

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5763
Rabbi Shelton J. Donnell

"What Is Your Mission Statement?"

Our world is different today. Much different than it was a year ago, isn't it? Hardly a year ago, when last we gathered together with our Temple family, we were in a state of shock. The horror and disbelief of the events of 9/11 left us in a state of disbelief, a kind of suspended animation from the mundane realities of our everyday lives. And, in the days since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, we have begun to pick up the pieces. The damage wrought upon the Pentagon has largely been repaired, while the ruins of the colossal World Trade Center have been cleared of the twisted wreckage and mangle of concrete and steel, leaving now only a gaping whole where once the twin behemoths reigned as the sentinels of New York - and America.

And that is what the terrorists attacked - America, not buildings - or even people, though their heinous act destroyed both. The Al Qaeda terrorists symbolically attacked the core of America, literally what America stands for. Consider their targets:

The most mind-searing image of September 11th was of the planes crashing into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the symbols of America's economic power. Who can ever forget those scenes played over and over again in the media?

The second target was the Pentagon, the symbol of America's military might and our place as the world's only remaining military super-power.

And, finally, it is believed that the halls of Congress was the likely objective of the hijackers on flight 93, whose heroic passengers thwarted the hijackers' plan and ended their lives in a Pennsylvania field. This particular target was the symbol of America's traditions of democracy and government of the people, by the people and for the people.

So, what was Al Qaeda's objective? The core, the very essence of America and what America stands for. And, that prompts a question from us: What exactly do we stand for as a nation?

Many people in the world today translate America's core values into "Americanism," what we might call the "exportable America." It's true, you can travel around the world and see the same McDonalds, Staples, Starbucks and Toys R Us in Mexico, Israel or France - just like you will see anywhere in the USA.

But, don't we stand for more than Coca-cola and Microsoft?

For many, American industrial might and economic hegemony are what America has come to symbolize throughout the world, that is the reason for attacking the World Trade Center.

Our military might is the object of envy and enmity often by our friends as well as our foes. Our allies in Europe are not immune from this, as evidenced by the resistance of France and Russia to

our peacekeeping roles in the Balkans and in the Middle East. And, certainly our enemies, typified in the extreme by Al Qaeda and its many sympathizers in the world, vilify and demonize America because of our military might and our presence throughout much of the world as peacekeepers and policemen; hence the Pentagon attack.

But, what about the foiled attempt on the seat of our government? I believe that it is incredibly significant that that particular objective failed, because, I believe that it is in the halls of Congress where the spirit of America truly resides, and that spirit could not be touched by the bloodied hands of Al Qaeda.

Abiding in the halls of Congress is the legacy of America's founders. The voices of Jefferson and Madison, of Lincoln and Roosevelt resound in a chorus of democracy singing the anthem of American democratic values, extolling the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as expressed in the Declaration of Independence.

These values are what America stands for, and those same values were, ultimately, the targets of Al Qaeda. But, in the past year it has become evident that Al Qaeda and their sympathizers are not the only ones who attack these precious American values.

Freedom in America allows for opportunity. As President Lyndon Johnson told the students at the University of Michigan, thirty years ago, "We have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society."

And that's true, given the talent, the gumption and the opportunity, in America you can aspire to attain almost anything. People in other countries may hate us, but they also want to come to America *because* of the opportunities that our freedoms provide for us.

But, as we have seen this year, our freedoms and the opportunities for reaching our goals can feed the greed and ambition which themselves run counter to our American values and prevent us from creating Johnson's "Great Society.". *Does* "the pursuit of happiness" mean building up bank accounts and making as much money as possible? Do we measure success by the luxury of our homes, the sticker price of our cars and the cut of our clothes? Is the pursuit of happiness an economic and prestige-achieving goal?

Something has become very clear during this past year, a "generation of greed," as Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan called it, can attack American values as surely as a terrorist's bomb. The dramatic downturn in the stock market has shattered the dreams of many of us for economic ease and comfortable retirement. And, it is becoming increasingly evident with every new corporate scandal, that greed is a vicious cancer attacking America, corrupting many of our top business people, infecting our leaders at the highest levels of government, and touching the lives of virtually each and every one of us.

Desperately, the President and Congress search for some means to reestablish confidence in an America shaken by the terrorists' attacks and demoralized by the state of the economy and of our shattered dreams of economic prosperity. Already, legislation has gone through Congress that attempts to curb many of the financial excesses that are blamed for corporate

mismanagement. This, in turn, has led to a national debate about whether government can or should legislate moral behavior. No matter what side of this debate you may be on, one thing holds true: at this time in our history, America desperately needs to reestablish its sense of its core values and find its moral compass.

