on their faith and give less attention to the concerns of everyday life.

Each night of Ramadan Muslims gather in large numbers in mosques for special [taraweeh] prayers.

And also like Jews, this time for them is one in which they are encouraged to do charity work.

<http://lfpres.ca/newsstand/CityandRegion/2005/10/04/1247280-sun.html>

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I love the confluence of our rituals and our intentions with those of the Muslim faith. How sad that our two holy days will go largely unnoticed by each other, despite their similarities and our common roots. Sadly and ironically, the root of

the reason why we are so distant from our Muslim siblings is told in the Torah portion for Rosh Hashanah - the one we'll be reading in just a few minutes. For included in our Torah portion this morning is the story of the banishment of Hagar, Sarah's maidservant, and Ishmael, the son Hagar had with Abraham. Ishmael, the son of Abraham, in Muslim tradition, became the patriarch from which Muslims are descended. Sent into the wilderness by Abraham at the request of Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael soon run out of water. Convinced they are about to die, and loath to watch her son suffer, Hagar tosses him under a bush and sits down some distance away, for she said, "I cannot watch the boy dying." And so she sat at a distance, lifted up her voice and wept. [Gen. 21:15-16]

A messenger from God calls out to Hagar: "Arise," says the messenger to Hagar, "lift up the boy and grasp his hand in yours..." The Hebrew there literally means "strengthen your hand through him -- hakhaziki et yadeikh bo . . . Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water." [Gen. 21:18-19] The narrative doesn't tell us if that well was there all along or if it appeared miraculously. We only know that when -- instead of walking away from him -- she grasped his hand, hakhaziki et yadeikh bo, and in so doing strengthened herself through him, it was then that she saw what she had not seen before, mayim chayim, life-saving water, and their lives were saved.

Last night I suggested by virtue of being part of our particular community at this particular time and place in history, we are positioned to help change ourselves and the world. That we are positioned to give ourselves experiences that will help us grow, that will help us to connect to others - and strengthening ourselves and them by reaching out hands ...across generations, across cultures. hakhaziki et yadeikh bo Hagar strengthened herself when she re-connected to Ishmael. In touch with another, her eyes were opened to the life giving sustenance right in front of her.

Last night I said that where I saw God's hand in the hurricanes was in the hands attached to the wrists of those reaching out to others.

I want us to do that more through BCC, and happily, I'm not the only one.

More as preview than anything else, I just want to alert you to some of the plans for reaching out that are already in the works for our congregation in the next few months:

The BCC Book Club is already reading taking an opportunity -- with this uncommon convergence of the month long Ramadan with our own Hebrew month of Tishrei - the month containing more Jewish holy days than any other - to read a new book by a Muslim lesbian and reformer, Irshad Manji, called *The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith*. Jerry Nodiff is even looking into the possibility of her visiting us at BCC. If anyone has any connections, let Jerry know.

So our first connection: Reaching out hands to the descendants of Ishmael.

On the weekend of Nov. 11-12, save Friday and Saturday nights to reach out hands, to strengthen our connections to our own history. Those nights we'll be celebrating our meeting with Olga Grilli, who was a child survivor from Chotebor, Czechoslovakia the same town BCC's Holocaust Torah scroll came from. Olga is coming with her family to be reunited with our shared scroll, and to meet us. Next week at Yom Kippur, by the way, is when we'll be reading from our newly restored scroll for the first time.

Let me highlight one more reaching out - of many though: Governor Schwarzenegger's infuriating veto of the amazing marriage equality bill that State Assemblyperson Mark Leno shepherded through both the assembly and the senate (making California the first state in history to start and pass a marriage equality on the legislative level) is only the latest addition to the expected attacks on the civil rights of glbt people. What is coming next are a series of ballot initiatives that would attempt to seal into our state constitution a prohibition against same gender marriage, and would even take away all our newly won rights from the domestic partnership bill. This will be a big battle as the forces against us are well organized and well funded, as the governor's actions demonstrate. A few weeks ago several BCC members joined forces with a new group organizing to fight these initiatives within the Jewish community. Called "Jews for Marriage Equality," we expect it to be necessarily one of our main projects over the next year.

If you want to join in with any of these activities, or have suggestions for them, talk to me, or -will you stand -- Steve Sass, Jerry Nodiff, Sylvia Sukop, or Avram Chill and Sarah Watstein who are the new co-conspirators - okay co-chairs - of our newly formed Tikkun Olam Committee.

Repairing the world by reaching out our hands in friendship, in coalition, and in so doing strengthening one another, opening our eyes to the mayim chayim - the life giving waters - the simple nourishment that we receive by working together for a better world.

Oh I almost forgot - today - Oct. 4 brings yet one more holiday convergence: today is the shared birthday of two of our BCC 4 year olds - I hope they'll both be up here in a little while - Ashira Weinreich and Marcus Katz Goodman. Like Hagar, we strengthen ourselves for the sake of our children, and our future generations.

One of the prayers offered on this feast of St. Francis of Assisi, the man who left behind the great wealth of his family, in order to care for the downtrodden, became the patron saint of animals and of the environment, an advocate for peace. A prayer for this feast day of St. Francis reads, "[Francis]. . . give me the serenity to live simply and distinguish my needs from my wants."
[Tom Cowan, author of The Way of Saints]

As we enter this new year, reaching out across boundaries and barriers, eager to bring change and healing to an ailing world, let us also ask God for the strength and clear vision to appreciate the profound gifts we too often take for granted: clear water, laughter, a community to live in, a place to call home, friends to call dear, a heart that feels, eyes that open wide enough to see the wellsprings of life that surround us every day.

Shana tova u'metuka a good year, a sweet year to us all.