

## Riding the Wave of Arrogance to Discover Our Humility

*Rosh Hashanah Evening Sermon -- September 18, 2009/5770*

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It is Monday afternoon, Labor Day, just about 10 days ago. I'm starting to write this sermon. I have already written my outline, some themes I want to address and I have thought about a story or two, but I haven't started to write till now. I'm actually on a bit of a roll, and I want to keep going. And then, my wife, Debbie reminds me, we have dinner plans. "What time should I tell them we'll be there," Debbie asks, "6:30 or 7?" I can't say now, what I said then. Let's just say, I am, at best, ambivalent about going and probably, I don't want to go. Now, you have to understand that I love this group of friends. We've been friends for over 25 years. But, I am into my writing, and I don't want to stop. It seems as though, every year, I start working on my sermon a little later. In 2002, the year of my first sermon, I started working on it in June! – a little spiritual OCD I must admit. We go to the dinner. It's actually very lovely. And the conversation is what you might expect from a group of six, upper-middle aged individuals – "I can't sleep. Hey, I can't sleep either. I'm not eating meat anymore, trying to be healthier. Well. Here is what I did when I couldn't sleep. You know, if you exercised more after dinner, but not too late, it would help you sleep better." And of course, they all know I am writing my sermon, so the topic of High Holidays comes up. Someone asks, "So Ed (I know as soon as I hear that, I'm in trouble), as a rabbi (I think, now, I'm really in trouble now) tell me, ....I've been going to High Holiday services all my life, why should I go **this year**? It was a great question, and it was asked with love, sincerity, and seriousness. Before I could answer, someone else said, "I know why you should go to High Holidays this year." So, in a few minutes, I will share with you what my friend said, just in case some of you here tonight, don't exactly know why **you** would attend High Holidays this year, either.

*Shabbat Shalom, Shanah Tovah*, and welcome to Central Reform Congregation, and to what I hope will be a good and a sweet year for all of us. As some of you know Debbie and I went to Hawaii earlier this year. Now most people, when they go on a vacation, research hotels, restaurants, sights to see, and things to do. Not me. I research waves. That's right waves -- which beaches have the best waves for bodysurfing? In my research, I found the one – the very best beach for bodysurfing. Sandy Beach. Sounds innocent enough. Here are the descriptions I found for Sandy Beach, which made me know that I **had to** bodysurf there. "Experienced bodysurfers find that the waves here have no equal anywhere else on the island." (OK, this is good) "Sandy Beach can be treacherous and swimmers should be extremely wary when there's surf present (OK. I said to myself, I'll be wary). "If in doubt,

don't go out." (I had no doubt). That was the problem. "This beach usually has a very nasty shore break, which means the waves come fast, scoop you up in no time and then dump your body on to the sand. (Hmmm...) And, there was this description. "Statistically, Sandy Beach is #2 for broken necks, broken backs and head injuries, and lifeguards make more rescues in a year here than on any other beach in the state. "

After reading these reviews, I think most people, would decide to go to Florida. We go to Hawaii. The day we visit this beach, I ignore every warning sign. Debbie said, "We're too old to be chasing the perfect wave." That's code in our marriage for, "You are absolutely crazy to go out there." The red flag is out on the beach, which indicates extremely strong surf. The lifeguard, who recognizes that I am not a local, because there are not many old, short, bald, Jewish guys on the beach, comes up to me and says the surf is very strong and he suggests that I use flippers. I didn't. I watch for a few minutes and then go in. I actually do well for the first 15-20 minutes. It is, quite exciting. And then, just as my research said, a wave comes fast, scoops me up in no time and then dumps my body on to the sand. I fractured my shoulder. In a moment, paradise turns to prison, and I spend the remainder of our vacation in pain, and with my arm immobilized in a sling. So what happened? What was this for me? What kept me from paying attention to all the warning signs?