And, where do we look for America's core values? I went back to my elementary school days and examined the preamble to the American Constitution. It is, after all, the closest thing that America has to a national mission statement. That foundation document of the American Republic reads:

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution for the United States of America.

Clearly from this short paragraph we have the moral foundation upon which our nation stands. Not just the pursuit of happiness is our goal, but the establishment of justice, the assurance of the common good, and the securing of liberty for all.

What was attacked on September 11th was the spirit of those words. What is crushed in the continuing revelations of corporate greed and scandal is the soul of American justice and fair play. We, as a nation must review and renew our commitment to the words of the Constitution and all for which they stand. Everyone, from the executives in the corporate boardrooms across America to the students in our schools and everyone in between, must accept personal responsibility for their actions and live with integrity. Those in the highest places must set an example for the rest of us and they should be held accountable. It is immoral that victims of corporate greed lose their life savings and financial security while those who have corrupted the system escape with little more than a slap on the wrist and a huge fortune to comfort them. Accountability is called for at all levels of government and in the executive suites of America to restore our honor and to bring us back to the values that make us strong.

That must be the answer to the ills that have been visited upon our country this past year.

Just as our country must measure itself by a set of founding principles that guide us, and our governance, so too do we, as a synagogue need to clearly define our core values. For a number of years we have operated with the inspiration of our Temple's mission statement. I wouldn't be surprised if most of you didn't know that we had such a document. It can be seen in the Board Room, right where the leaders of our Temple can see it whenever they gather to deliberate on the issues that shape our congregation. It says this:

Temple Beth Sholom is dedicated to making our congregation a focal point of Jewish family and communal life for our members, through excellence in professional and lay leadership, education, programming and spirituality.

Recently, we established a Master Plan Committee to chart the course of Temple Beth Sholom over the next two decades. Our community is changing and there are a whole host of challenges

that await us as we continue to grow in size, in programs, and in services. We are outgrowing our facilities and our congregation is changing every year. Early on in the deliberations of our Master Plan Committee, we realized that we could not successfully address the challenges of the future until we clearly understood what we stand for and what we believe as a congregation. We felt that the Mission statement did not say enough, and so, we brought together a think tank of congregants and gave them the challenge of visioning what the core values of TBS really are. This is what they came up with:

At TBS, the ***BRIT, THE COVENENTAL RELATIONSHIP*** between God and the Jewish People, between God and the individual Jew, and between the individual Jew and the Jewish People is expressed through:

· ***TALMUD TORAH - LIFE LONG LEARNING***

We believe that we must offer learning opportunities in which every congregant can learn about Judaism and Torah through study and experience at every stage of life.

· ***T'FILLAH - SANCTITY OF PRAYER***

We believe that we must promote spiritual expression through prayer and ritual.

· ***KEHILAH - A COMMUNITY GATHERING PLACE***

We believe that Temple Beth Sholom must be a Jewish gathering place that is welcoming to all while being an integral part of the larger Jewish community.

· ***TIKKUN OLAM - THE REPAIR OF THE WORLD***

We believe that through our engagement with the Mitzvot, we must strive to live an ethical life and to effect Tikkun Olam.

Like the preamble to the Constitution, these values can be used as the lens through which we look at, and judge every program and project that we undertake. It is our goal that every congregant knows and understands what we stand for and who we are. And these values should be evident in all that we do in the religious, educational, financial, communal or social spheres.

With these core values to guide us, the Master Plan Committee can effectively create the vision for our future and guide us to act upon that vision.

And what about each of us as individuals -- each of us sitting here today? Rosh Hashanah is a time for reflection and self-judgment. What do ***you*** believe? How many of us have our own core values? By what criteria do you measure yourself on this or any other day?

As Jews, we have a wealth of Jewish values and ethics to guide and challenge us. We can start with the Ten Commandments which are the foundation of the Jewish social contract. Though all are well known, how many of us could cite all ten from memory? We all recall the command to

honor our parents - but how well do we do so? None of us, I am sure, would consider murdering another - yet have we turned our back on the suffering of others? We condemn stealing - and then neglect our obligations to the community, to the needy and to the weakest in our society.

