

Words of Welcome Yom Kippur

Rabbi Jason Miller

I was sitting in a restaurant the other day, after Rosh Hashanah, and I overheard two men talking at the table next to mine. The simple conversation went back and forth.

"How was your Rosh Hashanah?" "Fine. How was yours?" "Fine. How was your Chazzan?" "Fine. How was yours?" "Fine. How was your rabbi?" "Fine. How was yours?" "Fine. What did your rabbi talk about?" "He talked about a half hour."

Well, maybe I was a bit verbose in my first High Holy Day sermon here because I had a lot on my mind. This evening, I would like to offer some words of welcome... and I will try to be concise.

You see, for the past few months, since my family arrived here, we have been welcomed, greeted, and received non-stop. The warmth of this community has been so evident in a way in which we have been made to feel at home here so quickly.

Well, if you will indulge me, I would like to do some welcoming of my own. Here we are at the beginning of the New Year. It is the birthday of the world when we welcome in another year. What an opportune time to welcome others.

So? Nu? Who am I going to welcome?

The first person I would like to welcome is **Republican Senator George Allen**. I'd like to welcome him to the Jewish people. I'm also going to welcome all the **babies** who were born into our world in the past year. As their eyes begin to focus and they begin to take in the world around them, I will offer them an awakening welcome to their future. And finally, to the forty or so **new members** of our congregational family. I will welcome them into the shul.

First, to Senator George Allen. Welcome to our fold. Maybe you haven't heard about the Virginia Senator yet, but he claims that he only found out he was Jewish a month ago and he only decided to admit that after being questioned about his mother's heritage. His mom, "Etty" finally confirmed to her son (over dinner this past August) that she concealed her upbringing as a Jew in North Africa. Therefore her son George is Jewish too. And whether he likes it or not; whether he wants to admit his Jewishness or not, he does deserve to be welcomed to our tribe.

So, Senator Allen, regardless of when you found out about your true heritage as an MOT (Member of the Tribe), whether you tried to conceal your Jewish identity for political purposes, and whether you even care one iota that you are Jewish... let me welcome you to the Jewish people and fill you in a bit about what it means to be a Jew today.

Sen. Allen: Your first comment after your admission that you have "some Jewish blood in you" was: "I Still Had a Ham Sandwich for Lunch...My Mother Made Great Pork Chops." Well, Sen. Allen, this is not much of a surprise. We didn't expect you to suddenly admit that you put on tefillin each morning, ate cholent Saturday afternoons, and sang in your shul's High Holiday choir. In fact many Jews, you should know, don't actually follow the dietary restriction against ham and pork.

But welcoming you to the Jewish people, Senator also means clueing you in a bit as to what it means to be Jewish in the world today.

We Jews really enjoy living in the United States of America. We are allowed to apply for admission to any university we want. We don't have to have our own country clubs or professional organizations anymore. Physicians aren't turned away from joining practices as they once were. But make no mistake about it,

Senator Allen. We Jews still experience anti-Semitism, mostly abroad, but here in the U.S. and Canada too.

Just last week, as the high holy days began, swastika flags were flown on various portions of at least four freeways in Los Angeles. The director of the Anti-Defamation League said, "The display of swastika flags as the Jewish High Holidays begin is a statement of extreme hatred against the Jewish community." I guess if there wasn't hatred directed toward us Jews, we wouldn't need an Anti-Defamation League.

In fact, the ADL's 2005 Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents noted an increase in anti-Semitic incidents directed towards Jewish institutions. In recent months, we've seen movie actor Mel Gibson go into an anti-semitic tirade when he was pulled over for a drunken driving violation, accusing Jews of being responsible for all the wars in the world. He then lashed out at the arresting officer whom he suspected of being Jewish. When he realized that there was no way to cover up his racism and his drunkenness, he did what any sincerely contrite motorist would do in his situation. He had his publicist issue a heartfelt statement.

We've seen, in our own country, anti-Semites walk into JCCs with preschools and open fire. We've seen shootings at Jewish federation buildings. In our own country. Senator Allen, I'm not even talking about European anti-Semitism today. And there's even the horrible challenge of ensuring another Holocaust doesn't happen. You see, there are people, like Mel Gibson's own father, who tell people that the Holocaust never happened. Senator, your grandfather, Felix Lumbroso, was imprisoned by the Nazis during the German occupation of Tunisia, which led him to cover his identity leading you to live your life not knowing your true identity. Can you imagine people denying your grandfather was ever imprisoned or persecuted?