There is a wonderful story in Torah about a donkey. The donkey belongs to the prophet Bilam, who is hired by King Balak to curse the people of Israel. It seems as though King Balak is getting nervous about us, that we are a little too numerous and maybe, a little too powerful. So Balak engages the services of Bilam, a prophet-for-hire, if you will – a prophet who would say what you paid him to say. On his way to curse the people, Bilam's donkey, which Bilam is riding at the time, sees an angel of God in the road and the donkey turns away. Bilam's response is to hit his donkey. Two more times the donkey sees the angel and turns away and two more times Bilam, hits his donkey. Then, an amazing thing happens. God opens the mouth of the donkey, and gives the donkey a voice. Not since the serpent in the Garden of Eden have we heard the voice of an animal in Torah. And the donkey says to Bilam, "What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?" Bilam responds, "Because you mocked me." "Well, haven't I been your trusted donkey that you have been riding all your life? Have I ever done anything like this before, said the donkey?" Bilam said, "No, you haven't."

Then God uncovers Bilam's eyes, and he sees the angel of God standing on the road. God uncovers Bilam's eyes, and then Bilam can see. It's an intriguing notion. First, our eyes are closed or covered and

we can't see what is right in front of us – a kind of spiritual blindness – and then something happens in the next moment, which allows us to see.

When God uncovers Bilam's eyes and he sees the angel, Bilam says, "I did not know that you were standing right in front of me. Bilam didn't see what was right before his eyes. He missed the warning signs, the three times his donkey turned away and would not move forward. He missed those warning signs.

The Hebrew word for warning is *ahz harah*, which comes from the verb *l'haz hir*, to warn or to caution. Interestingly, the same root (*zayin hey resh*) is also found in the verb *leezhor*, which means to shine or brighten or enlighten. Maybe it's not a coincidence that the verb to brighten, or enlighten shares the same root as the verb to warn or caution. The Hebrew language helps us to see that perhaps the things we are so drawn to, that stimulate us, or brighten our lives, are the very things about which we need to be cautious.

So what was it that kept Bilam from perceiving the warning signs? It was the very thing that also kept me from perceiving the warning signs. Stupidity! Well maybe, a little stupidity. Actually, I think its arrogance.

This past Sunday I met for the first time with my 9th grade class – 24 bright and beautiful high school freshman. We are talking about how to make a safe space for each other and about how to build community, and what might get in the way of that, for us. They describe arrogance as being conceited, overly proud, condescending, acting like you are above someone else or better than someone else. There is much wisdom in our young people. We look at the Hebrew together and find the phrase, "*mekel bich vod acherim*. *Mekel*, one who makes light of or lessens, *bich vod* the honor of *acherim*, others – one who makes light of the honor of another person or thing. Bilam makes light of the honor, so to speak, of the donkey by both disregarding it and abusing it. Now, you could say, C'mon Ed, it's his donkey!! It's a work animal – not a person. No. Torah and Talmud are very clear that we are to treat others, and even our animals, with care and respect. And I clearly made light of all my warning signs, as well as the strength and power of the ocean itself.

One more story -- my daughter Eliana is a senior in high school, and three weeks ago, we went on our first of number of college visits. We visit University of Missouri in Columbia, take a tour of the campus,

and meet two of Eliana's friends for lunch. On the tour we come to a place in the middle of the campus called the Speaker's Circle. The tour guide explains that this is one of two places in the state of Missouri where anyone can speak about anything they want, anytime, and without needing a permit, or any permission. Both Eliana and I remark how unusual it is to have such a place and what better place to have it than on a college campus. After our lunch we again walk by the speaker's circle and this time, there are people gathered because someone is seated inside the circle. We sit down and listen in. "How can you say that's the only path," one student asked? "I know it because it's true," said the speaker. "What about other paths, Muslim, or Jewish," another student asked. "If something is true, it's true. And this is the truth." (Oy) We listen for another few minutes, growing more uncomfortable with each of the speaker's responses. And, we weren't the only uncomfortable ones. One student finally yelled, "Why do we have to listen to all this religious stuff?" He didn't say, "stuff." "Just give the guy a guitar and we can all sing." It may not have been the most respectful thing to say, but it did provide some much needed comic relief. And, all this time, the speaker remains condescending and immovable. As we leave, one student says to me in exasperation, "He hasn't heard a thing we've said, and I don't think he ever will." The arrogance of that speaker--he made light of the honor of all the students, by not making room for any of them.