The last of the Commandments may be the most cogent for us today. It warns us against coveting. It is, perhaps, the most misunderstood of all the commandments. It reads: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his servant, or his ox or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."

On the surface it appears to mean: "don't be jealous, don't envy your neighbor." But really now, how many of us hasn't envied another's success or wish we had some of the toys that our neighbor enjoys.

Envy, wanting what your neighbor has, is not coveting. Coveting means that you are willing to compromise your values to get what you want. *That* is what coveting is all about. And, how many of us are guilty of that? No defense of "everybody's doing it," or it's a dog-eat-dog world out there," can justify compromising your core values to get what you want, or to get ahead.

Perhaps the person most responsible for bringing the discussion of ethics to the popular media is Michael Josephson, of the Josephson Institute on Ethics. In one of his daily commentaries he said this:

According to a survey of American workers released a few years ago, more than half had done something unethical or illegal in the workplace in the previous year because of "pressures." I imagine a similar number lied, broke promises or laws, treated others unfairly, or dodged responsibilities in their personal lives for similar reasons. I'll bet executives and accountants who bent and broke the rules in Enron, WorldCom, Xerox and Adelphia were under tremendous pressure too.

So we've located the culprit behind sliding public and private morality -- it's pressure. We're only human, so if we want people to act more honorably we've just got to eliminate all that pressure.

Yet, if we accept "pressures" as a satisfactory justification for ethical shortcuts and moral weakness, we ignore the role of character.

What we call "pressures" today used to be called "temptations." And when we called them temptations we knew we were expected to resist, overcome and never give in. Can you imagine expecting immunity by declaring to your father, a teacher or a boss that you lied or cheated because you were "tempted"?

Doing something wrong because of pressures is an excuse, not a moral justification. Pressures, temptations -- call them what you will -- are part of life. Less pressure would be nice but what we really need is more moral will power so we can resist pressures. Remember, people of character do the right thing not because it's easy or even beneficial but because it is right.

I believe that Michael Josephson hit the nail right on the head with that commentary.

Today, during this time of judgment, we are challenged to measure *our* lives by our core values. Traditionally these days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are designed for making adjustments in our lives, or, even, completely changing the course of our lives. Yom Kippur is called in our tradition, the Day of Judgment. Literally or figuratively, who is the Judge? Is it God? Is it you, yourself? How would you justify your life before a divine tribunal? Is your life measured by material possessions, position or power? Or, is your success measured by the strength of your character?

In Judaism we hold to the ideal embodied in the Yiddish word: "Mensch." To call someone a Mensch is to bestow high praise upon that person. And what *is* a Mensch? The word literally means, "Human being." But it implies that one is the kind of person that God wants us to be.

We aspire to many things in life, but what value do we give to being a Mensch? We spend fortunes educating our children to help them become successful in their professional lives -- but how much do we invest in their moral lives? Do we put more emphasis on grades than knowledge? Does it matter more what grade-point average your child has than how he or she obtained those marks? Ask your children if they and their friends consider plagiarism and cheating just part of life and the realities of getting through school.

When we define success with a bank account - especially an offshore one to avoid taxes - what do we communicate to our children?

I dare say that most of our children know what we do for a living. But, how many of our children know what we believe in and what we value most in life? What do we communicate to our children and to our grandchildren?

Is it what they see? Is it the fine houses, big cars and fancy vacations that seem so important today? Do we demonstrate to them, in the way that we live our lives everyday, what our core values are? We cannot expect others to teach them. Bringing our children to Religious School will not make them good Jews or good Menschen if we do not live those ideals ourselves.

At this season we come together, striving for a sense of shalom, of peace in our strife-filled and stressful world. We come here, because this is the place that represents the fountainhead of our principles and values, the timeless truths that nurture and sustain us. We seek shalom, completeness and wholeness to bring balance into our lives. We come here seeking refuge and a fortress against the challenges of our lives.

Our world is a lot less certain since September 11th of last year. Where have we come in the months since then? Where are we going in the future?

The message of this High Holy Days season is that our future is very much in our own hands. Let me suggest this challenge to you in these days between this Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur ten days from now. During these days take some real time and think about your own core values. Today, when you go home and sit down to your Rosh Hashanah lunch celebrations, use that time to discuss what you stand for, what you truly believe in, and what values guide your life. Discuss what being a Mensch means to you. Take the time to create your own, personal

mission statement. For, if you do so, I truly believe that you will begin your New Year with blessing.

AMEN