

ROSH HASHANA DAY 5776  
THE COURAGE TO CHANGE  
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

In May 2014, Bryna and I attended the Rabbinical Assembly Convention in Dallas. We took time to visit the Texas School Book Depository Building and the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza. I recall rather vividly November 22, 1963, the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas by shots that emanated from that School Book Depository. I was a student in my Jewish day school in Toronto on that Friday afternoon when word came over our loud speaker that Kennedy had been shot. Our teacher could no longer continue the lesson and dismissed us early. I recall as well Sunday morning as I continued my Hebrew studies at my school and then walked over to my Grandmother's house. When I entered she told me that she had watched on television as Jack Ruby killed Lee Harvey Oswald.

I don't recall personally much about the Kennedy presidency itself. After all, I was raised in Canada and the United States was our southern neighbor. His presidency encompassed the years of 1961-1963. I was 10-12 years old and not much concerned me beyond school and sports. However, the Museum and the Texas School Book Depository brought forth many memories of those terrible days in November, 1963, which I vividly recall.

This past summer we travelled to Boston and visited the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum. The museum spends very little time on the assassination of the President. It is about his life, especially his family life and his presidency. It details the battle for civil rights; the Cold War and his visit to Berlin; the Cuban missile crisis; and the White House dinners and concerts which were part of the Kennedy legacy clearly exhibiting the sophistication of the President and the First Lady and the beauty of the White House.

John F. Kennedy was also an author of a book entitled *Profiles in Courage*. Kennedy was a PT boat commander in the South Pacific in World War II. While on patrol on the night of August 22, 1943, PT-109 was rammed by a Japanese destroyer, the Amagiri, and exploded into flames, throwing crew members into the burning water. Two were killed and one was burned so badly he couldn't swim. Clutching the strap of the injured man in his teeth, Kennedy towed the wounded sailor to the nearest island, three miles away. For the next six days, with little food or water, the men hid, fearing they would be captured by the Japanese. Eventually, Kennedy swam through shark infested waters to other islands seeking help and was spotted by two Solomon Islanders. He carved a message into a coconut which they took to the hideout of a nearby Australian coast watcher who arranged their rescue.

That collision with the Japanese destroyer left him with a spinal injury, requiring surgery in the winter of 1954-1955. During his convalescence after surgery Kennedy wrote the book *Profiles in Courage*. He penned the preface in 1955, exactly 60 years ago, describing his interest in detailing the lives of eight American politicians who took courageous stands despite political and social pressure to do otherwise.

On these High Holy days I would like to examine with you the concept of courage. What do we mean when we talk about courage? What do we need to do to be considered courageous? Does courage play a role in our lives?

According to his brother, Robert F. Kennedy, who wrote a forward to the book in December 1963, courage was the virtue that President Kennedy most admired. The President, his brother felt, sought out people who demonstrated that they had courage, that they could stand up and be counted upon. The President was very fond of the quote attributed to President Andrew Jackson who stated, "One man with courage makes a majority," and that quote is found on the wall of the Presidential Library and Museum.

This morning, I would like to examine with you the courage that is needed to change, to move from one point to another, to better oneself in life, to do, in the theology of the High Holidays, Teshuva, repentance, and to make oneself a better person.

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has just written a new book entitled *Not in God's Name* in which he tries to delineate the argument that authentic religious thought need not lead to violence. In the book he tells the fascinating story of Csanad Szegedi. For many years, Szegedi was a rising star in the movement in Hungary known as Jobbik, the Movement for a Better Hungary. It is an ultra-nationalist Hungarian political party that has been described as Fascist, Neo-Nazi, racist, and anti-Semitic. It has professed the old canard of singling out Jews as those who control the world. He was widely seen until 2012 as its future leader. In that year, some of the members of the party wanted to stop his progress, so they spent time investigating his background to see whether they could find anything that would do him damage. What they found was that his maternal grandmother was a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz. So was his maternal grandfather. Half his family was killed during the Holocaust and Szegedi was a Jew.

As the rumors spread, Szegedi decided to check whether the claims were true. He paid a visit to his 92 year old grandmother and he asked her about his personal history. She clasped her grandson's arm and disclosed that she was Jewish, that her daughter was Jewish and, therefore, Szegedi was as well. She then rolled up her sleeve to expose a string of numbers tattooed on her arm. Apparently she had always worn long-sleeved shirts or a plaster to cover the tattoo. After Auschwitz his grandparents, once Orthodox Jews, decided to hide their identity completely. When his mother was 14, her father told her the secret but ordered her not to reveal it to anyone. Szegedi now knew the truth about himself. He attempted to hide it for a while, but by July 2012 he resigned from the Party. He decided at that point to find out more about Judaism. He went to a local Chabad Rabbi, Slomo Koves, who arranged for him to attend classes on Judaism and to come to the Synagogue. Needless to say, people were shocked to see him there. Yet he persisted.

Today he attends Synagogue, keeps Shabbat, has learned Hebrew, calls himself Dovid, and in 2013 underwent circumcision. Although married to a non-Jewish woman with whom he had a Protestant wedding, his wife is converting to Judaism, while his sons are circumcised.

Sacks writes: "As the realization that he was a Jew began to change his life, it also transformed his understanding of the world." Today, Szegedi says, his focus as a politician is to

defend human rights for everyone. “I am aware of my responsibility and I know I will have to make it right in the future,” he has stated.

This is a remarkable story of change. Szegedi, an anti-Semite, became a born-again Jew. His view of the world changed and his purpose in life with it. I would suppose that if he had not found out who he really was, he would have continued to be the anti-Semite that he professed to be. When he found out the truth about himself, his behavior, his philosophy, and his outlook on life were changed with it.

