

Survivor
Survivor

1st Day Rosh Hashanah

Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

September 16, 2004

How many of you have seen the yellow rubber wrist bands that many of the kids and a lot of the adults have been wearing this summer? In fact, raise your hand if you or your child or someone you know is wearing one of these wrist bands right now!

These are very plain, very simple yellow plastic - they only cost \$1 (when was the last time you got off by buying something your child "had to have" and it only cost \$1!) And inscribed on these bands are two very simple words: "live strong".

What does that mean?

It is connected with Lance Armstrong the remarkably cyclist, 6 time winner of the Tour De France and cancer survivor, in fact - Live Strong is a resource for cancer survivors that provides information on practical, emotional and physical survivorship topics..." Their web site poses the question: "Who is a survivor?" and then answers it by saying: "Anyone battling cancer." This seems to me to be a very worthwhile cause - and cancer survivors are some of the most incredible people I have ever met.

It also seems to me that the word survivor has become a very important word, in fact it is arguably one of the most important concepts of the 21st century. Most of us were first introduced to the term following WWII and the Shoah, the Nazi Holocaust that sought the complete elimination of the Jewish people and succeeded in the destruction of one third of European Jewry, 6 million innocent men women and children. The remnants of that Holocaust became known to our generation as "Survivors" - the technical term is actually - Seriday HaShoah - but in English, they have become known simply as "Survivors". There are Survivors of the Holocaust sitting with us in this sanctuary today, and there are children of survivors - who have become known as 2nd generation. Within the Jewish community the title and the people who bear it are treated with reverence and the utmost respect and as a result we are not at all sure what to make of the sudden currency of this term; there are cancer survivors, rape survivors, survivors of abuse, survivors of terrorist attacks and post 9/11 we all feel like survivors. There is even a hugely popular reality television show called "Survivor" - that has become, well, an

industry unto itself. A friend of mine told me that he was on vacation this summer in a house that had only one tv. He wanted to watch the political convention and his kids wanted to watch “Survivor”. My friend was unfamiliar with the show and asked his kids to explain what it was about. They explained that it was about a group of people competing for a great prize by getting rid of each other and the last one standing won. My friend decided that it was the exact same plot as the Political Convention that he wanted to watch -so they might as well watch the kid’s show.

What are we to make of this fact that suddenly everyone is a survivor of one thing or another?

Leave it to Larry David to capture the ambivalence we feel on this matter in one of the episodes of his hugely popular HBO series Curb Your Enthusiasm. Many are eagerly awaiting the beginning of the fifth season of this HBO comedy series but people are still talking about a show from last season, titled interestingly, “The Survivor”. As one of the originators and creative forces behind Seinfeld, Larry David has made a comfortable living upending traditional views on everything from adultery to the afterlife. But, in this particular episode of Curb Your Enthusiasm, the centerpiece is a dinner party celebrating the renewal of Larry and Cheryl’s wedding vows. The set up for the humor comes when Larry’s rabbi, who is invited to dinner asks if he can bring a friend to dinner and then adds, “he is a survivor!” Larry assumes that the survivor friend of a rabbi must be a survivor of the Holocaust, so to make him feel more at home, he tells his father to invite his friend Solly, also a survivor of the Holocaust to join them for dinner. Well at this point everything is in place for one of the most outrageous comedy moments of the year when it turns out that the rabbi’s “survivor” friend is not a Holocaust survivor but one of the stars of the reality TV series Survivor - the one where contestants are taken to remote islands and left to compete for fame and wealth. Colby, the TV star from Survivor captures the attention of those at the dinner party with his stories of deadly snake bites in the Australian outback. Suddenly a withered man with a glass eye interrupts. “Let me tell you, I was in a concentration camp. You never suffered one minute in your life compared to what I went through,” says Solly, the friend of Larry’s father - the “real” Survivor...? The conversation quickly devolves into a competition and the kind of immensely uncomfortable comedic experience for which the show has become known:

COLBY: We had very little rations, no snacks

SOLLY: Snacks, what are you talking snacks? We didn’t eat, sometimes for a week, for a month...

COLBY: Have you ever even seen the show?

SOLLY: Did you ever see our show? It was called the Holocaust!

And then, things just go down hill from there. With civility out the window, each of them shouts, "I'm a survivor!" "I'm a survivor!"

