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Parshat Vayeshev
December 1, 2007
AIDS Awareness Shabbat
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Our good friend and member, Dr. David Rosenthal who is an Allergy/Immunology Physician at the North Shore/LIJ Health Care System and does research and clinical HIV medicine in the adolescent population sent me an email this past week reminding me that this Shabbat is World AIDS day and has been declared AIDS Awareness Shabbat.

Many of us don't think much about AIDS anymore, -- if we ever did and yet, it is estimated that over 33 million people are currently living with the HIV virus around the world today. That more than 2.5 million were newly infected with the virus this year that 2.1 million people will die of AIDS this year. It is estimated that more than 25 million people have died of AIDS since 1981 and that Africa currently has 12 million AIDS orphans and more than 1 million people are living with the HIV virus in our country. AIDS was first diagnosed in 1981 and I remember the first time I was invited to speak on this subject in 1987. I was then a rabbi living in South Jersey and I was invited by the South Jersey AIDS alliance to speak at their annual AIDS awareness day conference in a Black Church in Atlantic City.

I remember the event very well, because it is not often that I am invited to speak to an inner city Baptist Church. And I even found the speech I delivered to that mostly black, mostly poor, mostly Christian audience – 20 years ago.

"I begin with an apology" I said. "I apologize because God has not spoken to me. When Michelle from the South Jersey AIDS Alliance invited me to speak about "acceptance" – I accepted, but I was hoping that God would help me out. Especially since God has spoken to so many of my colleagues in the clergy who have not missed an opportunity to tell us in newspapers, on television, even from political platforms – of how God feels about AIDS and the homosexual community for which AIDS was designed as a punishment.

But I'm sorry, God didn't speak to me. And I was really hoping He would because I had a number of questions that were really bothering me; questions which those clergy who were claiming to speak in His name have not been able to answer. Like: If AIDS is God's punishment for homosexuals, why so many heterosexuals, children and other assorted humans were dying from the disease? God, I thought, would have a better aim. I was also troubled by a concept of a God who is so vindictive. That is not the God I had come to know – it seems so out of character with the God of compassion and love and mercy which has been the source of my strength. God has always been the one I turn to in times of trouble – not the source of my troubles.

But, I'm sorry: God didn't speak to me and I won't be able to clear up these issues for you tonight. I became even more troubled when some of my colleagues who were making these "outrageous" claims about God, admitted that God had not exactly spoken to them either, but His will was made manifest in God's Bible. Well now I was truly puzzled. Because I do know the Bible and I have studied it all my life. And I have found on a whole host of issues that the Bible is not as simplistic as some would like us to believe. I know what the Bible says about homosexuality – thank you but I also know that the same Bible says: *V'ahavta l'rayecha kemocha* – "Love your neighbor as yourself" and teaches compassion for all God's creatures – without exception. And the great rabbi Hillel when asked to summarize the entire Bible while standing on one foot quoted this verse about loving others and said all the rest is commentary on these words.

Those who would argue a causal link between morality and disease, those who suggest AIDS is God's divine punishment would claim to know God's mind – an act of hubris and

conceit I find most distressing. Recently I visited a man in the hospital. He had been hit by a bus and was in serious condition. He asked me, "Rabbi, why did God do this to me?" "I don't know much about why God does what He does," I admitted, "But, I am convinced that God does not send buses to run down 85 year old men! The Book of Job once and for all disavows such thinking – a least in Jewish circles. Over the centuries, when the rabbis connected medicine with morality they did so not from the perspective of divine causality but rather from the perspective of human responsibility. In Leviticus chapters 12-15 we find a detailed discussion of the treatment of the most dreaded disease in Biblical times: leprosy. The Bible is very clear that it was the *koheyn* – the priest's responsibility to diagnose, and treat this awful disease. Some used to argue that in ancient times the priest was the doctor – sort of like the medicine man for the Native Americans. But I find it most interesting that the Bible does not refer all medical issues to the priest – only this most catastrophic of illnesses. I believe that the Bible had another more important lesson to teach. Leprosy was a disease that people shied away from – they were frightened by it and repelled by its consequences. They devised every means possible to isolate it and avoid it – including leper colonies so that the misfortunate who had the disease could be kept out of sight and forgotten. It was the priest's task, the priest's divinely commanded task – to remain concerned, to reach out and to touch those who were untouchable – to be the link between illness and humanity. I recently visited a young man in the hospital, an AIDS patient who has since died. I shook his hand, sat down and we began to talk. He began to cry. "What's the matter?" I asked. "Do you know how long it has been since somebody has touched me without rubber gloves?" His friends had stopped visiting, his family was attentive but distant, the hospital staff took the precautions – and all I did was shake his hand. This I believe is the great task of religion today – as it was thousands of years ago: to create a bridge – and not a chasm; to extend a helping hand – not a clenched fist."

This was from the talk I delivered 20 years ago!

It was my contention then as it is today that when Judaism spoke of medicine and morality that it did so from the perspective not of divine causality but human responsibility.

