

An elderly woman gets onto a crowded bus and stands in front of a seated young girl. Holding her hand to her chest, she says to the girl, "If you knew what I have, you would give me your seat." The girl gets up and gives up her the seat to the woman.

It is hot. The girl then takes out a fan and starts fanning herself. The woman looks up and says, "If you knew what I have, you would give me that fan." The girl gives her the fan, too.

Fifteen minutes later the woman gets up and says to the bus driver, "Stop, I want to get off here." The bus driver tells her he has to drop her at the next corner, not in the middle of the block. With her hand across her chest, she tells the driver, "If you knew what I have, you would let me off the bus right here." The bus driver pulls over and opens the door to let her out.

As she's walking out of the bus, he asks, "Madam, what is it you have?" The old woman looks at him and nonchalantly replies, "Chutzpah."

We Jews are the people of the Book; and we are the people of comedy. We are the religion of atheist Freudian psychotherapy and the community of mystics and faithful seekers of God's face. We are journalists and movie makers; we are liberals and neocons; we are bankers and hedge fund managers...and we are social workers and teachers and do-gooders...

We are so many things that the anti-Semites have a very easy time demonizing us. Because anything they would like to say about Jews is partly true. But, of course, so is its opposite.

But on one score I think any one of us...or of them...would have to agree.

We are a people of chutzpah.

Actually, in a sense, you see it all around you today. Yom Kippur may look like a day of solemnity and awe, but today is also mile 25 in our

seasonal marathon. We can smell the finish line and, even as the opening sounds of Kol Nidrei ring out, we know that we will break through the tape. We declare our regret and acknowledge 'our' sins, while we hope to be worthy of forgiveness. All the while, in our heart of hearts we know we aren't so pure. We dress up in white, acting like we are as innocent of the sins of commission and omission as could be. But confident in our chutzpah, the way we sometimes can be, that we will be forgiven because...hey! God's got our back. And we are sure that we will make it into that good book.

The chutzpah of this day is presented in a remarkable Midrash on the book of Exodus. When the People of Israel sinned by making a golden calf and worshipping it, in a fit of rage God is said to have sworn to destroy the people. Moshe intervened, pleading on our behalf that we be forgiven; and, of course, God relented. But then God was in a bind. God had made an oath which needed to be annulled. According to the Torah when a *person* makes an oath it must be fulfilled, and so these oaths carry the weight of Torah law. When such promises are unable to be fulfilled, or it would be worse for them to be carried out than abrogated, there is Hatarat Nedarim, the formal annulment of oaths. This ceremony entails the petitioner standing before a learned scholar who can release him or her (usually a poorly self-regulated person who is prone to ill-considered promises) from hastily made commitments that cannot be kept. Our Kol Nidrei service is a formalized, public version of this ceremony. But is there Hatarat Nedarim, is there Kol Nidrei for God? At this point, in a stunning act of interpretive chutzpah, the rabbis tell us that "Moses wrapped himself in his cloak and seated himself in the posture of a Sage, and God stood before him as one asking for the annulment of a vow; for so it says, *Then I sat on the mount (Devarim 9:9).*" A few weeks later, after Moshe had annulled God's vow, we received the 2nd set of tablets. On Yom Kippur. In this retelling of the story of our great national sin, it is God in

the hot seat! (Or witness stand.) The brazenness of the rabbis is clear: just like us, sometimes God needs forgiving.

We Jews have been chutzpadik through our history because we have been confident in our relationship with God. And because we have known that our very survival has depended upon a little audacity. Because we have known that we need to be willing to stand together, and sometimes to stand out, to advocate for our interests. Because no one else will. Because in our recent lived experience, and perhaps even today, the idea that others will be willing to step up and be our advocates, our defenders- it is simply untenable. Jews must, without apology, without hesitation and without self-doubt be the clear voice for the critical interests and needs of the Jewish people. Period.

Once upon a time, not so long ago, that was the kind of thing we could count on most Jews to know. We were not all religious, and we certainly weren't all rich (in fact we had far fewer resources as a community back in the 40s and 50s than we do today) - but virtually all of us could be counted on to do our best to support the Jewish future. Our memories were fresh from betrayals by our German and Lithuanian and Polish and French neighbors. We knew the feeling of being afraid that the latest populist politician would turn the furor of the crowd against us. But even more shocking was the fact that our friends, like the well-loved President Roosevelt, did not make saving our people as they were murdered a priority. His Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, simply brushed aside the desperate Jews in France in 1940. Several thousand such Jews were given visas to come to America by the embassy there but he rescinded their validity. Later, Hull turned away the St. Louis, only a few miles off of the US coast with its doomed cargo.

