KOL NIDRE

On Rosh Hashanah I shared with you the instructive Midrash that teaches that we exert control over three parts of our bodies – over our mouth, our hands, and our feet. I addressed the implications of that statement in my sermons on both days of Rosh Hashanah.

I must admit to you that initially I had a problem understanding the second part of the Midrash, namely, that we do *not* control what our ears hear, what our eyes see, and what our nose smells. After all, if I stick my fingers in my ears, can I not block out what they might otherwise hear? If I simply close my eyes, can I not prevent them from seeing something unsightly or unseemly? And if I pinch my nostrils together, can I not prevent my nose from smelling something foul? So, in effect, do I not exercise control over my ears, eyes, and nose? Is the Midrash just plain wrong?

I soon realized, however, that maybe the Midrash was correct.

First, maybe there is something I do want to hear, see, or smell, but other unavoidable sounds, sights, and odors interfere. For example, maybe I want to listen to the *chazzan* chant the prayers, but as I do, I also hear the sounds of too many people talking. I cannot control that (but you can!). Or, perhaps, I am walking through the park, enjoying the view, when my eyes and nose are assaulted by a stinking pile of garbage thoughtlessly dumped there. I cannot control that.

Also, even if you do try to stop up your ears, you cannot completely block out the sounds. Stick your fingers in your ears right now. Can’t you still hear me? Close your eyes right now. Sure, you can no longer see images, but you can certainly distinguish between light and dark. Similarly, if someone is wearing a particularly strong perfume, even if you pinch your nostrils, you can still detect some of the odor. The Midrash is correct: we do not exercise complete control over what our ears hear, our eyes see, or our nose smells.

But there exists another scenario when, even if we try to avoid hearing, seeing, or smelling, we cannot do so, because the sounds, the sights, or the smell is so overwhelming and overpowering that it permeates our entire environment. Case in point: how many Germans, Poles, Frenchmen, and others protested that they were not complicit in perpetrating the Holocaust, by claiming that they did not hear, that they did not see, and that they did not smell the destruction of the Jews? We know that that claim is utter nonsense. Why? -- Because even if one stuck his fingers in his ears, he could not help but hear the agonizing screams of his Jewish neighbors as they were rounded up and led to slaughter, nor could one avoid hearing the gunshots that murdered them. Again, the rounding up of the Jews, their being herded to the death pits in the forests or into the cattle cars or into the gas chambers was so ubiquitous that it was impossible for anyone not to see. And the stench of burning human flesh – a disgusting, almost-saccharine, unmistakable odor – so permeated the areas surrounding concentration and extermination camps that even if one pinched his nostrils he could not escape being enveloped in the horrid stench. And when you consider that Dachau is just a few miles outside Munich, Auschwitz not far from Krakow, and other death camps not all that far from cities in Poland, it becomes clear that the excuse, “I did not hear, I did not see, I did not smell,” is an outright lie. I will never forget my visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp back in 1973. I was travelling by myself, a little frightening back in the era of the Iron Curtain and the communist domination of Eastern Europe. I took a public bus from Krakow, where I was staying, to Auschwitz-Birkenau. As I looked at my fellow passengers – all native Poles – I started doing the calculations in my head. Let’s see: this guy sitting next to me looks to be in his sixties; it’s 28 years since the Holocaust ended; that means he must have been in his 30s during the Holocaust. I wonder whether he did anything to help Jews. And that lady across the aisle from me. She clearly is old enough to have lived during the Holocaust. I wonder what she would claim if I were to ask her about whether she knew that Jews were being butchered. Very frightening and disconcerting, believe me.

But that raises an important issue that pertains to all of us. If we do not control our ears, eyes, and nose, then we, too, cannot claim that we do not hear the cry of the anguished, that we do not see the plight of the downtrodden and oppressed, that we do not smell the stench of conflict.

I am about to mention some controversies concerning which we should not be deaf or blind or senseless. On the one hand, I am reluctant to discuss these issues in this Presidential year, because you might think I am supporting or opposing one candidate or another. A High Holy Day sermon is not about politics per se. On the other hand, I do not want to be silent in the face of issues that we must confront as individuals, as a country, and as Jews. In discussing these topics, therefore, I make no inference to the policies of any of the candidates for President.

The first issue about which we must not stop up our ears or cover our eyes is the whole issue of immigration, both legal and illegal. This is a matter which I have spoken and written about many times, and is an issue about which I feel passionate.

