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Temple Avodat Shalom

River Edge, NJ

Second day and 9-11

Today is called the Birthday of the World; the anniversary of Creation; a day of Hope and Joy when we eat apples and honey and wish each other a sweet year.

Tomorrow is September 11th the 9th anniversary of what the former Record columnist Jeff Page called the day the world changed forever. It will be a day of Yiskor; a time to mourn and remember; to mourn not only the victims who perished at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and in a now sacred field in Pennsylvania, but also a day to mourn our loss as a nation of what Franklin Roosevelt defined as one of our four freedoms; The Freedom from Fear.

My Holy Day sermons this year are all built around the questions; **what are our entitlements and what are our responsibilities**. It is a theme that is certainly applicable to the current controversy over the building of an Islamic center adjacent to the World Trade Center site. When I first heard of this plan I was appalled and offended. I found it irresponsible and distasteful that a 100 million dollar center of Islam would cast a shadow over the sacred ground containing ashes of thousands of victims of Islamic terror. I thought to myself: What entitles this group to build a center that I, and even more significantly, the families of the victims of 9-11 would find offensive?

As the controversy continued to play out in the media, I started to **think** about the issue instead of just reacting emotionally. As I wrote the sermon that I gave about Entitlements and

Responsibilities and how the Torah and the American Constitution speak to us about both, I came to realize that it's irrelevant how I feel. Our Constitution with its Bill of Rights proclaims that the Muslim community is entitled to build their community center and Mosque at the site of their choice. As American Jews we have been the greatest beneficiaries of the religious freedom clause incised in the first amendment in the Bill of Rights. As I wrestled with the arguments on both sides of this issue, I found myself hearing in my soul the words of our greatest sage Hillel, That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the essence of torah now go and learn

I stand here on a Bima that took ten years to get built, because over a half century ago, residents of this community did not want a synagogue in their town. 30 years ago The YJCC in Washington Township also endured 10 years of litigation in order to get approval to build. Similar legal battles have occurred over and over across America. If it is hateful to you and me when a synagogue is denied the right to build, we cannot in honesty oppose the Mosque near Ground Zero.

You and I do have the right to find it insensitive. I would personally prefer that this Islamic center not be built in the shadow of the memorial that will rise in memory of the victims murdered on September 11, 2001. While I believe that, as an American Jew, I have a responsibility to defend the right of the Islamic community to build their community center, because of the free speech clause, in that very same first amendment, I have the right to express my discomfort. However, what we lack is the right to defend our opposition, by defaming the Muslim Americans who are seeking to build this center. The vicious and false attacks on the Imam, who is the leader of this community is a sin. You shall not bear false witness against your

neighbor is a non negotiable moral imperative of Judaism. Disagreement on a policy does not entitle anyone to bear false witness, nor does it give us the right to defame an individual or a community; an act which Judaism equates to murder.

In addition to the controversy regarding the Islamic center at Ground Zero another issue that caught my attention in the news, this past month, was the study on Clergy burnout. I am sure you can guess where my sympathies lie. The study validated what I know from experience, that in the fast moving world of the web, the constant demands for reaction and response, are putting new levels of stress on all of us; not just clergy.

Since the world- wide web did not exist 70 years ago, freedom from e-mail was not one of Franklin Roosevelt's four freedoms. But I bet many of us here would put it near the top of our own list from which we seek liberation. There is obviously something in human nature that leads us to believe that anything we can do we should do. In less than a century, a mere snap of a finger in the history of human civilization, let alone the Universe, whose birthday we celebrate today , mankind has gone from the first airplane to space travel and an information super highway that was unimaginable just decades before. If the essential human question is what can I do? The Jewish question is what should I do?

The technological revolution in which we find ourselves is neither good nor evil. However it can be used or abused **for good or evil**. For example, because of internet and cell phone technology, phone service is today available at a price point that allows, literally billions of people, in what we used to call the third world, access to communicate with family and friends around the world. Information can be exchanged, knowledge acquired, and jobs created, in ways and in places that were unimaginable only a generation ago. Facebook is a technology that I have yet to master.

Not wanting to be unfriendly, I *friend* anyone who reaches out to me, but am not sure what to do next. Email allows us, as a community, to cost effectively keep each other informed. This is the good part of the story.

However, even this advance has come with a cost measured by an added degree of stress in our lives. I can receive more than 100 emails daily. Many of you probably deal with even more. Responding to them all is not possible and certainly not with the clear, accurate, warm and informative answer, that we each expect. Because of the communication revolution, for many of us, there is no longer delineation, between work time, on the one hand, and family and leisure time on the other.