And it wasn't only the Shoah that defined our experience of being alone. When people today think about racial quotas in universities we tend to think about the positive goals of inclusion of the minorities and

historically excluded. For Jews of the middle of the 20th Century quotas meant keeping Jews out, keeping us down and keeping us on the margins. It was chutzpah that led Jews to respond to these quotas in 1948 by founding the first Jewish sponsored nonsectarian university in America- my alma mater, Brandeis.

It was hutzpah that led Jews to establish our own country clubs, our own hospitals, and our own voice in American public affairs. It was chutzpah that pushed Jews, decades before Hitler, to dream the impossible dream of our own state, of Jewish sovereignty, in the ancient land of Israel. It was chutzpah, in the best possible sense of the word, that lead Theodore Herzl to declare in 1897, exactly 120 years ago, that the dream of Jewish return to control our own destiny would be achieved. It was chutzpah that led Chaim Weizmann to petition the British government to recognize the moral imperative and the political utility of building a Jewish national home. When Lord Balfour issued his declaration exactly 100 years ago this fall, it was thanks to the chutzpah of a generation of dreamers. 70 years ago this coming November, when the United Nations approved the partition of the land into 2 states, the UN made Balfour's promise an international reality. But it was chutzpah that gave a Jewish army in the following months, for the first time in millennia, the confidence to challenge invaders and attackers and to bring the state to life. Chutzpah has been the foundation of our people's successes in Israel, in America, in nearly every instance. We did not get where we are because Jews felt ambivalent about supporting the Jewish people. We saw where the alternative leads. And so, the first charitable dollar Jews had to give regularly went to a blue *pushke*, to Israel, to shuls, to Jewish Day Schools, to Jewish Federations, to the ADL, the AJC, to Hadassah, to JTS; to our people, our advocates and our addresses.

In a certain sense, it is fair to ask: is this era of Jewish chutzpah past? Are we a bit reluctant to be identified first as Jews today? When that first dollar of charitable giving today comes out of a Jewish pocket, the

researchers tell us it is more likely to go the symphony, to an art museum, a secular university, the American Cancer Society or a secular civil rights cause. All very deserving, no doubt. But where does Jewish commitment figure in? Dr. Jack Wertheimer of JTS, a historian and analyst of the contemporary Jewish community, has looked closely at these trends. His diagnosis of the situation is that the problem, believe it or not, is “Tikkun Olam.” This ideal- which is rooted in our tradition to be sure- he says has been elevated to the very pinnacle of our identity.

‘Healing and repairing the world’ is our job. It is our responsibility. The suffering in Puerto Rico, the plight of Syrian refugees, and the hunger of the children of Eritrea- they are all our business. But, Wertheimer insists, first- we have to exist. In this respect, I believe, he is absolutely correct. The idea that we can entirely identify ourselves vis a vis the needs of others makes a critical first error: it takes our vitality and existence as given. Jews *do* need to focus on the creation, education, and the inculcating of a new generation of Jews in order for us to do good for anyone in the world. And for tikkun olam to mean something authentic from a Jewish point of view, we also have to value the ‘repairing the world’ that also involves our own flourishing. We have to take seriously our responsibility to promote Israel, even when we disagree with some of its policies. We have to speak out against anti-Semitism consistently, even when it comes from other erstwhile political allies. That means- especially to our friends on the political right- we cannot afford to stutter or have any hesitancy in calling Nazis our enemies. Always. The President was wrong in calling anyone who marches under such a banner a ‘good person.’ And, to our friends on the political left- we cannot overlook the use of the word ‘genocide’ when applied to Israel’s actions against the Palestinians, even when it is offered by groups we would otherwise have sympathy for. Whatever mistakes Israel has made, this gross exaggeration is an outrage. Of course we need to cry out that black lives matter, but if BLM engages in an anti-Jewish blood libel we need to say so. Jews need to reacquire the

chutzpah to care about ourselves. Our lives. Our institutions. And our future.

Chutzpah. We Jews need to be known for it again.

