



Yom Kippur 2007

“IN SEARCH OF SERENITY” by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

I know that some people are very guarded about telling others about their favorite restaurant or vacation spot because they are fearful that these choice locations will be overrun with popularity, be hard to get into, and lose quality. For my family, Kiawah Island in South Carolina is one of these special places but I'm not afraid to pass on the favorable word. Kiawah is a barrier island about forty-five minutes southeast of Charleston. It has a beautiful beach, big enough for all of us, and there are laws to preserve the natural beauty and restrict any kind of commercial development. It is not in danger of being overrun and could use a few more Humanistic Jews from New York.

On the South Carolina license plates there is a slogan, “Smiling Faces – Beautiful Places.” It's all true, but as my wife, Myrna, said, “If only it were so simple.” Life is a lot more complicated and stressful than a vacation sound bite.

Last week, our Rosh Hashanah service contained a reading called “Rejoicing.” It talked about rejoicing in the beauty of earth, the love of parents, the children who bless our homes. For many years it also spoke of rejoicing in the “serenity of old age.” Until the obvious was pointed out: There is nothing necessarily serene about aging.

When I developed this reading, a long time ago, I bought into this illusion without giving it a second thought. Apparently a lot of others did too or didn't bother to say anything to me about it. It wasn't that I was oblivious to this reality, but in my immediate family I didn't yet have the personal experience to bring about a re-appraisal. And even when there is decline right in front of you, you don't always see it until it starts to accelerate.

But in recent years, and particularly recent months, I could not overlook my own father's situation. Two days before Rosh Hashanah, when I would have preferred to be thinking about other matters, I spent the greater part of the day moving my father into an assisted living residence in Ardsley. The goal may not be serenity, but at least safety and comfort. The same holds for me. My worries are far from gone, in fact new ones have replaced the old ones, but I am glad to know that he is getting good care.

So the so-called “golden years” are not always so golden. In fact, it is a period fraught with challenges particularly as our lives are extended.

But this is only a minor realization. The real awakening is that the dream of serenity is dashed far earlier than old age, in fact, from the moment we enter life. After all, babies are born into the world crying, wet, and hungry. Young children are not exactly calm when their needs aren't met and have a remarkable knack of interfering with our serenity just when we pick up the telephone. They also can get hurt on the playground and require an early morning visit to the ER on Yom Kippur morning, which is where I was earlier with Oren, and where Myrna is with him now while he gets a soft splint wrapped on his arm.

Later on, teenagers experience their own deprivations and remarkably need our attention and assistance just when we're getting ready for the serenity of slumber. More importantly, teens have anything but a serene time dealing with loneliness, fitting in, self-esteem, personal looks, the volatility of relationships and, if they've survived all this, the despair of broken hearts.

We may be more secure as we age and better able to withstand the pain of dashed love, but just cross fifty and, like magic, you suddenly need reading glasses, you wake up stiffer in the morning, you start getting ailments that only your parents and grandparents had, and you are unnerved by tiny lapses in your memory. It doesn't really get easier.

In fact it can get much worse. Some children act out in a big way. They do dangerous things, even run away from home, and families don't have a clue how to get control of a situation that drains all their energy if not their finances. There isn't much serenity there.

Or, more benignly, our kids stay clear of these problems, but we will still worry about them making good transitions to high school and college, and good choices in romance and ultimately marriage, if they go that route. I visited recently with an 84-year old woman who is basically house-bound with a slew of her own problems. But she was preoccupied with worries about her son, my age. He had lost his job and she was distressed about how he would support his family and send his kids to college someday and how helpless she was to provide any assistance.

For others, marriage itself can be very risky business. At least forty per cent of them, and maybe even closer to fifty percent, end in divorce. Initial compatibility and attraction can turn into intractable opposition or, if you're lucky, amicable disengagement. Despite all its attendant pain and new challenges, divorce can be a good choice and, ultimately, a salvation from anything but a serene relationship.

If this weren't enough, job dissatisfaction can take its toll, financial pressures may add up, and I've already mentioned caretaking for other family members, which is all the more complicated when they don't live close by. Medical issues, especially, can become all-consuming. Besides the pain and suffering, they can bring despair and fear, not to mention mounting costs in their wake.

When you look at the picture this way, it may be that suffering and struggle are defining principles, and serenity and calm are the brief respites we enjoy between new challenges. For Hedonists, happiness is the sum of pleasures, but as Freud defined the "reality principle", suffering is a given, and happiness is a result of diminishing one's pain.

That's not a rather inspiring outlook and practically extols suffering as a virtue. Of course, the opposite approach, of finding the silver lining in all adversity, isn't always possible or honest. Maybe it is not a matter of one or the other, but of knowing, realistically, that these alternative experiences – of joy and sorrow, of anguish and ease – are inextricably bound up together. In fact, they often co-exist. The most poignant example I can think of is of the man I met who faced, in the same week, the despair of his mother's dying and the celebration of his own child being born.

Maimonides, the 12th century Jewish philosopher, taught that the highest happiness is to be found in a life of contemplation or philosophy. The highest ideal was the practice of speculative reason. This, he said, was the ultimate goal and the secret to serenity. We may not be able to master or conquer our physical pain and suffering except with our mind. It is how we cope with our travails – how we face up to them – how we transcend them – that will bring us inner calm. Perhaps never acceptance, but accepting.

All this leads me to my other not-so-secret recommendation that I am willing to share with everybody who wants to learn about it. It is that secular humanistic Judaism offers us a realistic outlook on life that can guide us to achieving this goal.

Our philosophy teaches two basic lessons. First, the world is not such a serene place after all. We often encounter a life that is chaotic, unjust, unfair and painful. Bad things do happen to good people and we can't totally protect ourselves from harm. We can't wish away our insecurity either by constructing false myths of invulnerability.

And second, we have the strength within us – and with the support of our family and friends, and, when necessary, our doctors, therapists and clergy – to endure and persevere and, ultimately, flourish, not just survive. Most important, by seeing the frailty of life for what it is, we can learn to appreciate the gift of life even more.

We also have the powerful example of role models and heroes throughout our specifically Jewish history, not to mention our own families, to guide us. They valued and preserved their Jewish identity even in the face of hardship and persecution. They left one country for another, acquired new languages and professions, rebuilt their lives often from scratch. Their determination and courage can be an inspiration to us.

This is not an easy message. It takes work. It takes dedication and commitment. It also takes hope and optimism.

Now, as we enter the New Year, we pause to think about our actions, and also our attitudes.

When we assess our lives, what are we measuring?

What marks success?

What will bring us further along that road to serenity?

Fame and fortune – or personal dignity and integrity?

A life of illusion and myths – or a life of honesty and truth?

When we experience pleasure and joy, let us appreciate these moments for all they are worth and not take them for granted.

When we discover purpose and meaning, let us have a mindfulness that preserves these convictions even when they are threatened by the harshness of life that would steal them away from us.

And when we feel that our Jewish identity is challenged, let us find the strength to stand up for our own beliefs and champion our rightful place in the larger Jewish family and in the world around us.

May the year ahead be a year for seeking inner strength and inner peace.

May it be a year of bringing our strength and comfort to others.

And may it be a year of meaning, purpose, contentment, and ever more serenity.

Shana tova. Happy New Year.