

**All Our Vows:
In Support of Same Sex Marriage
and the Maryland Dream Act**

***Kol Nidrei 5773;*
September 25, 2012**

“*B’y’shiva shel Ma’ala, u’v’y’shiva shel Ma’ata, al da’at haMakom, v’al da’at hakahal, anu matirin l’hitpaleil im ha’avaryanim.* In the heavenly assembly, and in the earthly one...we pray as one.” Observant and free-spirited, committed and questioning, rooted and radical, united only, in some ways, by our differences, we come together on this night. For this day of reflection and introspection, “saint and sinner alike commune with the Most High. We are at one.”

We come together now for an evening which is, along with Chanukah candles and some kind of seder, the most widely-observed ritual moment of the Jewish year. And yet a jarring note disturbs the meditative mood. A voice jumps out at us from the Haftarah portion we will read tomorrow morning. “What are we doing all this for?” Isaiah asks with a sharp edge and biting sarcasm. “*Hachazeh yihyeh tzom ev’charayhu? Yom ‘Anot Adam Nafsho?* Is this the fast I have chosen? A day of self-affliction? Bowing your head like a reed? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Eternal? Is not *this* the fast I have chosen: *pateach chartzobot resha; hateir aggudot mota, v’shalach r’tzutzim chofshim, v’chol mota t’nateiku* -- to unlock the shackles of injustice, to loosen the ropes of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to tear every yoke... to bring every unjust boundary down.”

Or again: “*lo haMidrash ha'ikkar, eleh haMa'aseh.*” It is not the learning that is the main point, nor even the ritual. It is learning, and ritual...*and* action... the deed, the doing... that is the point. That is what works to cleanse our souls and mend a broken world. Meditation *and* movement, spirituality and social justice... the two together. Both/*and*, but not, and never, either/*or*.

I remember. I remember, through the mist of time, going to services as a young boy, asking my mother where the rabbi was. “Oh, he’s in jail,” she said. “Again,” she said. “Marching for civil rights,” she said. “Again.” And I remember. I remember what was said by the great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel – one of the most learned spiritual teachers of the last century, but also one of the great activists of our time. “When I marched in Selma,” Heschel famously taught, “I felt... as if my feet were praying.”

“*Kol Nidrei, v'esarai, va'charamai, v'konamay, v'kinuyay, v'kinusay, u'shavuot.* All vows, prohibitions, consecrations, assertions, acquisitions and oaths... that we take upon ourselves, from this Yom Kippur to the next one...”

But not all of our vows are equally binding. And not all our oaths are equally wanted. For some of us, there are vows that have no standing in the eyes of the law, empty words whispered into the wind. And for some, there are oaths not yet taken, dreams deferred, waiting, fading farther away with each passing day.

My friends, on this night, this holiest of moments, in the midst of our deepest sense of spirituality and greatest potential for unity, we have difficult challenges before us, and controversial ones. I call upon us this night to not only step into the world of ritual, but also remember the world of action. I am aware, however, that not everyone will agree with what I am about to say, or what it is that I want us to do. At a time of coming together, then, I want to temper a call to action with a measure of grace: we value every voice, and every spirit. The circle of the sacred remains an inclusive one, depending upon a shared sense of identity far more than agreement about issues. If we act in ways both conscious and conscientious, if we are open enough, then to act as a community, to exercise our conscience need not mean that we read anyone out. And on this night let us remember... that even determined purpose and moral resolve rarely rests on unanimity.

What are the shackles of injustice I feel this night? What are the ropes we hope to loosen, the unjust barriers we seek to bring down? This season we face a choice of candidates – and also questions concerning communal policy. On the question of men and women, of who to vote for or against we take no public position at all. But ballot initiatives and legislation is in a different category: these are questions with real-life outcomes; often these are policy matters with moral implications or social resonance or which reflect underlying values that our spiritual traditions address directly. Ballot initiatives are something which we, and congregations around the state, are able to address. And tonight I feel obligated to do so.

This fall we face two opportunities to step up, and stand out, to pray with our hands... to act, and by so doing, to make this world more whole. The initiatives I refer to will appear, a little over a month from now, as Questions Four and Six on the Maryland ballot. They are the Maryland version of the Dream Act, and the issue of Marriage Equality for Same-Sex couples. In my view, and, indeed, in the view of our Reform movement, these are measures which call for our involvement, and support.

Of these two, the less well-known, and by far less well understood, is the Dream Act.