With a commitment to our Jewish obligations comes the need for balance. How should we look after our own parochial, Jewish communal needs in light of our responsibilities to others? How do we know when we have gone too far in prioritizing ourselves, and when do we go too far in the other direction? The balance may be struck by thinking about how Martin Buber, the great early 20th Century theologian put it. In "I and Thou" he writes that all of our relationships form 2 basic 'word pairs'. When we live in the 'I-It' relationship, the first of these word pairs, all that is- all the people in our lives, even our families and loved ones- they are all made into nothing more than instrumentally important. They become objects: an 'it' for us. The opposite of this relationship, the 'I-Thou' or 'I-You,' is encountering the world around us and the people in our lives as truly others. As a subject, not an object. In order for my 'I' to be part of an 'I-You', I need two components. First, I need to know myself. I need to be aware of who I am and not entirely submerge my identity into you. And then I need to truly see and encounter you as a person, as a human being, created in God's image, just like me. If I only relate to you instrumentally, my 'I' becomes an expression of 'I-It.' If I fail to bring my 'I' to the party, to the encounter, then I am unable to be a full participant either. As in all the pre marriage counseling I do, Buber is saying that love depends on loving yourself AND on loving the true other, not only an image of who that person is. As individuals, and as nations, from a place of self-understanding and self-love we move to appreciate others, with their own responsibilities and their own stories. Around 2000 years ago the sage Hillel famously articulated a nearly identical idea in Pirkei Avot- the Ethics of the Fathers: "If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am only for myself, what am I?"

Buber, who came to live in Israel, articulated a Zionism informed by this insight. He said that nationalism could be truly healthy and necessary. It was the formation of our 'I' as a Jewish people. Good nationalism "is a demand upon the world for what [a people] needs, a demand that the unwritten rights of the nation be applied to a people to enable it to realize its essence as a people and thus discharge its duty to mankind." But, certainly thinking about the growing dangers in his native German lands, he saw a much darker and more ominous future for nationalism as well. When nationalism becomes guilty of hubris, he wrote, it "eats at its marrow. When this false nationalism [spreads...] it converts the nation into a Moloch (the false god of the Moabites who demanded child sacrifice), which gulps the best of the people's youth. National ideology ... is fruitful as long as it does not make the nation an end in itself."

So Buber's version of our role in the world, and the role of Zionism, is that, first- we must exist. It may take a little dose of chutzpah, but so be it. We must come to be our own presence in the world. And then, we must do the good we can in encountering others, even potential antagonists, even those with whom we struggle. But if we don't make this pivot, if we don't do what we should to truly encounter the reality of the 'other,' then our own national project could doom itself.

Today is a good day to remember that Jewish survival has always rested on a healthy, balanced chutzpah. From Moshe to Herzl, from the rabbis of the Midrash to Buber, we have always found a way to insist that our very being is a holy thing. It is God's will that we survive and thrive. And that our work in this world is too important for us to take ourselves, our own existence for granted.

I want to talk to you tonight about the need for Jewish chutzpah, and balancing it, not only with regard to the extraordinary, miraculous achievements of 70 years ago. Not only insofar as we consider conflict with other peoples and other nations. Nor do I want to focus on the

many miracles that have unfolded in Israel in the subsequent decades, also the product of courageous and bold dreamers. The story of chutzpah as a positive, critical Jewish trait doesn't end with the saga of armies or the challenges of pursuing peace alone. It also includes believing in ourselves. Us. You and me. We need to cultivate a healthy sense of chutzpah, that we- Conservative Jews- are the people who will guarantee the Jewish future. Our 'I' is worth valuing and supporting. Our movement has produced generations of leaders who went on to serve the 'yous' of the broader Jewish community, or who became active in social action leadership, or who simply became good stewards of their communities. But too often the products of our shuls, of Ramah and USY and our day schools have not seen our synagogues, our movement, as where the real important work needed to be done. I applaud all of those who have made a difference for others, for the 'yous' whom we have nurtured. But I think the time has come for us to say clearly: it is also critical that we value our 'I.' We are not just here because we like this style of praying. Because we like to sit, with men and women together. Because we like to have a traditional feeling but 'less demanding' Judaism. We need the chutzpah to be true partners within the Jewish family, and to say: if you are looking for the right way to be Jewish, look to us.

You have likely heard about the multiple fronts unfolding in Israel right now in which our presence, as egalitarian Conservative Jews is being attacked by the government of Israel. Agreements with Prime Minister Netanyahu and the government, painstakingly crafted and adopted which would give us a real presence at the Kotel, the Western Wall, have been tossed aside for political expediency. Women, the women of my own family, have been harassed, assaulted and screamed at for davening at the Wall. And on the issue of conversion, we are also seeing a slide in Israeli politics that points to a growing power for the ultra-orthodox and a total dismissal of world Jewry- including much of the modern orthodox world. When the former chief Sfardi Rabbi of

Israel says that we are worse than those who deny the holocaust, it is truly time to answer back. When PM Netanyahu complains that we are making a fuss and trying to be accepted 'through the back door,' we need to respond. We are not asking to be tolerated or accepted in some political maneuver in Israel because we would like it. We are demanding that we be accepted because Israel needs us. Because we value our 'I.' Because in order for us to contribute to the overall welfare of the Jewish people, we have to prioritize our own existence. We, in the Conservative movement, we who believe in pluralism as a value; and we who have produced the greatest number of leaders of the American Jewish community in all its forms; we who have raised up generation of Jews in the face of the challenges of assimilation that a welcoming environment necessarily entails- we are the real deal. We are Judaism in 5778. And we can be found in growing and vibrant communities all over Israel and throughout the world. And Israel needs more of us. This is not meant as an attack on our Orthodox or Reform friends. They are of immense value. But in order for us to have an I-Thou relationship with anyone, we have to exist first. We have to have the vitality and support and power that only comes from prioritizing ourselves.

