

Wasn't Watching - Erev Rosh Hashanah

The following is the sermon given by Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis on September 12, 2007

I imagine you all know that Phil Rizzuto died this summer. If you don't know who Phil Rizzuto was, shame on you. He was a great Yankee shortstop. He was a little guy they called the Scooter. He played for many great winning teams.

When he retired from playing, he became a Yankee broadcaster famous for exclaiming, "Holy cow!" when something exciting happened and for talking about cannolis when other broadcasters were talking about the game. In fact, if you looked at his scorecard, there were innings where, instead of recording the usual hits, outs and errors, he filled in the space with the unusual letters "WW." Someone asked him once what WW stood for. Rizzuto said, "It stood for 'wasn't watching.'" He would say to his broadcast partner on the air, "Holy cow, White, I wasn't watching, you explain it." And this WW is why I am telling you about Phil Rizzuto tonight.

I keep score the same way. But that's not why I tell you this story. It's that this time of year, we are supposed to be looking at last year's scorecard. We all have those spaces marked WW - the times when we just weren't paying attention. How did we score when it came to paying attention to what matters? How did we score when it came to bringing justice to the world? It's one thing not to pay attention to a baseball game; it's another thing not to pay attention to the world we live in. The consequences are not just a loss in the standings but also a loss of a future.

There was a time in the history of the world when we Jews had no choice but to pay attention. We didn't do it just so we could bring justice to the world. We had to pay attention if we wanted to stay alive.

In medieval Europe we lived among hostile peoples. We were ruled by greedy governments. We lived at the largesse of dictators. Our community paid a heavy price, both literally and figuratively. The community paid in enormous taxes and as well as in psychic well-being. Whatever an individual Jew did reflected on the Jewish community as a whole. If one Jew stepped out of line, the whole house of cards collapsed.

Shalom bayit, peace in the house, was extended from the home to become an important community value. There are even stories of a Jewish woman coming to her rabbi to tell him her husband was beating her - and the rabbi's saying, go home and don't tell anyone. Because if the outside world heard that a Jew beat his wife, who knew what the neighboring peoples might do to the Jews.

It was also unsafe for Jews who traveled outside the community. It was not uncommon in the Middle Ages for Jewish traders to be kidnapped and held for ransom. Jewish communities

had to redeem their own members. The mitzvah was called *pidyon shevu'im*, the redemption of the captives. If anything, Jews had to be hyper-vigilant and watch all the time.

What a relief that we don't have to live that way any longer. What a relief that in this country, we can live our lives as we wish. You don't fear that your behavior reflects on this congregation. You don't fear being kidnapped. A democratic society protects your individual rights. There is no external force making you pay attention to the outside world. If anything, you feel almost too safe.

Feeling too safe limits your capacity to have other feelings. You are not always moved the way you should feel moved. Did you know that people feel more pain in response to one person's hunger than when they think of the masses of people who go hungry every day?

Nicholas Kristof wrote in the Times about a series of studies by psychologists trying to understand why people - good, conscientious people - aren't moved by genocide or famines...In one experiment, psychologists asked ordinary citizens to contribute \$5 to alleviate hunger abroad. In one version, the money would go to a particular girl, Rokia, a 7 year old in Mali; in another, to 21 million hungry Africans; in a third to Rokia - but she was presented as a victim of a larger tapestry of global hunger.

Not surprising, people were less likely to give to anonymous millions than to Rokia. But they were also less willing to give in the third scenario, in which Rokia's suffering was presented as part of a broader pattern.

In an article discussing these experiments, a researcher at the University of Oregon observes, "Our capacity to feel is limited." He says we can't depend on the innate morality even of good people. Instead, he believes, we need to develop legal or political mechanisms to force our hands to confront genocide.

But even legal or political mechanisms can fail us if we don't set up the proper oversight. When an independent inquiry on Hurricane Katrina issued its report a year ago, they said that dozens of factors contributed to the disaster. The factors included political decisions that caused the Army Corps of Engineers to squeeze miles of floodwalls on too-narrow levees along the city's drainage canals, with sheet piles, the interlocking sheets of steel that anchor the levees, driven to a depth too shallow to lock water or the shifting of the mucky New Orleans soil. All of the factors, they concluded, add up to a "culture of inattention" that put safety lower on the scale than cost.

