

## SERMON KOL NIDREI 5781

Rabbi David Edleson, Temple Sinai, S. Burlington

### **THE *TESHUVAH* OF BEAUTY**

Tim and I, as many of you know, love opera. To be sure, we are low-key provincial opera queens, but it is one of our great loves. Yes, the stories are melodramatic, and somehow the woman always seems to die at the end, but as we know, life too often ends unfairly, unjustly, and goodness is often not rewarded.

When I feel fed up with humans, with our petty dramas, our politics, our self-centeredness, I listen to opera. Centuries and centuries of human genius go into every note.

First there are the instruments. How much trial and error, fine craft goes into just making those instruments.

Then there are the musicians that play them, with skill that is taught and passed down and perfected over generations

Then there is the composer who was able to take poetry, set it to music so complex but that can be written down. It is amazing that symphonies can be written down.

Then there are the singers. I know some of you don't like operatic singing – fine. But I want to push back. The human voice is astonishing in its range and diversity, and if there was a bird that could learn to sing like opera divas sing, we would think that species the most miraculous of creatures.

That the singing is with words, in a play, with an orchestra, all written out in scores – well if humans can do that, there is nothing of which we aren't capable.

The sheer immensity of the project of writing and putting on an opera – the countless years it takes to create the musicians to do that – all for the sake of beauty and art: I fall in love with humanity every time I listen.

And then there is the audience, which requires commitment, spending lots of money just to be immersed for a few hours in this expression of the human longing for the sublime, the longing for moments of transcendence.

Indeed, opera has much in common with religion, because you go to hours and hours of opera in the hopes of having one of 'those moments', the sublime moments when the singer, the orchestra, the text, and the conductor and the audience all come together for a moment in which all that separates us dissolves and there is a oneness that is beyond words. One doesn't believe in opera; one experiences moments of transcendent beauty. One doesn't believe in God; one experiences moments of transcendent love

You know who also loved opera? RBG. Here is a woman who was a fierce attorney, a relentless and brilliant strategist, one of the clearest minds of jurisprudence in American history, and she also loved opera, and could be dear friends with Antonin Scalia, her judicial nemesis, because they shared this love of beauty and the empathy for the human condition.

If we ask, "what would Ruth Bader Ginsberg do" in these difficult days, we know one answer would be "get to work," and one answer would be "listen to opera."

Opera, like all the outpourings of the human heart we call 'art', offers us a form of *teshuvah*, a return, a repentance. When we experience art, we are reminded of the painful beauty of being human. We are reminded of the beauty of which we humans are capable. We are reminded of our shared tragedies and losses, our sense of exile, and for a moment our differences dissolve and we experience something greater, something that transcends our differences. We experience beauty.

As humans, we are blessed with the ability to experience beauty in profound ways, and let's just pause for a moment and think what a complex miracle of consciousness that is.

I would call it holy. Sublime.

We live now with so much ugliness around us. So many deaths from this pandemic. So much nastiness in our discourse, and crudeness, *like we experienced during the Zomb Bombing in Friday Night's Shabbat Shuvah services*. There is such anger, much of it justified, and so much disequilibrium, a sort of *cultural vertigo*, that it is easy to forget the beauty all around us, within us, between us, available to us.

One of the most important paths of *t'shuvah* is to remind yourself of beauty, and the beauty of being human even in such times as these, or particularly in such times as these.

Carve out time just to listen to music, or to out and look up at the stars for an hour. But I'm going to suggest something radical: *prayer is a way of experiencing the beauty all around us and in us*. Prayer, *being prayerful*, is the habit of opening up to the sublime, to the holy, to the beauty of being alive, in human community and being loved.

Prayer is the outpouring of our feelings and hopes to have them reflected back to us as something holy.

We need to reset our spirits, to cleanse our hearts of all the gunk and anxiety and worry that have built up.

Last year, a handful of us from Temple Sinai went to the Union of Reform Judaism's Biennial to connect with the movement and learn from other synagogues and thinkers about how we can best live up to the ideals of liberal Judaism.