This summer I was part of an AIPAC delegation of rabbis who traveled to Israel. We explored every aspect of the conflict with the Palestinians; we examined the issues in confronting Iran; we explored the phenomenon of an increasingly more educated and successful community of Arab Israelis. We saw the good, decent and admirable of Israel- in the form of Syrian refugees who were cared for in remarkable hospitals. We saw the great in the form of Israel's successes- in the military, the economic and the cultural sphere. And we saw the long 'to do' list for the better Israel we pray for each day. But the thing that I think resonated most with the participants in this group was our Friday evening in Jerusalem at a little shul called Tzion. This congregation, a Masorti/Conservative synagogue led by Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum,

is a true force in Jerusalem today. She is the rabbi who spoke at my installation here two years ago and she continues to bring the voice, the presence of an authentically Israeli, an authentically Jewish, an authentically pluralistic reality to Jerusalem every day. Her chutzpah, began in creating a new synagogue in the holy city. (Talk about coals to Newcastle.) She has included Sephardi and Ashkenazi aspects to her service, she has drawn in intellectuals and traditionalists, the old and the young, to her shul. And she has spoken out on what Judaism, our Conservative Judaism, has to say about what it is to live in peaceful coexistence with our neighbors. She has proudly and unapologetically put forward her 'I', our 'I', and made it possible for our Judaism to deeply engage with the many 'Thous', the many others that make up Jerusalem. Her work has been so successful- bringing the religious and secular together, bringing local imams and nuns to shul to increase understanding, demonstrating for economic justice and advocating for a better Israel- that she has become one of the city's best known rabbis. During our trip we had Shabbat dinner with Rabbi Daniel Gordis, the well-known writer and thinker who likes to regularly point out the failings of Conservative Judaism (the movement in which he grew up). Gordis looks at Rabbi Elad-Appelbaum and sees not just a counterpoint to his regular critique. Not just a good rabbi and a nice shul. Gordis said to us, and he has since published, that "the State of Israel was only founded so that there would be a Rabbi Tamar Elad Appelbaum." That is chutzpah! All that sacrifice, all those grand achievements, with all that effort to save, revive our people, revive our language, the bringing of the exiles together, the wars, the conflicts, the hopes, the dreams...they were all in order to reach this pinnacle achievement: A Conservative shul. Such glorious chutzpah!

But I entirely agree. What the rabbi has wrought, what we have the power to do here, is what our covenant is all about. The whole reason we were saved from slavery in Egypt..the whole purpose for the giving of Torah..the reason God asked Moshe for help in annulling that

vow..the whole reason your ancestors came to America...the whole reason we are here today- is to be a people, to be an 'I', ready to do our part in the world. But first, we have to prioritize our existence.

That means, with an understanding of how full and complex our lives today are- come to shul! I know that there is soccer and skiing and work and a thousand other needs and activities- but this is where you are needed. This is where you belong, as often as possible. Be here with us as we learn and pray and strive to understand our place in the Jewish present. Be willing to be pushed out of your comfort zone, just a little, so that you can grow as a Jew. As a Conservative Jew. That means, and here is the chutzpah, support us. Financially. Emotionally. Personally. When we are at our best. And when we make mistakes. Be a part of building a better future.

And when you support Israel, and you must support Israel, support our institutions in Israel. Because a little chutzpah is necessary- I'll tell you the truth. Nothing is more critical to the future of Israel than the success of the Masorti/Conservative movement. Nothing. Without the open, deeply rooted, embracing and demanding Judaism of our ancestors, the future of the state, the future of our people is endangered.

Today we have the gall, the temerity, the audacity to believe that we deserve forgiveness. That we have the right to claim a 'do over' for all those mistakes we list. That we have a claim to a tomorrow with a clean slate. Those missed chances? Those errors? Those hurtful comments? They should be entirely wiped away. As if they never happened at all. Who can ask for such a thing? Who has the presumptuousness to suggest such a thing? Who? You and I do. We have been given the blessing of a new year. An opportunity to make things right. After all of the petitions for forgiveness and all of the confessions have all been offered- it is time, without apology, to stand up, to be willing to stand

out, and with all the chutzpah we can muster, say with pride: Bus driver, *this* is my stop!