Sometimes bad things happen even when we are paying attention. Watching isn't magic; it doesn't always prevent bad things from happening. Having a swastika painted on our temple is proof of that.

Things happen and then we pay attention and decide how to deal with them. And that is all the more reason to act when we can. But there are times when we don't want to know, so we don't just not watch, we actively turn and look the other way. *Avinu malkeinu* calls us to task

not just for our "sins of inattention and commission" but also for our "sins of inattention and omission."

Sometimes we deliberately choose to close our eyes. In Israel, there has been a debate about how to handle refugees who come up illegally through Egypt. Initially, the government announced that African migrants who infiltrated from Egypt would be sent back to Egypt except for refugees from Darfur. The idea was that people from Darfur were refugees in genuine need of asylum and the others were economic migrants. Sudanese migrants are being voluntarily repatriated and have not suffered persecution. Unfortunately, Prime Minister Olmert then defied his own policy and sent back Darfurians as well.

To my great pride, there was an uproar by Israeli human rights organizations that refused to close their eyes. No matter how hard life might be in Israel, no matter what they face, Israelis refuse to ignore the needs of other people in the world. We understand the life of refugees better than most people. We remember the World War II days when our refugees had nowhere to go; thankfully, these days there is a United Nations that can intervene on behalf of targets of genocide. We know that Israel can't save everyone, despite our history. But we also understand that we can't choose to look the other way.

We have chosen to look the other way in too many places. We have looked the other way in the city of Newark. We have looked the other way when it comes to Iraq and when it comes to illegal immigration. We have looked the other way when it comes to our health care system. We have become social and political ostriches. The American Cancer Society said just last week that if we don't fix the health care system, that lack of access will be a bigger cancer killer than tobacco. (John Seffrin, 8/31/07)

What accounts for our ignoring such obvious problems? The burden of watching can be a heavy one. The Israeli author David Grossman wrote recently, "I can recall what we all felt in Israel, for one singular moment, when the airplane of the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat landed in Tel Aviv 30 years ago, after decades of war between the two nations: then, all of a sudden, we discovered how heavy is the load we carry all our lives - the load of enmity and fear and suspicion. The load of permanent guard duty, the heavy burden of being an enemy, at all times. And what a delight it was, to remove for one moment the mighty armor of suspicion, hate and stereotype. It was a delight that was almost terrifying - to stand naked, pure almost, and witness an human face emerge from the one-dimensional vision with which we observed each other for years." (NY Times, May 13, 2007)

We Jews are not just on permanent guard duty in Israel, we are also called upon by our prophets to be on permanent guard duty in the world - and sometimes, the burden feels too heavy and we don't want it.

There are also times we also don't want that burden in our personal lives, yet there especially we can't afford not to be on permanent guard duty. How tempting it is to ignore each other's distress and not notice when our family and friends are hurting. And the world of technology that is supposed to keep us connected instead becomes our excuse for ignoring each other.

The NY Times columnist Thomas Friedman calls this not "inattention" but "continuous partial attention."

"Continuous partial attention," he writes, "Is when you are on the Internet or cell phone or Blackberry while also watching TV, typing on your computer and answering a question from your kid. That is, you are multi-tasking your way through the day, continuously devoting only partial attention to each act or person you encounter. It is the malady of modernity. We have gone from the Iron Age to the Industrial Age to the Information Age to the Age of Interruption. All we do now is interrupt each other or ourselves with instant messages, e-mail, spam or cell phone rings. One wonders whether the Age of Interruption will lead to a decline in civilization - as ideas and attention spans shrink and we all get diagnosed with some version of Attention Deficit Disorder."

While all of this multitasking gives the appearance of our being connected all the time, it actually prevents us from making real intimate connections and from truly paying attention to each other and to what needs to be done in the world. The burden may feel heavy at times, but the cost of not carrying it is heavier.

More than ever, the world begs us not to write WW on our scorecards. On Earth Day this year, the Star Ledger had a headline that asked, "How big is your footprint?" They were referring to our ecological footprint that lets us know how much of the planet's resources each individual uses. An ecological footprint is defined as the acreage needed to produce an individual's food, housing, transportation and energy needs. The results for nearly any American are sobering, says the article. The average American needs 24 acres - far above the 4.5 productive acres per person available worldwide. You can compute your own usage by taking the online quiz at www.myfootprint.org.

