

***Days of Awe: Look Back Through Silence***  
**A Sermon Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist**  
**By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia**  
**On October 9, 2011**

**Reading** – Isaiah 58:1-12

<sup>1</sup> Cry with full throat, without restraint;

Raise your voice like a ram's horn!

...

<sup>2</sup> To be sure, they seek Me daily,

Eager to learn My ways.

Like a nation that does what is right,

That has not abandoned the laws of its God,

They ask Me for the right way,

They are eager for the nearness of God:

<sup>3</sup> "Why, when we fasted, did You not see?

When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?"

Because on your fast day

You see to your business

And oppress all your laborers!

<sup>4</sup> Because you fast in strife and contention,

And you strike with a wicked fist!

your fasting today is not such

As to make your voice heard on high.

<sup>5</sup> Is such the fast I desire,

A day for men to starve their bodies?

Is it bowing the head like a bulrush

And lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Do you call that a fast,

A day when the Lord is favorable?

<sup>6</sup> No, this is the fast I desire:

To unlock the fetters of wickedness,

And untie the cords of the yoke

To let the oppressed go free;

To break off every yoke.

<sup>7</sup> It is to share your bread with the hungry,

And to take the wretched poor into your home;

When you see the naked, to clothe him,

And not to ignore your own kin.

<sup>8</sup> Then shall your light burst through like the dawn

And your healing spring up quickly;

...

<sup>9</sup> Then, when you call, the Lord will answer;

When you cry, He will say: Here I am.

If you banish the yoke from your midst,

The menacing hand and evil speech,

<sup>10</sup> And you offer your compassion to the hungry

And satisfy the famished creature —

Then shall your light shine in darkness,

And your gloom shall be like noonday.

<sup>11</sup> The Lord will guide you always;

He will slake your thirst in parched places

And give strength to your bones.

You shall be like a watered garden,

Like a spring whose waters do not fail.

<sup>12</sup> Men from your midst shall rebuild ancient ruins,

you shall restore foundations laid long ago.

And you shall be called

"Repairer of fallen walls,  
Restorer of lanes for habitation."

### **Sermon**

At Rosh Hashanah the year is said to turn and the people are supposed to take the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to turn and look clearly at the actions of the last year, to make amends and then turn anew toward life. Rosh Hashanah was on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September and, last Sunday, when we were doing the hokey pokey and turning ourselves around I intended to ask you to take this week as a time for turning even more fully – but, you know, there's always so much to say and so little time. I let it go and then regretted it.

The days of awe are a special time, though I believe, that if we live with deep and honest authenticity – turned toward reality – reckoning with ourselves and the world as we and they really are – then every day is a day of awe. Every day – though the urgency grows everyday well – we can turn. It's said, in Jewish tradition, that once a year God opens the book of life and, after seeing how we re-atune ourselves during the High Holy Days, can choose to write us again into the book of life. Now this doesn't mean that if God finds us undeserving, that we keel over sometime in the next year – rather, it means that we are judged to be choosing life or death dependent upon our actions.

Who or what is this God that judges us and how is that God to be judged?

You may be familiar with the story of an event that Elie Wiesel said that he actually witnessed as a boy of about 15 in Auschwitz. A group of rabbis and scholars had been debating God's guilt in the holocaust and they decided to put God on trial. They spent a series of nights with witnesses and plentiful evidence of all the suffering they had experienced and knew of that God had allowed, ignored, or responded to in silence. After long deliberation God was judged guilty on all charges. Then one Rabbi spoke up and said – "and now it is time for evening prayers."

In the play that Wiesel wrote, called *God on Trial*, set in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the character named Mendel described the horrors of the pogrom in which his entire village with the exception of himself was massacred. Sam, who turned out to be the devil in disguise, responded: "Blessed be the lord for his miracles." Mendel snapped "a whole community massacred and you talk of miracles?" The devil responded "a Jew lives and you ignore them?"

He tried to make Mendel lose sight of the forest for the trees. After all, it's said that if you save one life it's as though you saved the world and if you take a life it's as though you've destroyed the world. So – is it a blessing that one Jew survived or a tragedy that only one survived? You know how people who survive a catastrophe may say – God was watching over us? By this they can only mean that God wasn't watching over all the other folks who perished. Either of these are unsatisfactory responses to great suffering.

It is easy to fail to see the forest for the trees. After all, we're each raised in one small part of the forest. What I want to share with you is a portion of my own turning – my emergence from behind a tree – that's hard to talk about and yet necessary for me to be honest as I cherish my own Jewish lineage, history, and tradition.

As you may know, this summer, my husband, Mark, and I travelled to Europe. The trip began because Mark's older brother Greg, wanted all of us to meet a newly found branch of the family. He had enough frequent flyer miles to get all of us over so we headed for a family reunion in Kiev and Belarus. It is important for you to know that his family was largely Catholic.

Mark and I decided to use a little extra time to explore my family tree, since our families came from areas close to one another. I have a family tree that traced my father's family to a city called Landau on the border of France and Germany. A Jewish presence is recorded in there from the 13<sup>th</sup> century but in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century there was an expulsion of the Jewish community and many fled. My family fled to Krakow, Poland. Some Jews returned to Landau in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Anne Frank's grandfather came from there – but through the terrors of Nazism the entire Jewish community either fled or was killed and none live there now. Since all evidence of the Jewish community was destroyed we decided to skip Landau – at least this time.