And if making fun of Holocaust survivors was not disrespectful enough - in the very same episode - he decides to make fun of 9/11 survivors. Earlier in that same episode Larry's rabbi (why do they always pick on the rabbi's?) says that his brother-in-law died on 9/11. Larry, and we, feel an immediate sympathy with this poor man's loss - but again the "joke" is on us as it turns out that while he was killed on 9/11, it was in a run-in with a bike messenger on 57th Street. Larry's is angry, feeling that he was somehow duped - that dying on 9/11 means only one kind of tragedy and not another.

I know Larry David was only going for the joke - but the truth is that many a profound truth is hidden in such humor and I believe that this may have been a seminal moment in contemporary culture. (And you missed it because you don't have cable)

We are being challenged. Solly is a survivor and Colby is a survivor - is there no difference between them? Someone who died on 9/11 - in the twin towers or in an accident on 57th street, is there no difference between them?

Dead is dead - isn't every death a tragedy and deserving of our concern and sympathy?

Survival is survival - does it make a difference whether you survived the holocaust or the artificial challenges of a tv show?

In a word - yes. Of course every death is a tragedy - but if we can't distinguish between a tragic accident and the targeted murder of thousands of innocents - we are in big trouble.

If we can't distinguish between Colby and Solly - between an all too common kind of American who has come to think that suffering is life without sneakers, toilet paper, or a personal trainer and the suffering of those who were targeted for annihilation and extermination we are indeed in big trouble.

How can a culture that knows survival as an elaborate game show possibly understand the true depths of the Holocaust. And how will a culture that cannot distinguish between an accidental death and the targeted murder at the World Trade Center respond appropriately if it is merely dismissed as just another tragedy - death is death, and all death is to be mourned equally.

I am a bit embarrassed to have to say this but say it I will:

There is a difference between a survivor of the shoah and a tv show survivor. There is a difference between someone who dies on 9/11 accidentally and someone who was killed in the World Trade Center - and the difference is not only in the act itself but in the response it demands.

The key element to survival is faith. The greater the tragedy - the greater the faith that will be needed in order to survive.

Anyone who has suffered the loss of a loved one - knows the importance of faith - faith in something that enabled them to survive, to begin again, to go on again.

Anyone who is a cancer survivor knows of the importance of faith - to enable them to imagine the possibility of a brighter tomorrow.

Survival requires faith; Survival demands faith.

This is something that holocaust survivors understand and TV show survivors do not - and this is something all Americans need to learn if we hope to survive in a post 9/11 world. Faith matters.

We knew what it meant to be a survivor after the Shoah. What does it mean to be a survivor after 9/11? What does it really mean to be a cancer survivor or even just to survive the loss of one special someone you loved?

You see I think we Jews have some expertise on the subject of survival. And by extracting the insights gleaned from 4000 years of Jewish experience I think we have something to say about survival in a post 9/11 world. We have something to offer our fellow Americans as we all seek to chart a path in a new world that seems to be playing by new rules.

Faith matters - this is something I have no doubt that Solly as a Holocaust Survivor understands and I also have no doubt that Colby, the TV Show survivor does not - do we?

Faith is not something that most of us have a handle on. Faith is not something that most of us are comfortable with. Faith somehow seems so, well Christian. When we think of faith we think of "faith based initiatives" and "keeping the faith" and while Faith may be a name that is frequently used for a woman - it is not one that is often enough used by Jews. Many of you were raised with the sense that you could be Jewish, could be a very good Jew, without faith - that it was possible for Judaism to survive without faith. That it was possible for the world to survive without faith. You could attend Israel rallies, send

your kids to Hebrew school even belong to a shul and not get caught up in all that faith stuff. Judaism was lox and bagels on Sunday mornings. It was a certain kind of humor and the country club you belonged to and the neighborhood you lived in. Being Jewish was a matter of the Yiddishisms you sprinkled your speech with and the friends you hung around with - it was all these things and more but it was not about what you believed in, belief just didn't matter, it wasn't necessary.

That is so old world. My friends - welcome to the new world - and in the new world, faith matters, belief matters - big time. Faith is the key to survival in this new, post 9/11 world - and many of you, too many of you are playing in a new game with old strategies.