You see, it's not easy being Jewish today. In addition to people hating us, we have a lot of responsibilities too. We have to be ethical. Follow the Torah. Practice social justice and Tikkun Olam – trying to make the world a better place. Working toward getting a fair minimum wage for our lower class. Stamping out hunger in our own country. Helping the poor and the destitute, the homeless and the unemployed. Encouraging the spread of democracy across the globe, seeking peace and pursuing it.

You are really in a position to help out with all this because you're a Senator. If we can get you to think and vote with a yiddische cup now, maybe there will be great outcomes. You might continue eating pork chops and ham sandwiches, but maybe you'll think more about your grandfather in a prison because he was a Jew. Maybe you'll think about hate and racism and the prejudices you may harbor in a different way. You see, Senator Allen, you've been outed. You are no longer one of the goyim. You are now a light onto the goyim, onto the nations. You have a responsibility.

Maybe right now, you don't feel the Jewish ethnic and cultural pride. Maybe that will come in time and maybe that is something you will fight against for the rest of your life. But, Mr. Allen, it is something that most Jews do feel. Whether we are Jewish from birth, converted to Judaism later in life, or only in our adult lives realized we were Jewish, we are proud of who we are. We try to fulfill the responsibilities incumbent upon us as members of Keneset Yisrael – the Jewish people. Welcome to the Jewish people Senator Allen. My wish and, indeed, my prayer for you is that in time, you embrace who you are, and find pride in your Jewish heritage.

My next welcome is to all the babies who were born in this past Jewish year of 5766. And I therefore include two of my own children who were born this past November. To all the baby boys and baby girls, I say: "Welcome to the world." But don't get too excited little ones. Not yet at least. I'd like to welcome you to the world, but I also feel compelled to tell you a bit about the world you've come into.

It's a world not too unlike the world your great-grandparents knew in the late 1930s. You see, there's a lot of hate in the world. There's a lot of evil. I'd like to try to make sense of this world for you, new babies

of the world, but it's just not that easy. I mean, who am I to try to explain this all to you? I majored in International Relations in college, but what makes me an authority on the world situation? I read the NY Times and the Wall Street Journal once in a while, but I'm no political expert on world affairs. But I'll give it a shot because I think it's important that if you're going to be living in this world... and eventually inherit this world, you should know what you're looking at. By the way... it's not so good.

Over a decade ago, I read Samuel Huntington's article entitled "The Clash of Civilizations?" that was published in the academic journal Foreign Affairs. I was scared when I read it. You see, Huntington predicted that people's cultural and religious identity would be the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War world. I think he was right. I read a book by the Chief Rabbi of Britain, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks called *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. I don't think enough people read it however, because we seem to be in a "clash of civilizations"-type phase right now in the world.

We are witnessing the spread of what is called Islamofacism or Jihadism. People are murdering in the name of religion. Each day, I think about the Hebrew word Kadosh meaning "holy" and try to figure out how that beautiful word has become so popularly matched with the word war. Holy War has been declared. Are our eyes open to what is transpiring?

So, while I'm thrilled to welcome all these new babies into the world, it is a bittersweet feeling as well. Because our world is so far from perfect today.

At the Columbus Jewish Federation's Main Event only a couple weeks ago, I heard Les Wexner ask the chilling question to everyone in attendance. "Think about it, he said, if you woke up tomorrow and turned on the news and heard that (God Forbid) a nuclear bomb had been dropped on Israel, would you believe it?" How scary is it that the answer is "NO" – we wouldn't be surprised. Look at the world.

The world you are to inherit, new babies, is a world that isn't just fragile. It is a world that is broken. And I'm sorry to be the one to break that news to you. It's a helluva welcome, isn't it?

The world you were recently born into is a world in which:

- Men fly airplanes into skyscrapers in the name of their own religion
- Women and Men strap explosives to themselves and walk into restaurants, coffee shops, schools, and hospitals
- Kids shoot and kill other kids at school
- Bin Laden gets more airtime on Al Jezeera TV than President Bush gets on ABC News.
- Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez calls our President "the Devil" and then welcomes the anti-Semitic and Holocaust denying leader of Iran, with full military honors, to his country to strengthen the strategic alliance between the two states.
- We live in a world with drug abuse, domestic violence, and widespread illiteracy. Where more money is likely spent on gambling and entertainment than on medical research to cure cancer, diabetes, and AIDS.
- More than 852 million people around the world suffer the indignity of hunger and more than 153 million of those who are hungry are under the age of five
- Hamas, a known terrorist group on the United States' terrorist watch list, was actually elected – yes elected into public office

- Lessons haven't been learned from the experience of modern-day genocide, whether it takes place in Armenia, Nazi Europe, Cambodia, or Rwanda
- Sunnis kill Shias and Shias kill Sunnis. Israeli Jews kill Palestinian Arabs and Palestinian Arabs kill Israeli Jews. Hutus kill Tutsis and Tutsis kill Hutus. Whites kill Blacks and Blacks kill Whites. And people murder their own. Their own brothers.