Most of us will not go through that type of radical change. However, it seems to me that we all need to change in the course of a lifetime. That is what Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are all about. They give us the opportunity to look at our lives and recognize that we can always do better. Surely we can be better spouses, children, siblings, business associates, teachers, students, and community members. Most assuredly we can learn to be more receptive to the world at-large and the many of its population who need support and assistance. Without a doubt we can become better Jews, learning more, growing in our faith and in our commitment to our people and the State of Israel. The question is: do we have the courage to look at ourselves critically and say “we can do better?”

Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book *Conquering Fear – Living Boldly in an Uncertain World* writes: “Change can be more than just unpleasant or unsettling. It can be terrifying. It can carry the threat of serious loss, the danger that something we have cherished will be taken from us.” He reminds us that “change always means giving up the familiar for the unknown.” We may be fearful of change for it leads to circumstances that we cannot predict. It is always better to feel comfortable in the known than in the unknown. However, Kushner informs us: “Fearful people cannot be happy. Fearful people cannot be generous, charitable, or forgiving. Fear constricts the soul and keeps us from being as fully human as G-d would like us to be.”

It takes courage to change, to recognize that we cannot feel comfortable in our present predicament and allow inertia to take over. Instead, we must reach out for that which is unknown and pursue a higher purpose for our lives. According to Kushner, “hope and courage, not fear and timorous obedience, are the will of G-d. Courage is not the absence of fear; it is the overcoming of fear. Courage is looking fear in the face and refusing to be intimidated.” That fear of change can sometimes make us feel comfortable in our present situation and not allow us to grow. It is fear of the unknown that very often serves as an obstacle to our improving ourselves and the lives of those around us. Rabbi Shmuley Boteach writes that “procrastination is a sign not just of laziness but of cowardice.” What is needed is courage to overcome that fear and the unwillingness to embrace change.

How does Judaism define courage? Perhaps the best definition is found in Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, Chapter 4, Mishna 1: Ben Zoma says: “Who is mighty? One who conquers his evil impulse.” That evil impulse is within all of us. Judaism does not negate it. In fact, it instructs us that it also has some benefits to our lives. The Talmud tells us that if it were not for the evil impulse no one would build a house, marry, beget children, or engage in trade. The question is whether we can control that evil impulse, which is present in all of us, and change its inclination to lead us astray by utilizing its forcefulness for good means. Rabbi Paul

Steinberg has written: “Instead of repressing our urges, the task is to be aware of those thoughts and feelings, and then to control them so they do not run amok and become part of our character, resulting in perpetual self-centered callousness.” To do that, we have to know ourselves, examine our behavior, and be ready to be critical of it. To do that, we have to make amends for the past, better ourselves in the present, and work on ourselves in the future. Perhaps, using President Kennedy’s language, we could say that changing ourselves for the better allows us to be included in the definition of possessing a “profile in courage.”

The United States the last number of years has seen an explosion of self-help groups. These groups, also known as mutual help, mutual aid, or support groups, are groups of people who provide mutual support for each other. They are usually people who share a common problem, often a common disease or addiction. As you well know, it is the goal of the group for each individual to help one another heal, recover, or change behavior patterns from being destructive to being constructive.

Al-Anon Family Groups are a fellowship of relatives and friends of alcoholics who share their experience, strength, and hope, in order to solve their common problems. In a book entitled *Courage to Change, One Day at a Time in Al-Anon* ‘Book Two’ each day of the year is marked by a passage written by those who have gone through the program and are learning to deal with their behavior. All the contributors are anonymous, but the messages are rather clear.

One of the authors writes: “Every day I can look to myself and decide what improvement I can make. How can I grow today? What can I do by day’s end to improve myself? Is there something I can learn? Is there some challenge I can meet? Is there some old, tired fear I can walk through and be rid of? Is there some new happiness I can experience?” The author then quotes a passage from Alexander Pope: “A man should never be ashamed to own he has been in the wrong, which is but saying, in other words, that he is wiser today than he was yesterday.”

This is an important lesson for each of us as we come together on the High Holy Days and recognize that we are part of a self-help group. For us it is called North Shore Suburban Synagogue Beth El. We acknowledge our transgressions, iniquities and weaknesses in the plural recognizing that we are all here to help one another. Yet, it is up to each and every one of us individually to improve our behavior, our conduct, and our relationships. One of the authors of a passage in the book quotes Lao Tse, the founder of Taoism, who wrote: “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Today we are asked to take that single step towards creating a better life for ourselves, our families, our community, and our world. The question we must ask ourselves today is whether we have the courage to do so, to face ourselves, fears and all, and resolve to do better in the coming year.

In the last paragraph of Kennedy’s book he writes: “To be courageous requires no exceptional qualifications, no magic formula, no special combination of time, place, and circumstance. It is an opportunity that sooner or later is presented to us all.” He continues, “In whatever arena of life when we meet the challenge of courage – each man must decide for himself the course he will follow... for this each man must look into his own soul.” I believe that one of the purposes of the High Holy Days is to give us the courage to look into our own souls to examine where we have gone astray and to change for the better. It is not an easy task, it

is very difficult. And yet, it is essential if we want to be the people we need to be and become the people we must be.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the Protestant theologian, wrote the following little prayer in 1934:

“Oh God, give us –  
Serenity to accept what cannot be changed  
Courage to change what should be changed  
And the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

This is what I wish for us on Rosh Hashana 5776. We may need the serenity to accept things that can't be changed, but we definitely need the courage to change what should be changed. I believe we must start with ourselves. None of us, thankfully, will be confronted with the great change of life of Csanad Szegedi. However, in our own way we must resolve this day to delve into our past and learn from it, examine our present and study it, and change for the better in the future so that we can be models for ourselves, our families, our communities, and our people, as we create a better world for all.