We live in a world in need of guidance. The old rules, the old way of doing things do not seem to be working - do not seem to be producing the results to which we are normally accustomed. The survival business is not what it used to be. What is that old definition of stupidity? Someone who repeats the same behavior over and over expecting different results. One hits his head against the wall - and it hurts. One repeats the action - and it hurts again. The smarter you are, the quicker you learn that hitting one's head against the wall hurts. The stupid person persists in his or her behavior with the same degree of surprise at the painful outcome each and every time.

And so we seem to find ourselves in a new world, that seems to be playing by new rules and yet too many of you persist in doing things the old way. Now I am not unsympathetic - I know it is not easy to change. Most of you had mastered the old game, the old rules so well - that you are reluctant to change - I understand, I really do. But as your rabbi, I can't just sit here and watch you keep banging your head against that old wall - so I am afraid I need to introduce you to the new world in which we live and if we as Americans, if we as Jews are going to survive in this one - we are going to have to adapt, going to have to change - the way we have always adapted and always changed to meet the needs of an ever changing world. We Jews haven't made it in the survival game for 4000 years by being stupid!

In the old world - and for the purposes of our discussion this morning let's define old world as the one that existed before September 11, 2001 - it is as good a cut off date as any. In the pre-9/11 world the prevailing sense, the one that many of you built you lives on, was that belief didn't matter, actions mattered. In the old world, for example - I didn't really care what you felt about me as long as you behaved decently toward me. Your feelings, your beliefs were your own business - but behavior that was fair game for discussion, for debate, for laws. In the old world we spent a lot of time debating appropriate and inappropriate behavior. That was a fair discussion. We spent little or no time discussing appropriate or inappropriate beliefs - that was not fair. I remember when

religion was first raised with respect to a presidential candidate, it was when JFK - (the first JFK) was running for president. Prior to that time, the country had never elected a Catholic president and the question was raised regarding his fitness for the job because of his faith. There was concern as to how his religious beliefs might influence his presidency. The resolution of this matter - in good "old world" fashion, was that it did not matter - his beliefs were irrelevant. What he felt in the privateness of his heart was not our business - as long as he made clear what his actions, what his policies would be - we would judge him based on his record, not on his faith. And this became the defining paradigm for all politicians since then - that is until the old world ended. We now live in a very different world and in this new world, belief matters - big time. And too many of us haven't yet woken up to the change - we are still operating on old world standards.

It is becoming more and more clear that we have gotten ourselves into quite a mess over in Iraq. And I would like to humbly suggest to you this morning - that one of the reasons we are faring so poorly in all our encounters with the radical Muslim world may well be that we are applying old world strategies to a new world situation.

We assumed that we would be judged in Iraq, based on our behavior, on our actions. We assumed that in a country that had long been tortured and abused by Saddam Hussein's regime - that after freeing this country from his cruel dictatorship that we would be welcomed as, well - liberators. Visions of Paris with tanks rolling down the Champs Elyse and cheering crowds lining the streets throwing flowers and kisses at us - danced in our heads. But that is so old world. Instead what we have found, is that they - some of them, many of them, most of them? Hate us! In Iraq we now face a widening insurgency and a deepening hostility from the general public. Our deepest enemies now run several cities and support for the United States in Iraq is now running at 5%. Night after night we watch on our televisions and we see pictures of our young brave soldiers killed in Iraq - soldiers who were fighting for their freedom - and the very people whom we thought we were there to liberate - danced on our dead bodies - celebrate our defeats - mock our very presence. And we are confused.

An article in the New York Times this past year was titled: "France struggles to curb extremist Muslim clerics." It goes on to describe that France expelled five Muslim clerics this year on charges of spreading a dangerously divisive brand of radical Islam. According to the country's Interior Minister, Dominique de Villepin, "The government cannot tolerate the public statement of views that are contrary to human rights, attack the dignity of women and call for hate or violence," This struggle is so new world. Notice that the dilemma here is how do we control - not what they are doing but what they believe, what they think! These Muslim clerics were deemed offensive and worthy of expulsion from France not because of anything they did but because of what they said, because of what they believed. Their beliefs were deemed a threat to the people of France. And this from the country that first promised the world: "Liberte, Egalite and Fraternite!"

This is indeed a new world. And new strategies are necessary if we wish to survive.