In my opinion, we must find a way to make citizens out of those who have come to this country legally or illegally and who are working and contributing members of our society. These are the people who are cutting your lawn, raking your leaves, trimming your trees, re-shingling your house, installing your gutters or your solar panels or your sprinkler system. They may also be the people who are cleaning your house. They are the ones who are cooking your food when you go to a restaurant – even a kosher one – and washing your dishes. They are also the people who harvested the fruit and vegetables you ate before you came to shul tonight. Most of these people came to this country not for a handout, not for a free ride; they came here to work and/or to escape oppression. They came here for a better life for their families. They came here for precisely the same reasons why our parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents immigrated to this country. I firmly believe that if an immigrant – even someone who arrived at our shores illegally – is working, then we should provide him/her with a clear and achievable path to citizenship. Trust me, they are not taking away jobs from born-here Americans. How many American-born citizens do you know – even if they are unemployed – who are willing to cut grass in the hot sun all summer, clean your toilets, harvest fruit and vegetables, or slave away in a hot kitchen all day? We need these immigrants to fill the jobs that no one else wants to fill. And if they are working, make them citizens so they can integrate into American society and meet their responsibilities as citizens. As I have mentioned on many occasions, the Torah commands us to show compassion for the resident alien and foreigner amongst us because we Jews experienced what it means to be an oppressed foreigner in the land of Egypt, an oppression that was repeated far too many times in our history as we were compelled to wander from nation to nation.

None of us can shut our eyes to the plight of the millions of refugees who have fled and are fleeing from Syria, Libya, and other Muslim countries. We have seen too many images of the bodies of dead children washed up upon the shores of Turkey or Greece or Italy to be deaf to their plight. Thousands have lost their lives in an attempt to reach safety and security in Europe and elsewhere.

Again, we Jews are painfully aware of what it is like to be a refugee with no place to go, to be a refugee when no one wants you. How many Jews could have been saved from the Holocaust if more countries were willing to accept Jews! We all know that even this country closed its ears and its eyes and its heart and its borders to the tens of thousands of Jews who could have left Germany and Europe before it was too late. But most of the world pretended to be deaf and blind to the plight of the Jewish people, with the result being the murder of The Six Million.

I know that many of us, myself included, fear admitting too many refugees from war-torn Muslim countries. After seeing what has transpired in Europe, we are afraid that some of them may be radicals, fundamentalists, or terrorists. I am not going to blind myself to this legitimate fear. That is why in a Shabbat sermon several months ago, I suggested not only a thorough vetting of such potential immigrants, but also that the United States require potential immigrants to have a sponsor here in this country, just as Jews and other immigrants had to have a sponsor after the United States changed its immigration laws in 1924. If you were a German Jew in the 1930s, for example, you had to have a sponsor here in the United States before you stood a chance of getting onto the quota list to enter this country. What was the responsibility of the sponsor? – To make sure that he/she would support you so that you did not become a ward of the state, and to ensure that you would not get involved in crime or any anti-American activity. We should require the same sponsorship today, whether the sponsors are a family, a church or synagogue, or an employer. We must not blind ourselves to the plight of the innocent, nor should we deafen ourselves to the dangers of Islamic terrorism.

Another issue that we cannot ignore is the Black Lives Matter Movement. It is certainly contemptible that racism exists in many police departments, and that so many unarmed black males have been shot by police. I would not want to be a young black man in the United States today; it is dangerous, for many reasons. We can neither blind nor deafen ourselves to the murder of unarmed blacks by those charged with upholding the laws of our communities.

On the other hand, we cannot tolerate the brazen murder of police officers in this country either. The heinous gunning down of law enforcement officers in Dallas, Baton Rouge, and elsewhere cannot be justified or excused. Similarly, the current reluctance of police officers to stop and arrest malfeasants in high crime areas for fear of a backlash only works to the detriment of everyone, especially the innocents living in those high crime areas.

However, we cannot deafen or blind ourselves to the fact that the Black Lives Matter Movement has morphed into an anti-Israel confederation, and that should be troubling to all of us. The recently published Black Lives Matter manifesto claims that Israel is an apartheid state and is guilty of genocide against Palestinians; that statement, written, incidentally, by a self-hating former Jew, is not only a gross lie and a patently false representation, it is also deliberately off-putting and inflammatory, perhaps calculated to drive a wider wedge between the Black and Jewish communities. Incidentally, I should inform you that in the face of the gunning down of unarmed blacks, the Long Island Board of Rabbis and the main Black ministerial group here on Long Island have spent the past year working on the creation of the Black-Jewish Coalition for Justice of Long Island. I can almost guarantee to you that the Black Lives Matter manifesto’s anti-Israel plank will be a topic of discussion at one of the forthcoming meetings.

But this incident should remind us that we cannot be blind or deaf to the threats against the State of Israel and the rise in anti-Semitism throughout the world. One of the most insidious threats to Israel is the BDS movement – that’s the “Boycott, Divestiture, Sanction” movement against Israel. Since I have spoken about the nefarious nature of the BDS Movement in previous High Holy Day sermons, I will not belabor the point tonight. However, let me emphasize several factors about which we Jews cannot be deaf or blind:

First, many, if not most of, the proponents of BDS seek to delegitimize the State of Israel, period. For many of them it is not a matter of Israel’s making peace with the Palestinians, or ending Israel’s so-called “occupation” of the West Bank, or the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank (the so-called “Two State Solution”). For many of the supporters of BDS, any Jewish state in the land you and I call Israel has no right to exist. Forget that the United Nations gave its blessing to a Jewish state way back in 1947. For many BDS supporters, the State of Israel should be wiped off the map. If that is not an existential threat to us Jews, then I don’t know what is.