Susan Leff, Tim and I all landed in a workshop Dan Nichols was doing about how a few of his songs connected the music with the words and the prayer service, and then a traditional cantor would compare Dan's work to a traditional cantorial setting of the same prayer. The room was packed, standing room only. It was B.C. – before Covid.

One of the songs was called "Lev Tahor" or "Pure Heart" and they put the words up on the screen. They were from Psalm 51:

*Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
And renew the right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from Your presence  
Do not take the spirit of your holiness from me.  
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation  
And may a giving spirit take hold in me....*

Like most of the people in the room, I knew this song, had the album, but had not really given it that much thought, but he chose to focus on the line, "*Al tashlicheinu milfanecha – Do not cast me away from You presence,*" which so

powerfully expresses the desire to stay connected to God, to have moments of prayerful beauty and relationship.

When Dan started singing his version of this, the room joined in, and for me, it became one of those moments of prayerful beauty. I was transported. I was filled with a sense of joy and love for God and for the people around me. I loved Dan, loved the music, loved seeing young people around singing and crying like I was singing and crying.

I turned to Tim when it was over and said, “Remind me to use that song for Kol Nidrei this year to introduce the silent Amidah.” It seemed like a good idea at the time, but after several drafts of a sermon about it, I found myself not sure what to say other than what the words already said more clearly that I could: how we long for holiness and a spiritual life; how we fear loneliness and disconnection; how hard it is sometimes to say what is troubling us.

Last Friday Night, on Rosh HaShanah evening, David Punia brought up his phone on which was an alert or a text that said simply, “RBG has died.”

It threw me. It is still throwing me, if I’m honest. In a single short text there were so many layers of meaning, of dread, of sadness and they all were poured out at once.

My heart sank, my stomach clenched, and I felt like the ground beneath me was wobbly.

I felt what many of you felt. Love for her example. Pride at having such an icon be a Jewish woman. Sadness at the end of an era. And a sense of being overwhelmed that with everything else going on it is just too much to contend with. I suppose I felt tired; felt exhausted. On Rosh HaShanah, I felt abandoned and bereft.

And after services were over, loss very quickly grew to anger, and as we drove home, I started to work myself up into a righteous rage. I was having my own private audience with Mitch McConnell telling him what I thought about him until Tim turned to me and said “That’s not very Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi.”

He’s right. But I was hooked, and still am really. The pull of partisanship and division is so strong, that even as I tried to get back into a *t’shuvah* state of mind, I could feel the pull of anger and the pull of taking sides. Can you feel that pull?

No matter which side you are on, I think we are, as a society, all caught in a riptide that is pulling us in two directions, and it is a tide made by us, and it can only be changed by us.

And we want it to change, we really do, because don't we all hate this endless arguing? We will change... *as soon as our side wins.*

We can call it concern for the vulnerable, or hide behind our lofty ethics, but we are deluding ourselves if we believe that is what motivates us. There is a pull toward tribalism, toward teams, toward winning that is wicked powerful, and I fear it is pulling us all away from the shore.

We can't, as a society, reckon with our past, reconcile with one another, and address some of the great problems we face if in doing so, we tear ourselves apart, demonize those with whom we disagree, and see people who differ from us politically as evil. Calling the side we disagree with, "the enemy of the people," is the death knell of liberal functional democracy.

When politics becomes our religion, disagreement becomes heresy. Compromise becomes betrayal and the punishment is excommunication and exile. The consequences of this sort of Puritanism are profound, and dangerous.

If we want to do *t'shuvah* as a society, we need to look into the mirror into the dark mirror of our divisions, and find a different way of disagreeing. I don't think there is a bigger sin we need to atone for than the sin of divisiveness, the sin of righteous indignation, the sin of moral certainty. I know I am guilty of it.

So tonight, let's pray when we rise in a few moments what David prayed:

*Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
And renew the right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from Your presence  
Do not take the spirit of your holiness from me.  
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation  
And may a giving spirit take hold in me....*

God, open my lips that my mouth may declare your beauty.