And we live in an ironic world too. The Catholic Pope quoted the 14th century Byzantine emperor who characterized aspects of Islam as evil and inhuman. How did Muslims respond to this speech? Five churches were burned by Palestinians wielding guns and firebombs. Angry Muslims began calling for the Pope's death. They sure showed him.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad promises to wipe Israel "off the map." He stands on the dais watching proudly as his arsenal of weapons is paraded before him. He lusts after the necessary amount of nuclear weapons needed to finish off the Jewish State. So, how does the Council on Foreign Relations deal with Ahmadinejad? He was recently invited to speak to that council providing him a forum to deny the Holocaust took place.

And the day after the fifth anniversary of September 11th, the former president of Iran, Mohamad Khatami, was invited to speak by the Institute of Politics at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. His topic? "Political Tolerance."

Iranian Presidents speaking at Harvard about tolerance. Welcome to the world kids! I know you had no choice in the matter. It could be said, you're in this world against your will. Well, you actually had no will. But you're here. You're here in this broken world. A world where a nuke could be dropped and we just wouldn't be all that surprised to wake up and see that reported on the news. Welcome!

But there's good news too. The good news is that one of you, one you babies born in the past year, could grow up to be the leader of the free world in fifty years from now. You can break the cycle. The world today might not be much different than the world of your great-grandparents in the 1930s, but you can ensure that the world fifty years from now is a safer, fairer, more peaceful place than it is today. Or than it ever has been.

We observed the birthday of the world just last week. What a great birthday present it would be if this new generation – not the Baby Boomers, or Gen X, or Generation Y, but the newest generation – you babies just recently born, commit yourselves to Tikkun Olam. Commit yourselves to making the world a better place. To repairing all the breaks, all the fractures and fissures in the world today. I know that sounds like an insurmountable charge, but the generations before you have been tremendously unsuccessful in this regards. So, we have no choice but to count on you.

Perhaps our eyes were closed when Hitler came to power and stated exactly what he was going to do? Perhaps our eyes were closed when Saddam came to power? Perhaps our eyes are closed now when Iran and Syria and North Korea are gaining in power and gaining in weaponry? Maybe our eyes are closed because we're too proud, or too comfortable, or perhaps too naïve? Maybe, God willing, you will open your eyes. Welcome to the world, you have your work set out for you!

It's scary. There's no great way to spin it. We live in a scary world. But I want to leave you with some hope and happiness too. So, my third welcome is to many of you. To the forty new family and single members of our shul, I say welcome. And to the potential members sitting among us this evening, I say welcome. And also to those of you who have been members of our congregation for a few years, or twenty years or over fifty years, I welcome you. Welcome to our congregational family!

We do live in a frightening world. And being Jewish today isn't easy. But here at our shul, exciting positive things are happening. We are experiencing a renaissance of Judaism. Shabbat at shul is fun. Being a kid here at our shul – whether a tot or a high schooler, is fun. This is a great place to learn, to shmooze, and to celebrate. There's a lot of grey in the world, but inside these holy walls is sunshine. In this building, Jews come together to pray together, to learn together, and to eat together. On this very bimah, young people stand under the wedding chuppah professing their love and commitment to each other. Small preschool children run down the stairwells in this building, darting outside to the playground without any care in the world. Many of those same little children ascend the bimah each Shabbat morning to lead us in Adon Olam. They also give us something promising to look at – the future.

Welcome to our haven. Welcome to our shul. Welcome to a place that is safe. A place that is secure. A place I hope you will come often. When you find yourself in a time of need. A time of grief. A time of celebration. Or a time when you're scared. We offer many services. One of those services we offer is hope. It's a crazy, cruel world, but we hope to give the gift of a little hope; a little light amidst the darkness. You see, when you look around our shul, you'll see many reasons why you should actually feel quite optimistic about the future, about our people, and about our world.

Welcome! George Allen – like it or not, you're one of us. Make us proud. Babies born in 5766 – please... please make this world a better place. We need healing and we need help. We're looking to you. And to all of you, welcome. You make being the rabbi here a very rewarding mission. So, I welcome all of you. Welcome to the world; welcome to the Jewish people; and, welcome to our community. To the world, I say "Happy Birthday... May you get better with age!"

Shanah Tovah and G'mar Tov. May you be sealed in the book of Life.