Second, in addition to their attempt to delegitimize the State of Israel, they also seek to demonize the State of Israel. By using terms like “apartheid” – and anyone who has visited Israel knows that Israel is farther from being an apartheid state than almost any of the Muslim countries – and “genocide against the Palestinians” – which is so far from the truth that it is inconceivable how anyone can even utter the phrase – the demonizers of the State of Israel, in effect, make it “open season” on Israelis and Jews. If Israelis and the Jews are the devils incarnate, as they imply, then why should anyone not hesitate to attack or kill Israelis and Jews? My friends, this is a repetition of the Nazi success in demonizing the Jews of Europe. And we all know where that led … right to the killing pits and extermination camps of Europe. This is nothing more than the revival of the old blood libel against the Jews, and we all know how many thousands of Jews were tortured because of that fabrication. The same rhetoric is being used today against Israel and its supporters, and it must be stopped.

Third, let no one here tonight think for a moment that anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism; it is one and the same. As far back as the 1960s, the great black leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood that the former is just a front for the latter. **On this issue, as on so many others, Dr. King was absolutely correct. When he heard a black student at Harvard launch a tirade against Israel, Reverend King stopped him in his tracks and said: “Young man, when people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews. You’re talking anti-Semitism here.”**  What Rev. Dr. King realized then is even truer today: Anti-Zionism is just one element of – and is frequently a smokescreen for – anti-Semitism. If you do not believe me, then ask yourself a question: Why have Muslim terrorists targeted and murdered Jews in France, Belgium, and elsewhere? Why have Muslim hoodlums attacked and beaten to the point of death Jewish students in Paris, Marseilles, and Toulouse? Why do synagogues like ours all across the world have to take security measures, if not because being anti-Israel is the equivalent of being anti-Jewish. We must not be blind or deaf to the fact that any threat to the State of Israel is an existential threat to all of us sitting in this room.

There are other social issues about which we should neither blind ourselves nor deafen our ears. While I adamantly do not agree with his proposed solutions, Bernie Sanders was right about at least one issue: income disparity in this country that is growing wider and wider by the year. That such a huge gap does exist in this country was recently hammered home to my daughter Shira. For the past five years Shira had been teaching history in an elite, non-denominational Jewish high school in the greater Boston area at which the annual tuition - for high school, mind you – is approximately $35,000 a year. This year she is teaching at a Catholic high school in South Boston run by the Boston Archdiocese; the school’s mission is to serve children from low-income families. At this school, the average family income is below $30,000 a year. Did you pay attention to those figures? – It means that the families at the Catholic school at which Shira is teaching now make less than the tuition at the Jewish day school at which she formerly taught. Talk about income disparity. If we do not try to solve this issue, it will come back to bite us in the future.

And then there are the many Jewish issues to which we should not stop up our ears or close our eyes. Since I have discussed many of these topics in previous High Holy Day sermons, I mention only one now:

We cannot blind ourselves to the changing Jewish demographics of Long Island. It is no secret that synagogue membership is dropping in almost every synagogue and temple on the South Shore, though our membership here at EMJC rose this year, thanks to the many new members who joined our synagogue family, and, once again, I want to welcome all of you. I am also delighted to say that our congregation, the East Meadow Jewish Center, is more viable than most other congregations, and is certainly one of the most active. Yet, no one here should be deaf to the challenges that lie ahead as we struggle to provide you with the quality services, programs, and activities that we offer. We are certainly in a period when consolidations may become more than hypothetical, and we must not be desensitized to this possibility.

My friends, the Midrash that I have been sharing with you, as you know by now, contains two parts: It teaches that there are parts of our bodies that we can control – namely our mouth, hands, and feet; and that there are three parts of our bodies that over which we do not exercise control – specifically, our ears, eyes, and nose. I want to suggest to you this evening that the juxtaposition of the two elements of this Rabbinic teaching instructs us that we must utilize those parts of our bodies that we do manage whenever we encounter injustice, inequity, or challenges. Whether those injustices, inequalities, or challenges pertain to the society in which we live or to the Jewish people of which we are part, we must use our bodies, our energy, our resources, our strength, and our ingenuity, to right those injustices, resolve those inequities, and successfully surmount those challenges.

Remember: you do control your mouth, you do control your hands, and you do control your feet. May God grant all of us the sense and the ability to use them wisely, to use them for good, and to use them to make this world a better place for us, for all Jews, and for all humanity.

Shana Tova!