I turn first to a text, as any exploration of Jewish values should – and I begin with a premise. The strangest section, the most puzzling part of the Ten Commandments, are words which appear towards the end of the Second Commandment, the admonition against idolatry: “*Ki Anochi Adonai Eloheicha Eil Kana – Pokeid Avon Avot Al Banim Al Shileishim v'al Ribeyim L'Sonai, V'Oseh Chesed L'alafim L'Ohavai U'l'Shomrei Mitzvotai...* For I the Eternal your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children unto the third and fourth generations of those who reject Me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me, and keep My commandments.” What disturbing words! What a troubling tradition – the notion that we are affected, to such a degree, in our lives, by the choices our parents and grandparents made.

Troubling, but it is also true. Just look at the journeys made, or not made, legal, or illegal, to this country. Those who stayed where they were, among the Jews, are gone now, for the most part. Of course there is an impact... of course there is a lasting affect... that comes from the way our ancestors lived their lives.

But there should be a limit, a way to step out of the chain of choices we had no part of making. And so the prophet Ezekiel, in what is largely seen as a response to this notion, takes a new twist on an old proverb: "*Avot yochlu voser, v'shinei habanim tik'henah* – that parents should eat sour grapes, and the teeth of their children should be set on edge." No, Ezekiel asserts, a new day has come, and he proclaims the doctrine of individual responsibility. "The soul that sins, that one should be punished." That one, and not others.

In theory the Dream Act is a simple notion. It applies to those who had no hand in breaking a law, but who were dependent on the decisions of others. It allows for the children of undocumented residents, brought to this country when they were minors, to be given a chance, and a choice, to share in some of the benefits afforded to the citizens and legal residents in the communities in which they live.

The Federal Dream Act is expansive in its scope, and although it had wide-support at one time it is off the table in the current climate. What is before us now is a carefully crafted, much more narrow state-based initiative, which would allow undocumented immigrant children, raised in Maryland,

whose parents have paid taxes to the state for at least three years, to pay in-state tuition at Maryland state colleges and universities. To address the claim that any such students would be taking up academic places of legal residents, the bill is further narrowed to apply only to those who have attended a community college for two years, and who want to continue on to a four-year institution of higher learning. Beneficiaries would also be counted as international students for purposes of admission.

Remember that the tuition break we are talking about is for those who are not eligible for federal loans and grants – but whose higher education will have an impact beyond their own lives. Their professional achievements will contribute to the community that they call home. In the long run, we are all beneficiaries. I know that not everyone agrees about this issue. But I believe, our congregation's Board believes, our Reform movement believes... that the Maryland Dream Act is fair, just, balanced – and important.

Of the two issues, the Dream Act is the less well-known. Marriage equality, same-sex marriage – this one everyone knows about. And everyone has a strong opinion.

Texts there are, and arguments over words, but now I want to do something different. At this point I want to issue an appeal, instead. Because logic and argument cannot often overcome discomfort, and yet, I know, sometimes, that compassion can.

To those of you, few perhaps, who are on the fence, who are uncomfortable with or opposed to what we are calling Marriage Equality, support of marriage for same-sex couples, I want to say this: you may want to frame the question in terms of what feels natural to you, or in terms of a tradition that you are comfortable with. But marriage, who you live with, who you build a family with... is a profoundly personal matter. So I ask you: try to think about this in terms of people. These are real people we are talking about, our neighbors, our colleagues, our cousins, our kids, ourselves! You may say you are all in favor of workplace protection, hospital visitation rights, equal treatment, but not the M-word. You may say that there is something special about marriage – and as one who works with life-partners preparing to marry, who stands with committed couples under the *chuppah*... you are right. There is something special about it. There is a reason marriage is called *kiddushin* in Jewish life – a sanctified, holy relationship. What a powerful partnership this is indeed. It is a sacred bond that should be open to all who choose to embrace it. And what an amazing thing it is to witness, this march towards monogamy! It's practically retro! It's totally traditional, for God's sake!

We are talking about deep values here, and yes, “marriage” matters, because, in the world we live in, that is how we frame the way we think of families. I can't bring someone who is not yet comfortable with this new world to be thrilled about this kind of inclusiveness, but I can say this: step beyond your zone of comfort if you can, do it because of what this means to real people, real couples, real families sitting around you even now, even at this

time, and in this space... and you will know that the word *mitzvah* really means. It is the sense of doing the right thing, pulled to it, as it were, commanded, as it says. Because if all you are doing is something you want to do anyway... that's hardly a major *mitzvah*, is it? That's an act of convenience, not a commandment.

Do this, support this, fight for the rights of *other people* and I believe, with all my heart, and all my soul, that you will look in the mirror and know... that you have done the right thing. Standing up for those in need of your support, perhaps even against your own initial instincts, can there be any greater gift than that? Now it is *you*, that has the choice, and the chance: this November, and even in the work of support we can do before then – with your voice and your vote you *can* make this world a better place!