Now. Lest you think this is only about Muslims, think again. This past year the influential PBS television show "Frontline" featured a documentary entitled: "The Jesus Factor" which explored the nature of President Bush's faith and how it impacted on what he does as president. Yes, in the "old world", President Kennedy's faith may not have been relevant to his presidency, but in our "new world" we are told that this president invoked a higher authority which led him to battle "the evildoers". When asked if he consulted with his father, the former president of the United States who also went to war with Iraq, before he went to war with Iraq, the current President Bush replied - "No, he did not speak to his father, he consulted a higher Father in his decision making process..."

And in Israel as well, a transformation has taken place, a recognition that for better or for worse we live in a new world that plays by new rules - and in a country where survival is a daily occupation they do not have the luxury of a slow learning curve. Once upon a time, Israelis were amongst the most pragmatic of people. They wanted peace so desperately that they were willing to pursue any and all options - no matter how much they stretched credibility. The entire Clinton peace process was in many ways, so old world - it was based on an assumption that it did not matter how the Palestinians felt - it was behavior that would be decisive in making a peace agreement possible. When some protested that Clinton was twisting the Israeli's arms to sign the agreement and the Palestinians had not yet even taken the "call for the destruction of the Jewish state" from the Palestinian Covenant! When the question was raised as to how Israel could be expected to make peace with a people who believes they should not exist? We were told not to get caught up in the rhetoric - that their words and their beliefs did not matter - only actions mattered. If Arafat was willing to shake Peres' hand on the White House lawn and sign a document - that was all that was needed. It was not important what Arafat really thought of us, it was not important whether the Palestinians really loved us. And then came the Intifada - and everything changed. The reason that Ariel Sharon now enjoys broad support from most sectors of Israeli society; the reason that for all intents and purposes there is no left wing in contemporary Israeli politics - is that they have been forced to confront the reality of the new world in which we all now live. As America is painfully learning in Iraq, the Israelis learned just a little bit quicker in their own streets and cities - feelings matter, beliefs matter - and the fact that they hate us is not besides the point, it is the point.

In 2004, belief matters, it is crucial to the survival of all the things we hold dear. Now I know this is not what many of you want to hear, but what can I say - it does, it really does.

It has been painful to watch thoroughly secularized Europeans try to grapple with Al Qaeda and radical Muslim terrorism. The bombers declare, "You want life and we want death" - a fanatical but religious faith statement par excellence. But thoroughly secularized listeners lack the mental equipment to even begin to understand such a faith. They struggle desperately to convert Al Qaeda into a political phenomenon: the bombers

they insist, must be expressing some grievance. Alas this is the path to permanent bewilderment.

A faith attack demands a faith defense. They believe in death and we respond that we too believe - we believe in life. But do we? Do we believe in life as fervently as they believe in death - and can we be as committed to our beliefs as they are to theirs?

I have my doubts.

Millions of young people - and not so young people - who are wearing their yellow wristbands proudly proclaiming "live strong" - have in ways they don't even quite understand yet - declared that they want to survive - they want to be survivors and that they even understand that survival demands faith: live strong - that is after all what is written on these plastic yellow bands. But they, and we, are not quite sure where to take things from there. These yellow bands represent the very beginnings of belief - but it is a belief that is not yet transformed into commitment.

The incredible popularity of these yellow wristbands - is not the result of a sudden national interest in cancer cure, as critical as that may be - but I do believe it has struck a cord with a nation and a generation of young people that is discovering the need to survive, the need to believe in survival.

Madonna can change her name to Esther and start studying the Kabbalah but most of us instinctively know that there has got to be more to it than that.

Some of you here today who are not wearing yellow plastic wristbands - are wearing red bendels, red strings around your wrists - somehow, you believe although you are not quite sure how it works, somehow these are imbued with some kind of mystical Jewish faith blessing.

It is a start - at least you are now looking in the right direction. At least you have affirmed that the answer is a matter of faith, that our survival - whether it be our national survival, or your families survival or your own personal struggle against disease or despair - at least the yellow bands and the red strings represent a modest affirmation of faith - represent an understanding that survival will be found in the strength of your faith. But, do we believe in life as fervently as they believe in death - and can we be as committed to our beliefs as they are to theirs?