Look at today's torah portion. When Joseph is thrown by his brother's into the pit and abandoned for dead – does he say: "I guess this is where God wants me to be?" If there is any message to these biblical chapters that make up the Joseph story – it is not one of divine causality but human responsibility. Joseph's brothers will have to learn to accept their responsibility in Joseph's fate, Joseph learns to take responsibility for his own fate when he confronts the advances of Potiphar's wife and at the climax of this magnificent story he reveals himself to his brother's not in anger or in vengeance but in love: "*ani yoseyf ahicha* – I am Joseph your brother!" – and he accepts responsibility for the welfare of his family even though they had not been so considerate of him. In Judaism divine causality is something that can be attributed only after the fact – never as a strategy before the fact. Before the fact – Joseph is dependent on his own skills, wit and determination. He rises from the pit to become the second most powerful man in all of Egypt due to his own ingenuity and effort – it is only later, at the end of the story that he muses: "Now do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you." Do we see God's hand in the world? Yes, but only in retrospect – it is never a strategy for the present. In fact the rabbis clearly prohibit such a way of thinking when they declare: "*ayn somchim al haneys* – One is not permitted to depend on miracles". One of my favorite Hasidic stories has a student trying to catch his teacher in a contradiction when he asks his rabbi: "DO YOU believe that God created everything for a purpose?" "I do," replied the rabbi. "Well," asked the disciple, "why did God create atheists?"

The rabbi paused before giving an answer, and when he spoke his voice was soft and intense. "Sometimes we who believe, believe too much. We see the cruelty, the suffering, the

injustice in the world and we say: 'This is the will of God.' We accept what we should not accept. That is when God sends us atheists to remind us that what passes for religion is not always religion. Sometimes what we accept in the name of God is what we should be fighting against in the name of God there are times when we should behave as if there is no God so we will act in a way that is pleasing to God."

One of our favorite moments as we sit around the Passover table is when we come to the singing of *dayeynu*. While the song is a lot of fun – its theology is a bit more problematic. *Ilu hotzianu memitzrayim...* If God had brought us out of Egypt and not split the Red Sea for us – *Dayeynu!* It would have been enough for us! Wrong! If God had indeed brought us out of Egypt and not split the Red Sea – the Egyptian troops would have destroyed us even before we got started! But we go on to sing: "Had God split the sea and brought us through safely and not drowned the pursuing Egyptian troops – *dayeynu* – it would have been enough for us. Wrong! They merely would have pursued us and annihilated us on the other side. If God had brought us safely through the sea and not provided manna for us in the desert – *dayeynu* – it would have been enough for us. Wrong! What good would all the previous miracles have done us if we ended up dying of starvation in the wilderness? Each of these would not in and of themselves have been enough for us – so how can we sing this song? How can we express these beliefs? Because *dyanynu* is a song that can only be sung after the fact. It can only be sung by a people safely ensconced in their land – like Joseph in today's torah reading – we can look back and see God's hand in retrospect – but at the moment – in the heat of the battle – the issue of God's hand in history is not only misleading – it can be downright dangerous. When Moses paused at the Sea and prayed to God – he was chastised by God who said – "Why do you call out to me – now is the time to move forward!" We are not permitted – say our rabbis – we are not allowed to expect miracles – we are called upon to act.

There are some contemporary Jews who have turned this strategy that has served us so well over the generations – on its head. These Jews – who dress in the garb of the ultra-religious espouse beliefs that are – in my opinion – very un-Jewish. They tell us that it is forbidden to fight in the Israeli army – and they do not permit their young men to enlist in the army and to refuse if they are drafted. They believe that the very existence of a Jewish army is an affront to God. "If God wants us to have a State" – these Jews will tell you – "than we shall have a State. And no matter how many Arabs may be against such an idea – if it is God's will – God's will be done. But if God does not want us to have a State – than no matter how strong the Israeli Army – it will be of no avail to fight against the will of God." So in this strange, and in my opinion very un-Jewish way of thinking – we are in the hands of God and any action on our part is a sign of disloyalty and disbelief in God.

Thankfully the Maccabees did not see things this way.

On this coming Tuesday night we will once again gather to celebrate the holiday of Hanukkah. Two thousand years ago when Judah cried out: "All who are for God – follow me!" It was a call to arms that changed Jewish history forever. The story of Hannukah is a very different reading of Jewish history than the one our ultra-Orthodox brethren would have us believe. Starting Tuesday night we will celebrate the victory of the weak over the strong, the few over the many, the innocent over the corrupt -- as a reminder that we live in a world where anything is possible as long as we accept our human responsibility to act in accordance with God's will. –Yes, when we open our prayer books on Hannukah we will chant praise to God as the One who, "stood by His people in time of trouble, a God who defended us, vindicated us, and avenged our wrongs for us. But that is a prayer just like *dyaynu* that we only recite after the fact – Judah did not sit and pray to God. He said, "All who are for God, follow me!"

There are times for prayer and times for action and there is great danger in confusing the one for the other.

Jewish history as we read it teaches a very important message – God helps those who help themselves – and the divine will is most revealed in human acts of courage and compassion – human acts of kindness that seek to embody the will of God not wait patiently for miraculous intervention.

The doctors and scientists who do research seeking to find a cure to AIDS – you are doing God’s work. The nurses and care givers and volunteers who minister to the needs of the sick and the suffering – you are doing God’s work. God is revealed not in the prayer of the pious but in the love and care and compassion of those who act in His name.

Twenty years ago, I ended my speech on AIDS Awareness day with the following plea: “Be patient,” I said, “with those who speak hurtful words. Their fear is a product of their ignorance. With awareness will come acceptance and with acceptance will come hope.” And then I ended with a promise: “Tonight we pledge, I pledge, to remain aware of the needs of those who are too easily rejected. If religious institutions are to be true to themselves, we cannot only be places where the attractive, the successful and the whole celebrate their joys and the beauty of their lives. We must also be centers which reach out to those whom too many would prefer to forget – to bring them into the circle of God’s concern.

That is our challenge on this AIDS Awareness Shabbat, to remind ourselves that there are so many who depend on us. As we recall the courage of Joseph and the bravery of Judah and the Maccabees – let us, who believe in God, act in the way God would want us to act – with compassion and love and I hope you will say – Amen.