

“TO EVERYONE A SEASON”
Part Four

“FRAGILE SPRING”
A Sermon for Atonement Day 5772
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The day was October 25, 1939 – my parents’ wedding day. Forever after, with a smile on their faces, my dear Mom and Dad would remember their wedding as more or less typical of “Cohn confusion.” My father had made the arrangements (and that was the first mistake). It was to be a simple ceremony in the study of his family’s beloved Rabbi, Edward L. Israel of Baltimore’s Har Sinai Temple. A small celebration luncheon for dear family was to follow at The Lord Baltimore Hotel.

There they sat in the waiting room outside the Rabbi’s study – my mother in her white suit, my father in his new suit, his parents, my mother’s mother, known to us as Bubby (undoubtedly her very first time in a Reform Temple), and their siblings and their spouses, but, alas, no Rabbi. The clock ticked away – finally, a phone call. It was Rabbi Israel, calling to inquire whether the wedding was a go or a no, because he was waiting in Northwest Baltimore, at the Temple’s newly dedicated suburban center. The bride and groom were waiting at the main temple on Bolton Street and there was, in 1939, about a 45 to 50 minute distance between the two locations.

The Rabbi finally arrived at the downtown temple in just enough time to perform a brief ceremony. They did get married, but the Rabbi rushed to the Camden Station, caught a train to Washington where he testified before a Congressional hearing. Rabbi Israel was the chairman of the Social Action Committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. His testimony that day concerned his crucial role in ameliorating the Western Maryland Railroad strike.

Along with his fellow Reform Rabbis, Edward L. Israel led a national Reform Jewish Commission which publicly (and with no little controversy) fought tooth and nail to bring the Prophetic Jewish voice to bear upon those challenging depression years.

The goal of the Reform Rabbinate was to fight a tenacious battle:

- 1) Toward a more equitable distribution of the profits of industry;
- 2) Toward a minimum wage for a fair standard of living;
- 3) Toward an eight hour day;
- 4) Toward safe and sanitary work environments;
- 5) Toward the abolition of child labor and raising the age limits for child workers;

- 6) Toward universal workmen's health insurance and insurance for unemployment and old age;
- 7) Toward recognition of the rights of labor to organize and collectively bargain;
- 8) Toward the rights of women in industry.

Now all of these principles were labeled by the Reform Rabbis of that day,

“The Duty of Social Mindedness.”

In time, everyone realized that Edward L. Israel needed to become the new Executive Secretary of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. At age 45, almost two years to the day after my parents' wedding, at the Union's Executive Committee Meeting, Rabbi Israel began his inaugural speech, which among other initiatives, included the decision to move the Union's headquarters from Cincinnati to Washington, D.C.

That speech was never concluded because Rabbi Israel was struck down by a massive coronary right before those very delegates who had placed the future of Reform's voice and conscience in his hands.

Though this tragic scene took place 70 years ago this month, Edward L. Israel, beloved to my family and, many years later, the subject of my own rabbinic thesis, continues to haunt me as a rabbinic mentor. Yes, I confess that I am always very conscious of what Rabbi Israel would say and what he would do about the times in which we now live.

“What,” he would ask with incredulity, “they're still arguing over that! I thought we settled it?”

Many years ago, we were living in Pittsburgh and, as you can readily imagine, the winters in that otherwise lovely and gracious city of Western Pennsylvania, are long and tough to endure. Many would distract themselves by following the Pirates in spring training. I, on the other hand, gave my closest attention to the tulips, daffodils, hyacinths, and crocuses, as they ever so gradually poked their beautiful green stems through the unwelcoming frozen tundra of our front yard.

This particular spring, Pittsburgh was shaping up far more promising for the tenacious banks of flower bulbs than it was for the hapless Pirates. It seemed sure that

we would relish a magnificent season of color. That is, until a ridiculously late and crushing wet snow blanketed all of Pittsburgh with a mid April storm.

The spring flowers all over the city were smothered and crushed. Trees in full blossom were bent over as branches often broke off. Of all the seasons of nature, none is more fickle than “Fragile Spring.” A “Fragile Spring” is a reversal of expectations. The expected does not arrive and, what is, cannot be reversed.

Again, drawing insight from the seasons, on this sacred day of Yom Kippur, I confess that I despair over the unmistakable assault being waged right now upon so much of the progress, boldly and courageously envisioned, and for which preceding generations have assigned their highest priority. Though once thought to be as secure and certain as that beautiful Pittsburgh spring, much of what has made American society blossom for, in some cases, eight decades, with security and hopefulness, justice and exciting possibility, is suddenly subject to reconsideration and threatened by a political climate as primitive, fierce and coldly self-calculating as a killer freeze in “Fragile Spring.”

Yes, I do hear my beloved Rabbi Israel raging –

“What, they’re still arguing about **that**?
I thought it was settled!”

I speak now, have no doubt, of the Tea Partyers and others without conscience, who if not equal in Tea party extremism, are nevertheless far from moderate. Most obvious among their targets are those same Unions and worker’s rights which Rabbi Israel and so many others endorsed with all their might.