Alan Ehrenhalt, author and contributor to the New Republic Magazine, recently wrote that we Americans are like the fellow who sits in front of the TV constantly zapping the

remote control. Indeed this may well be the ultimate symbol for contemporary Americans - the remote control TV channel changer - maybe we should emblazon it on our flag! Why the remote? Because it is the "ultimate weapon of personal choice, one can proceed in the course of an hour to select and reject dozens of visual entertainments whose ability to satisfy us for more than a few minutes is crippled by our suspicion that there may be something more stimulating a couple of frequencies further on. Alan Ernhalt laments: "Too many of the things we do in our lives, large and small, have come to resemble channel surfing, marked by a numbing and seemingly endless progression from one option to the next, all without benefit of a chart, logistical or moral, because there are simply too many choices and no one to help sort them out. We have nothing to insulate ourselves against the perpetual temptation to try one more choice, rather than to live with what is on the screen in front of us."

Lighting candles on Friday night and Shabbat dinner with family is such a beautiful tradition - until your friends call and invited you out to a movie - change the channel. Nice town, nice community - I like it here - and then another job comes along so - change the channel, we move. We move out of our communities we value so dearly when a better job comes along. We abandon our hallowed traditions when we find them tiresome. We divorce when our marriages loose their luster. We leave our companies when our jobs get boring. And we drop our membership in our shul as soon as it feels the slightest bit dull or unrewarding. We change this and we change that and then we were dismayed that we can't find anything deep and lasting to hold onto.

The suicide bomber versus the remote control channel changer - a fight to the finish. In this corner - fanatical faith linked to ultimate commitment - and in this corner - little faith and even less commitment. It is not a fair fight and my friends, we got pummeled in round one - maybe it is time to rethink our strategy.

Maybe that is why I like the yellow wristbands - at least they are a start in the right direction. Maybe that is why I loved that episode from Larry David's "Curb Your Enthusiasm" - it was a shot across our bow - that if we are really serious about this desire to survive - we are going to have to understand the difference in faith that enabled Solly to survive over Colby.

To live a life of faith means to make a commitment to something. Choosing one shul, one community, one spouse enables you to have deeper bonds to that shul, to that community, to that spouse than the person who experiments throughout life. The monk in the monastery does not lead an experimental life, but perhaps he is able to lead a profound one.

For thousands of years one prayer was always on our lips: ani maamini - "I believe!" For thousands of years we responded to every challenge, every trial and tribulation that life could throw our way with these simple words: ani maamini - "I believe!" When Jews walked to their deaths in the concentrations camps of Auschwitz, Treblinka and Birkenau - they went with these words on their lips: ani maamini - "I believe!" Ani maamin beemuna sh'leyma "I believe with a perfect faith!" That was who we were and that was what we believed - and because of our faith - we survived! But alas - we are a generation who no longer sings ani maamin - many of us no longer even know the words. And it is time that we learned. It is time we rediscovered the faith that has enabled us to survive - Are our enemies mightier than we? No! Torah is stronger than their might, and our dream is greater than their night.

So what do I want from you? Well a couple of years ago - I spoke on the High Holy Days using an analogy between reading the Bible and reading the hugely popular Harry Potter books. A number of you came up to me after the holidays and told me that thanks to my sermon you went out and read Harry Potter. That was not exactly my point - I wanted you to go out and read the Bible. So too here - I fear that some of you may tell me that as a result of my comments here today you started watching Larry David on HBO - but that too is not exactly my point. What I really want you to do is reconnect with your faith - rediscover your faith - explore the meaning of a faith that has sustained us for 4000 years and which we can ill afford to abandon today. I invite you to make a Shabbat dinner on Friday night and not change the channel when something else comes along; I invite you to come to shul - not only today, but on Shabbat and on holidays and rediscover the contours of our great faith. I invite you to study with us in one or another of our Adult Education offerings and rediscover the meaning of our faith and fashion a commitment that will enable us to survive.

My friends our very survival is being challenged, - our enemies understand the power of faith and commitment - we are being tested, how will we respond?

Ani Mamin B'emunah Shelyma B'vat Hamashiah - Ani Maamin - For thousands of years we Jews have responded with faith more powerful than those who sought to destroy us and we have survived. I invite you to believe as well, I invite you to live strong and we will survive.