

A Time To Speak -- Yom Kippur 5765 (2004)

The island of Sardinia. Summer 2001. Toga-clad servers pass out hors d'oeuvres. An archer fires flaming arrows for spectacle. A giant ice sculpture of Michelangelo's David pours out triple-distilled vodka for its guests. If you were in attendance, then you were lucky enough to be included in Tyco's \$2 million birthday bash for its CEO's wife.

Corporate excess? Corporate greed? You bet! Tyco, Enron, WorldCom, Martha Stewart. And those are just the one's who got caught, or caused their companies to crash and burn, or wiped out pension funds and sent thousands of workers into financial ruin.

David Callahan is the author of a book called The Cheating Culture. He writes that "Today's business values normalize felonious behavior," that Americans are acting with an historic lack of honesty.

His point is well taken, and here are just a few examples that I've come across. HireRight over in Irvine, is a company that does background checks on job applicants. It has found that 34% of all job applications today contain some type of lie. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce says that employee theft is now costing companies \$50 billion a year (which is, by my reckoning, a lot of missing paperclips)! And the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners tells us that business fraud was \$600 billion in 2002, which is double what it was in 1997.

In his book on cheating, Callahan also points out the obvious – there is a definite trickle down effect. So many workers see their top executives cheating without serious consequence that they logically draw the conclusion that getting ahead in the corporate world demands that they also lie, cheat, and steal.

Walt Pavlo is on the lecture circuit these days. He's a public speaker for the Young Entrepreneurs Alliance. And he's had plenty of time to put his ideas together – 24 months in prison, to be exact. He worked for MCI back in the 90's. And, when the tech bubble started to burst, he became part of that trickle down corruption. He claims that his bosses pressured him to make MCI's books look better than they were. So, he managed to make millions of dollars of bad debt disappear – along with a tidy \$6 million, which happened to reappear in his own bank account.

Something terribly disconcerting is going on in America – an unrelenting series of scandals that, more days than not, occupy our top news headlines. And *corporate* scandal is not even the worst of it. No, we saw the very worst this year at Abu Ghraib prison – graphic images of American soldiers humiliating, torturing, raping, and even murdering Iraqi prisoners. The heinousness of their actions cannot be understated! At Abu Ghraib, all America was handed a humbling lesson – we are just as capable as anyone else in this world of being really bad. These were not Nazi war crimes, or the brutal acts of Islamic extremists toward their hostages. These were American soldiers perpetrating pure evil and barbarism. Something within our culture and ethic created that. It wore the "made in America" label.

And do you know what their legal defense will be? Their attorneys are already telling us, it will be textbook. Their defense will be that they were only following orders, that they could not break the code of military fealty. Trickle down corruption in a uniform.

The news of this year has prompted me for the first time, to really think about the prayer we recite on Yom Kippur, our Al Chet, and particularly the line which says: "For the sin we have sinned before You under coercion or by desire." What does this actually mean? Who of sound mind freely wants to go out and sin? Where exactly is the line between *wanting* to sin, and being *coerced* to sin?

I think most people who steal, or lie, or abuse prisoners do it because they feel that they have to – that, given their circumstances, they have no other choice. If they don't, there will be horrible consequences. They could lose their companies, or their jobs, or their stock investments, or be court-marshaled.

Coercion to do wrong can be subtle, seductive.

Look at what it takes today to get ahead. How many of us feel the pressure to perform or face serious consequences? How do you compete in a workplace where you know there is lying and stealing? How do you feel about working for those A's to get into a good college, when you know that some students are just going to buy their way into the college of their choice?

Yes, coercion, the trickle-down effect of dishonesty, of immorality is a growing crisis! It's not just something we read about from Wall Street or Iraq, removed from us and our day to day world. It is an infectious disease that strikes right here at home, and can contaminate our own lives.

And the question is, what are we supposed to do about it? *"Al chet sh'chatanu l'fanecha, b'ones u'v'ratzon* – for the sin we have sinned against you under coercion or by desire."