I am all too aware that God does not answer all our prayers. But the times in my life when I have prayed to be able to be there for a person I care about, when my requests have been about being better, embracing empathy, having some sense of what someone else is going through... that kind of prayer... it tends to get answered. Often enough, the answer is even “yes.”

For those of us already inclined to support Marriage Equality, remember: this needs to pass. This needs to pass now. It needs to pass here. *Atta HaIsh. At HaIsha.* You are the one... *You* are going to put this over the top. We are going to be the first. We are going to make history!

And so what is it that we can do, and what can we not do?

We can... remember that the work we do to better the world is something we do... as Jews, as a congregation, as a Jewish community, as an expression of our Jewish values... as well as flowing from our sense of general human decency. We can step forward, with head and heart and hand... With education, passion, and advocacy.

Religious school opened on September 9 with a table full of information about both ballot questions, much of the material provided by Jews United for Justice, the organization coordinating the Jewish community's efforts on these initiatives, working with synagogues of every single denomination all over the state. Tomorrow afternoon, during the Yom Kippur Mid-Day Study Sessions, we offer a chance to explore the issues surrounding the ballot initiatives: we will have with us a "Dreamer," an immigrant who would benefit from the Dream Act, and those who can speak to Marriage Equality as well. And on the upcoming two Sunday night holidays, additional options: on Erev Sukkot, the first evening of the holiday of Sukkot, Sunday, September 30, we open with a 6:15 PM service under the Sukkah, followed by a Pot Luck Dinner and a program called Shelter and Support: An Educational Panel about the Dream Act. Thus we take the core theme of the holiday, and work to make it real, in the hopes and dreams of those who came here seeking shelter. The following Sunday night is Simchat Torah on the Reform calendar, the night when we unroll the entire scroll, unwrap it and surround those stand in the middle of

the Sanctuary with the sacred words. That night we read from the end, and return to the beginning. On that night, prior to the 7 PM service, at 6 PM, we host a different program: A New Beginning: An Exploration of Marriage Equality. The end of the scroll, the very last letter of the Torah is “*Lamed*,” and the first letter, the very beginning of Genesis is “*Bet*.” Together, the *Lamed* and the *Bet* form the Hebrew word *Lev*, which means “heart.” What better time to celebrate love, for all the families in our midst?

We have already begun the work of the hand, as well. This past Sunday night, our 8th and 9th grade students began a voter-registration drive, with phone calls to the college students from our congregation, reminding other young people who are eligible to vote for the first time to do so, how to register, and by when. Taking care to preserve the rights and work within the boundaries of what might well be diverse opinions, the students also learned about political activism in general – and they were joined by adult congregants in the first of our three evenings of phone bank advocacy. Upcoming phone bank opportunities, with available slots and a real need for participants, are Tuesday, October 2 and Wednesday, October 10.

Several congregants have hosted house parties on behalf of Marriage Equality – and in both homes the Dream Act was discussed as well. Other efforts are on their way, and you will hear about them in the days to come. Mitzvah Day on November 4, just two days before the election, will include training and an opportunity to canvass for those who choose to do so.

This is what we can do. What we cannot do... is read anyone out, escalate *non-malicious disagreement* into personal opposition, allow a voice with questions or doubt to feel ostracized, isolated or unwanted. We cannot condone bigotry but we can live with differing opinions. I believe that clearly, God speaks to us, yes, but I do not believe that God speaks clearly, and so while I speak with moral passion I claim no monopoly on ethical insight or principled positions. I remember... I remember that the Talmud teaches the words of both Hillel and Shammai, divergent conclusions – even as it moved forward and ruled for and acted on the positions of the house of Hillel. Even as we act, we must still be open to one another, listen to one another, and remember that as strongly as we feel, we are bound together by far more than the two issues I have put before us tonight.

Vehaya b'acharit hayamim... And it will be, in the days to come... I believe in a time when we come together as one.... Not torn apart in strife and discord, but unified in love, even as we celebrate our differences. I believe that after we let loose the ropes that ties us down and hold us back, we will come to be bound by our own words, sanctified by our own choices, the oath of the heart, the vows of the soul.

There is a theory... it may not be right, but it is out there... that Kol Nidrei came about... because there was a time when we were forced to say, what we did not mean. This was a formula meant to free us from the closets of deceit, the shadows of society. Let us never do the same thing, to anyone else, neither to force people to live in secret, or to hide who they are; neither to squash dreams, nor to stifle love.

This night and in the days to come, *Ribono Shel Olam*, Maker of Matches and Knower of Secrets, help us and work with us. Guide us towards compassion. Let justice prevail. And let freedom reign.

L'shanah Tovah.