Martin Buber the great Jewish existentialist philosopher of the early 20th century called his seminal work **I and Thou**. Buber 100 years ago differentiated between human connection and human relationship. He called the former I-it and the latter I-Thou. I believe, that one of the reasons that there is so much burn out among clergy, is that my profession, is all about creating, nurturing, and healing relationships. Today, we live in an age where everyone is connected; but fewer and fewer of us have fewer and fewer real human relationships.

I am going to plan to offer an adult education course later this year on Martin Buber's philosophy, if for no other reason than I need to keep reminding myself that our well connected world needs relationships to make it meaningful.

The real depressing news is that the internet and cell phones, are together, the single most effective means of spreading hate and lies. Cell phone abuse is a much more serious problem

than the inconsiderate or thoughtless person talking in a theater; or the person who sits in a class or meeting or at a dinner table, texting on his or her blackberry.

Cyber-bullying and sexting are a real danger to our teenagers. The ability of one teen to harass another has been magnified by a degree beyond measure. The Cyber-bullying provoked suicides, this past year, are just the most dramatic and serious example, of a trend, that threatens to grow worse, if we do not confront it. The explosion of web sites claiming to be news sources, gives anyone with the know-how to upload information onto the web, the ability and the opportunity to defame distort and incite people with whom they would otherwise have no contact. Facts to the contrary, the internet has been able to convince increasing numbers of Americans, that President Obama, is a foreign born Muslim rather than a native born American Christian

Hate today is being spread with the speed of a mouse click.

The terrorists who attacked America were Muslims, but all Muslims are not terrorists. As Jews who have a 2000 year history of being held guilty by association, we have a responsibility to distinguish, between our entitlement to fight terrorism and our responsibility to extend to others, the same rights we hold dear. How we choose to use or abuse, our rights and our power, makes a difference. The Jewish understanding of Freedom is that we human beings were created with a free will and then given a Torah, a teaching, by which we can distinguish between good and evil, blessing and curse, life and death; In the torah portion we read last Saturday and will read again on Yom Kippur, God calls upon each of us to choose life!

The leaders of the New York City Islamic community are choosing to exercise their right to build their Center in what they now certainly know is a site of controversy. While they are

entitled to do so, I would argue that the Islamic community also has the responsibility in light of the public controversy of this summer to decide whether building their Islamic Center at this site will allow more Americans to have insight into the positive teachings of Islam, or will it incite greater hatred and fear between Muslims and their fellow Americans of other faiths. Moreover, if the Muslim Cultural Center becomes a reality, the Islamic community will then be responsible to make sure it becomes a place of dialogue and understanding and not a center for teaching hate.

For me, the Islamic Center controversy is a reminder that just because I can do something does not mean that I should. My answer to those who are adamant in opposing the building of this center, by arguing, that since religious freedom does not exist in the Muslim world; that churches and synagogues in many Muslim states have been destroyed and desecrated, I say, on this Day of Judgment, that our entitlements and responsibilities as Americans is, to insure, as we say in our pledge of allegiance, that we are One nation under God with Liberty and Justice for all.

It is a tragic irony that the most vocal critics of the Islamic center site choice, who have used lies about the Imam and evoked fear among so many Americans, and have made it politically impossible, for the center's builders, to back away and move the Center to another site. **I believe that the Op Ed in Wednesday's New York Times by the Imam where he announces plans for Jewish and Christian chapels to be built within the proposed community center is an act of conciliation on his part. I would love to see a parallel act by the organizers of the planned Koran burning scheduled for tomorrow in Gainesville Florida.** I cannot look into the hearts, of either the minister in Florida or the Imam in New York see their motives, but just as I question why the New York Muslim community chooses to build their

Islamic Center near ground zero, I would like an answer to the question, asked in recent editorials, whether Conservative political groups that have used untruths to attack this Islamic Center, are not intent on fueling the fires of hatred, in hope of using fear for their own political gain.

In Martin Buber's philosophy he distinguishes between the I-Thou relationship and the I-It connection by stating that I-Thou is a state of consciousness where we see ourselves in others; and see the other as a unique and valued soul. In the realm of I-It the other is just it; the other is there for whatever utilitarian purpose that it can be used by ME.

Jeff Page asked me 8 years ago What was I doing on September 10th 2001.. Today is the Birthday of the World; it is the beginning of a new year; it is also called the Day of Remembrance; Rosh Hashanah is the time each year that we take a vow to change; So, I ask each of us, to ask ourselves, a corollary question;

What am I going to do today, to change the world, by changing myself;

Am I willing to balance my entitlements with my responsibilities?

Am I willing to work at turning my connections into real relationships, by not doing what is hateful to me to another?

Am I willing to admit that in order to become free from fear, I have to admit my prejudices and biases, and place the same limits on my actions and movement that I ask to be placed upon others?

Tomorrow is 9-11 Today is Rosh Hashana. In the words of Hillel: If not now when?