It's like a multiple choice test; we have a few possibilities here. Do we:

a) ignore what's going on around us and just try to do our personal best? Do we b) speak up and be the one to blow the whistle, even though we know we could easily be victimized for it? Or, c) should we just join in, because this it's the only way to survive today?

Clearly, "c)" is out, and we know that Judaism encourages us to stand against the tide. *B'makom sh'ein anashim, hishtadel l'hiyon ish*. Our rabbis taught: "In a place where there are no good people, strive to be a good person." No matter what other people are doing, no matter what may be asked of us – do the good and right thing.

The fact is, that there is a commandment in Judaism to defy illegal or immoral orders. The famous Rabbi Akiba died the death of a martyr, burned alive while wrapped in a torah scroll, because he refused to do what the Romans asked of him. He chose death over betrayal.

But, is this enough? As hard as it is to resist coercion, to stand fast in our convictions, it's *not* enough just to refuse to carry out an order that we know is wrong. As Jews, we also have to stand up against it. "Do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds," means that we cannot allow the evil to continue, even if it only affects someone else.

This spring, I experienced a tragic illustration of this lesson. There is a lovely Iranian family who belong to Temple Solel. And when I say family, I mean FAMILY – three generations of extended family groupings – grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. They were exiled from Iran because they are Jews, and they made their way to freedom, riding on horseback through the desert, with a little baby in their arms. Here, in North County, they have truly found the American dream. That little baby grew up, became bat mitzvah, and was confirmed right here on this bima, as have many of her cousins after her.

On a beautiful day, the whole extended family was attending the high school graduation of one of the boys. At the reception after the ceremony, the father of that little baby, was assaulted with a punch in the face that landed him on his back, and put him in the ICU with head injuries – because, as his assailant told him, he isn't wanted in this country!

As he was telling me this unbelievable story, I couldn't help but think of the irony. Here he was, exiled from his home in Iran, having fled persecution. Only to be attacked by someone with no inkling of all he went through to become a free American. And you know what? When I asked him, he told me that not one bystander at the graduation did anything to help him.

"Do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds" is a hard commandment to carry out in the real world! We could get punched out ourselves, find a swastika painted on our front door, become a pariah in our company, be ridiculed by our schoolmates. But, standing up for justice is something that we Jews have always been asked to do.

Remember Pastor Martin Neimoller's famous reflection after the Holocaust?

In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists . . . the Catholics . . . and the Protestants . . . and I didn't speak up. Finally they came for me, and by that time, there was no one left to speak up.

Well there is plenty to speak up for today! As a Jewish community, can we remain silent when anti-Semitism reaches new heights in Europe?

When our Jewish community center is burned to the ground in France as happened last month – where anti-Semitic offenses rose from an average of 10 a year in the 1990's, to a current pace of 120 a year?

Can we remain silent when the International Court of Justice at The Hague, declares that Israel has no right to build a security fence to protect its citizens from being blown up by terrorists?

Can we remain silent when the Presbyterian Church of America votes at its national assembly to divest from all of its investments in Israel and, at the same time, refuses to halt funding for messianic congregations that target Jews for conversion?

And what about our own community? This year, a swastika and racist graffiti were painted on a bench outside of one of our local middle schools. In the wake of Mel Gibson's, *The Passion of Christ*, an overwhelming number of our Solel kids were confronted with anti-Semitic canards, and asked by their friends why the Jews killed Jesus? There was even a neo-nazi group marching around campus. And one of our teens has been repeatedly threatened by a gang outside of his Martial Arts Studio, because he is Jewish. Can we remain silent? Should we hide?

Al chet sh'chatanu l'fanecha, b'ones u'v'ratzon – for the sin we have sinned against you under coercion or by desire. It is a sin to be coerced into silence. Not only must we resist injustice and corruption, we must actually stand up against it – even at personal risk.