This past March marked the 100th anniversary of the horrific Triangle shirtwaist factory fire. Hundreds gathered at the corner where that factory once stood. They vowed to resist efforts to weaken unions in state capitals across America.

The Triangle fire killed 146 people in March 1911 and helped to galvanize the U.S. Labor Movement. The victims were mostly young immigrant women and many children, a great percentage Jewish but by no means all – they were all recent immigrants who jumped to their deaths to escape the flames or were burned beyond recognition if they did not.

Two hundred and fifty thousand people lined the route and 100,00 people marched in 1911. Their grief and outrage forced the management to provide unlocked exits, fire escapes which actually reached ground level, and ultimately, humane working hours,

working conditions, fairer wages and the enactment of child labor laws. And yes, Unions with collective bargaining and the right to strike.

My dear friends, I believe that for all their flaws, and they have many, including corruption and excesses, Labor Unions are still an indispensable presence in society, so that the collective voice of workers remains a vital counterweight to the voice of management power and corporate indifference. I do not believe, as does Mr. Romney, that “corporations are people too!” I believe that they can be monsters! If you think differently, cuddle up to the folks at BP.

They want to seize upon the pittance of benefits which accrue to the elderly, the sick or the poor or the working man or woman from their food stamps, or from their Union agreements?

The richest 1% of Americans has nearly as much wealth as the entire bottom 95%! And yet they begrudge the crumbs of others!

This goes back a long way and is found in the Bible.

Early in the development of our Torah, and even in the Book of Psalms, one can easily find teachings and attitudes expressed which we might call “Prosperity Theology.” You know what that is? According to this view, God will protect and prosper the virtuous and the faithful. And that’s how you know if God likes you: “Hey, if they are prosperous, God must favor them.”

We Americans bought into it with our own version of “Prosperity Theology,” but we call it the Horatio Alger myth – that anyone faithful and hardworking enough ought to be able to pull himself up by his own Gucci loafers, and thereby become a success.

In the race for success however, you and I know full well that the playing field of life is nowhere level, with some of us wearing no shoes at all, but with others of us having a huge head start.

Not to mix sports metaphors, but many a successful person is out there today strutting his or her own self importance, having been born on third base, but absolutely certain that they have hit a triple! So that’s “Prosperity Theology” – God must love them. Look how much they have!

Enter the second, deeper theme of our Torah and Scriptures, far more profound than “Prosperity Theology.” It recognizes the truth about an unpleasant fact, not always

but often, of our own human nature. The more we have, sometimes we are still not quick to share or willing to trickle down anything much worth having.

This sacred day we should remember Israel's Prophets of the 8th pre-Christian Century whose gutsy message has remained the priority of Reform Judaism's role calling us to become a Light unto the Nations. The Prophet Amos, 29 centuries ago, asked why it was that the privileged:

“grind the faces of the poor,
and sell the needy for a pair of shoes.”

You will **not** be surprised that I'll take my place with the Prophet Amos, as does our Torah, on this most sacred day of the Jewish year.

A few hours from now, my friends, as we stand here in the shadows of late day, typically embraced by the reflection of these beautiful stained glass windows dancing upon the walls of the Sanctuary, we will read the broad outline of true faith from the Holiness code of Leviticus (19).

“When you reap the harvest, . . .
do not reap the corners of your field . . .
leave them for the poor and the stranger; . . .
You must not oppress your neighbor.
. . . The wages of a laborer should not
remain with you overnight until the morning.
Do not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling
block before the blind: . . . “

“You shall rise in the presence of the aged
and show respect for the old:
. . . The strangers who live with you
shall be to you as the home born,
and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

While labor unions and collective bargaining and immigrant rights, and even National Public Radio and Planned Parenthood have joined Social Security and Medicare as vulnerable targets, at least there is one huge historic victory to be celebrated. The State of New York, and with bipartisan support, has now become the seventh U.S. jurisdiction allowing Gay and Lesbian couples to marry. Now **that** is a Schecyanu achievement of progress.

Some months back, I saw a cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine which portrayed folks at a cocktail party, and one of them admitted: “I’m in the market for an easier religion.” Well, my dear ones, **that** is not our Judaism!

The Prophets of Israel – Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea – this day they pose an earnest question to us, their 21st century kin.

“So how is God going to make a difference
in saving our world?”

Because that’s their question. And **their** answer to us? Based on all **I** have been taught and all I have come to learn about life, would be this:

“Put your hands in front of you
and take a good look at them,
because, Baby,
those are the hands of God and **nothing less.**”

Our Jewish Scriptures (our Torah, Prophets and Writings) they begin in Genesis with creation, and conclude in *Chronicles* with the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem – the City of Peace. This Torah of ours portrays a universe that is “going somewhere” – not sitting still and certainly not regressing and falling backward. Our Judaism is designed to hit the streets.

The hopefulness and anticipation of spring is always ever so fragile! People cry out for someone to bear witness to what is true compassion and to take up the cause of the needy, the widow, the orphan and the stranger.

“*Fragile Spring*”, the anticipated and the realized can still be spoiled! The progress which has taken so long and so arduous and dangerous a trek toward human protection and dignity, needs now, at this historic but so confusing juncture, to still be held sacred and protected forever!

Amen!