Or you can take one of these bookmarks from the [Jewish National Fund](#). It also gives you a link so that you can calculate your carbon footprint. The Jewish National Fund, once known for planting trees in Israel, has become a major force in global environmental work.

In any case, the reporter in the Ledger took the online quiz. The quiz result told her, "If everyone lived like you we would need 8.9 planets." I took that quiz. My total footprint was 43 acres. If everyone lived like me, said the website, we would need 9.7 planets. And I like to think I am careful; I refill the same water bottle every time I go to the gym, I recycle faithfully, I take the train when I go to New York and I still take my VCR to be repaired when it breaks. Yet somehow I continue to live as if the resources of our planet have no limit.

In a prescient passage, the rabbis 2000 years ago said, "Everything in this world is given to us in the form of a pledge. The pledge is that we will utilize the gifts of this world properly. No debt is ever cancelled and none can ever evade his or her responsibilities. The ledger is open and the hand writes." (Pirke Avot 3:20)

We American Jews fell in love with modernity; given our history, who could blame us? It is almost like we have done too good a job of putting that vigilant past behind us. Instead, we're

tempted to turn away from remembering how unsafe and unfair the world can be. Yet we've also seen what we can do when we do pay attention.

Forty years ago this year marked the beginning of the free Soviet Jewry movement. We made posters that said *Shlach et ami*, let my people go. We protested. We lobbied. We raised funds. We visited refusniks in the Soviet Union. We smuggled in forbidden religious items. We marched on Washington. And we made a difference. At last, in the 70's, Jews began to trickle out of the former Soviet Union; and in the 80's, many thousands more poured out.

I remember meeting one of those first families back 1979 in Pittsburgh. I had a small student congregation in the North Hills. They were young and too small to afford an ordained full-time rabbi, so every other week, I got on a plane from Cincinnati and flew to Pittsburgh for the weekend. Every Friday night, I ate Shabbat dinner with a different family. I would arrive and they would wait for me to lead the blessings. I used to say, "I am a guest in your house. You lead the blessings as you would usually do." And they usually did. Until one Friday night when I arrived at the home of a family who had arrived from Russia not too many years before.

Their Shabbat table was beautifully set. The silver was polished. There were candles, wine and challah. I found out later that they had called other members of the congregation to be sure they had all the right things for their Shabbat table because they didn't know. They waited for me to lead the blessings - and as I began to repeat my usual line, I stopped myself because I realized that they couldn't lead the blessings because they didn't know the blessings. In Russia, they hadn't been allowed to receive a Jewish education.

As they stood silently, I recited the blessings they didn't know. And they were so proud they could have the rabbi for Shabbat dinner. Then they served the borscht. They didn't know I was 4 weeks pregnant - I barely knew it except that I was totally nauseated - and that I didn't eat borscht under the best of circumstances. I looked at the family seated around the table and realized how important it was for them that I eat every last drop. And I haven't been able to eat borscht since. That family would still be in Russia today had we not paid attention and raised our voices in protest. We were watching and we made a difference.

When you saw WW written on Phil Rizzuto's scorecard, you knew he hadn't been watching. In fact, he was even known to leave the game in the 7th inning so that he could beat the traffic on the George Washington Bridge on his way home to Hillside, NJ. If he wasn't watching for a few innings, no one seemed to care and the consequences were minimal. It was just a game.

But there was another game played in Roman times where the Talmud forbade Jews from watching at all. It was those ancient Roman gladiator games, where two gladiators would battle to the finish, at which point, the victorious one would look to the crowd for a decision; if the loser had, in the eyes of the spectators, fought valiantly enough, they would vote, "thumbs down," meaning put the sword down. If not, they would signal "thumbs up" and the winner would respond by killing the loser.

The rabbis were almost unanimous in urging Jews to boycott these games, all except for Rabbi Natan. He said Jews should go, and when it came time for the spectators to vote, they should stand up and should turn "thumbs down", potentially saving a life. The Jewish task has always been to fight for the right social order, to defend justice and support life. But we are a part of a people who wrote "*Adonai Haaretz um'lo'o, tevel v'yoshvei ba* - The earth is the Lord's and all its fullness, the world and all who dwell there." Watching over it isn't a choice; it is our holy obligation.

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