A long time ago, I learned a hard lesson. Back in 1969, in my public high school, I learned that most people are afraid to speak out. I was in the school chorus, and the teacher assigned us Ave Maria to sing in the holiday program. When I told him that some of us were Jewish and singing a song which overtly professes Christian religious faith would be inappropriate, he couldn't understand the problem. He asked me just to view it as artistic expression.

At that point, the few other Jewish kids in the class didn't want to make any more of an issue of it. So, I decided to meet with the principal, but to no avail. Finally, after refusing to sing Ave Maria, I was expelled from the class. It was not until the Anti Defamation League intervened, that I was reinstated. Suffice it to say, that I did not receive an "A" that year in Chorus! In 11th grade, I learned the hard lesson that, many may be troubled by injustice, but few will be willing to stand up. *Al chet sh'chatanu l'fanecha* – for the sin we have committed against You under coercion or with desire.

I would venture to guess that most people don't really want to sin. They are usually coerced by personal need, by unique circumstances, by pressure from superiors, or even peers, to do things that are against their better judgment. And when this happens to us or, someone else, we have to do what is right and just. "In a place where there are no mensches, strive to be a mensch."

Be the one to stand up; be the one to tell others they are wrong and stop them from committing crimes in your school, your company, in your army unit. Be the voice of conscience, even to the world, in speaking up against the morally corrupt doctrine of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism.

When you see a friend in school who is getting involved with drugs or alcohol, or any kind of self-destructive behavior, say something and take a stand – tell him, tell his parents, tell *your* parents, tell me. Don't stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds. If you are given the opportunity to get ahead

in your company, but dishonesty would be required, take a stand. Be the person who stops the *ones*, the coercion, before more people are harmed. And when anti-Semitic things are said to you or, in front of you, even if they are meant to be harmless – say something, speak up, don't let it go, even when it's uncomfortable.

Something is going on in America – in our military, in our corporations, in our schools – selfish, bigoted, abusive behavior. And the trickle down has to stop with us. We need to be the ones to act with character, and to model character for our children and grandchildren.

So, let's listen to them more concerning their ethical dilemmas, and help them learn how to be strong and take a stand. Of all the vows and oaths we make this Yom Kippur, this may be the most important one – to declare that we will not be coerced to sin, or stand idle in the face of injustice. Rather, we will stand up, speak out, and put ourselves on the line if we have to!

This summer, my family and I witnessed a harrowing event. We were with our kids on vacation, where we happened to run into another couple from Solel. As we were out at the pool, a little child had apparently lost consciousness and was motionless under the water. He was quickly pulled out, and the lifeguard was trying to get the boy to breath, but to no avail. He was clearly young, and without enough experience. As we looked up, we saw our temple member jump in, take over, and bring this little boy back to life.

Sometime afterward, we talked. And she asked, "well, have I given you a High Holiday sermon today? This has really made me realize that life is so precious, and in just one moment, everything can change."

Later, I as I reflected on her words and actions, I began to realize that, for me, the sermon was going to be slightly different. For what I learned that day, was that, at any moment, we can be called upon to step up and take action. The only question is, when that moment presents itself, will we?

When we are called upon, will we have the courage to save a life, to stand up against those doing harm, to proclaim the truth even at personal risk, to defy an immoral order, to be honest when others are dishonest. When our moment of action unexpectedly arises, will we duck underground, or rise above the seductive sin of coercion?

This is Yom Kippur – the angels stand in awe and trembling before the heavenly throne – and so should we. For today we decree our destiny and seal our fate. Will we live by our conviction, or die a spiritual death by standing idly by?

Ecclesiastes wrote that, "There is a time for every purpose under heaven – a time to keep silent, and a time to speak out."

Let us not keep silent. But rather, let us sound the siren call of the Shofar – raising us to new heights of courage and character. So that, when the gates of Neilah are closed, we will be standing, not where *others* place us, but where *we* want and need to be. Amen.