We are arrogant when we don't make room for the other, whoever or whatever the other is. I didn't make room for all of the *ahzharot*, the warning signs, so I was toppled by the power and awesomeness of the ocean. The speaker didn't make room for all the different student voices, so he couldn't hear some new wisdom. And, Bilam didn't make room for the donkey, so he couldn't see the angel of God.

So think for a moment about who the donkeys are in your life. Who are your donkeys and what do they want you to see, or to hear, or to do? Chances are, someone in your life is working to get you to see or to hear something, right now. That person may even be sitting next to you now, right now. Maybe they don't approach you in the best way. Maybe they're even critical of you. It's understandable since they've been trying to get you to see something for a long time. Maybe their delivery isn't the best. That's **their** part. Hopefully, they'll work on their part during these High Holy Days. Nonetheless, they are coming to you with a warning. Maybe they are worried about your health, your diet, your drinking, your not sleeping, as our good friends have already attested. Maybe they're worried about your temper, your anger, your controlling nature, your reckless spending, your being distant, your lack of sharing. The donkeys closest to you probably come from a place of love and concern. What is in the way of your seeing or hearing them? That is **your** part. What is in the way of your doing what they

ask? Can you at least look at your part and see if you are not making any room for the donkeys in your life. Consider this. **If one of your donkeys comes to you with a warning, and you don't pay attention, your donkey, is not the ass.** It means that you are probably stuck in your arrogance, by taking up so much space that there is no room for your donkey.

But, here is the good news. You don't have to be stuck in your arrogance. In fact, these High Holy Days teach us that we don't have to respond that way at all. We have another way. The Haftarah for the Torah portion about Bilam, is from prophet Micah. Micah puts forth to us the important question, "What does God require of you? To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Walk humbly with your God. Why is this section of prophets paired with story about Bilam? Maybe it is to contrast our arrogance with our humility. We hear the story of Bilam's arrogance and get the prophet Micah's teaching about our humility. That is our other option. We can respond with *anavah*/with humility.

One of our 9th graders said that humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less. Amazing. I'll add to that, what Alan Morinis, author of Climbing Jacob's Ladder, says. Humility is the experience of "occupying just the right amount of space in life that is appropriate for you, while making room for others." Occupying the right amount of space for you—that is important, because sometimes we don't take up enough space for ourselves with another person. But, what makes us arrogant, is the taking up of so much space that we don't make room for the other. And, what makes for our humility is taking the right amount of space for ourselves **while we make room for the other**. So, when our donkey's come to us with their warnings, we can now say, from our humility, "I will make room for you and what you want to say to me. Even if it is difficult or uncomfortable for me, I will make room for you and what you want to say to me."

In the end, Bilam finds his humility. And only when he finds his humility is he able to look into our tents, and give us the blessing, not the curse. I don't know if the man in the speaker's circle will ever find his humility. I wanted to invite him here to CRC, but decided not to. That was one warning sign I actually paid attention to. And I also found my humility. I knew I had to go back to Sandy Beach before we left Hawaii. I had to go back and stand there, just stand there one more time. I went there with a plan to scream out to the ocean and scream out to God how angry I was. I stood on the beach, ready to give the ocean and God all that I had. What came out surprised me--no screaming, no anger, no outrage. What came out was almost a whisper. "Thank you. Thank you, ocean. Thank you, God. Thank you for giving

me just the sign that I needed to get out." I ignored all the reports I read and I ignored 3 other warning signs. I could not ignore the fourth. Without that warning, I would have stayed in and maybe, probably, I would have been even more seriously injured, or even worse. It could have been, so much worse. Like Bilam, I went back to make a curse, and instead, I found the blessing, because I made room for the other instead of just making room for myself. Maybe it is true for all of us as well. When we move from our arrogance to our humility, by being able make room for the other, then we, too, can give and receive the blessings.

So now, I'll tell you what my friend said about why we would attend High Holidays this year. My friend said, "Just as Shabbat gives us a time each week to renew ourselves, High Holidays gives us a time, each year to go inward and do our inner work - a way to see where I am with myself." I thank my friend for her wisdom.

This year, may we also come to know our own arrogance, so we will be able to respond with more humility. And when we do, we are all more able to give and to receive so many blessings. And that, just might make for a happy, and healthy, and joyous New Year. Amen.