Krakow was too far to visit and most of my family had fled from there during the pogroms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Those who stayed had died along with the 60,000 or so other Jewish inhabitants who were exterminated by the Nazis. Only two small walls of the Jewish ghetto remain today.

I knew of a distant cousin on my father's side who'd migrated to Russia from Poland and found her way to Minsk, Belarus – where Mark also had family! Because she was a member of the Communist Party she and her family survived the German attacks and her parents were buried in a cemetery outside of Minsk.

On my mother's side I only knew of family from Kiev, Ukraine so at least there, I'd be in the vicinity of family history. So, we left on pilgrimage with few real markers, to visit places that once were, where people had fled or been killed.

We wanted to visit a small French town called Troyes where Rashi, the learned rabbi, had lived in the 11th century. I figured that since nearly all of my known ancestors were Rabbis or the wives of Rabbis there was a chance that they'd studied with the great teacher at some point. But the Jewish community in Troyes is now tiny and nothing remains of the area where Rashi once lived, tended his vineyards, and sold his wine.

We became used to the themes of dislocation and erasure as we reconnected with my family history. The holocaust was just the culmination of two millennia of torment.

We decided to explore Paris.

On our first day in Paris, we visited La Marais, where for centuries Jews had lived. There were few signs of that history but the following day we returned and found the Museum of the Art and History of Judaism on Rue Du Temple. The museum is in a beautiful palace once home to a number of Jews. The exhibit that most struck me was a room full of scale models of Eastern European Synagogues, long gone, destroyed by pogrom more likely than Holocaust, which were, as were the models, built of wood.

That night we took the train to Munich and went the next morning to visit Dachau – the first concentration camp. The entrance with its signature metal gates and the message *arbeit macht frei* – “work makes you free”, is chilling to enter. The Camp was called the school for torture since, rather than being the site of mass murders it was the place where doctors did research on captive human subjects and the capacities of the human body were stressed and tested, where men were worked to death, new gas chambers were designed, and political prisoners were held. At Dachau the Unitarian Minister, the Czech Reverend Norbert Capek, creator of our flower communion, was held in 1942 until he was taken to Linz to be poisoned. The atmosphere at Dachau feels sterile –as it was when it was active. The Germans were terrified of catching diseases from the inmates and made them keep the camp immaculate. Still the barracks – each designed to hold around 20 people eventually each held 220 people and the camp – designed to hold 5000 prisoners held approximately 13,000 at a time with more than 30,000 passing through its gates. Most of the barracks are gone now – numbered gravel lots mark their sites. At the far end of the camp – a long walk from the houses of torture are a number of small new chapels – Jewish and various Christian denominations. I couldn't explore them. God had been no protection to the people who suffered there – it felt dangerous to enter a “house of God” on those grounds.

Dachau was a chilling experience, but it hadn't challenged my internal paradigm.

When we arrived in Kiev we met my husband's great uncle, Daniil. He took us around the city where he lives and works as a pediatric surgeon.

From Kiev we travelled to Minsk where I was able to visit the grave of my distant cousin's mother. I followed Jewish custom by placing pebbles on top of her marker. I said the mourner's kaddish. The plot was weedy and overgrown – but it was nearly joyous to find this tangible place. Someone real had been here – someone of my own.

In Minsk to meet more of Mark's family from there we travelled to Brest, Belarus where Daniil travelled to meet with us again and show us where the Krivchenia family came from a couple of generations ago. One afternoon we took two vans full of Krivchenias out through the countryside in search of a town that Daniil hadn't been back to since 1947, when he was about ten years old. From highways, to small byways, to gravel roads, to plain dirt road we travelled as though back in time. Small houses – less than a quarter the size of this sanctuary – appeared along the road – old and fragile looking but brightly painted – robin's egg blue, sunny yellow, kelly green, with brilliant contrasting trim. Houses nested amid fruit trees and behind flowers. Then seemingly in the midst of nowhere – like the strange little train stop in Fiddler on the Roof – there was a small platform and a sign that read Vyarchiee. We'd arrived.

There's so much I could tell you about this town that looked as though time had overlooked it entirely. Huddled close to the dirt road were the bright, tiny houses, an old woman in boots, a long coat, a kerchief, bent over screens sifting grain, a horse drawn wagon carrying a boy and a man came through the town who eyed our white vans with curiosity, the discovery that Daniil made of the childhood friend he had not seen since 1947. There's so much I could tell you about this small town that once held one hundred families but now only had ten.

But it was Daniil's experience that captured me. He found a tree he used to climb, a field that had belonged to the family but now belonged to the state. On the outskirts of town he described his family hiding in caves, hearing gunfire as Soviet and German armies clashed in their fields. When the Soviets and the Partisans lost the battle he remembered the Germans coming town by town looking for the last of

the partisans. They took all the people into the center of town across from the only small store and forced them all into a large ditch. Daniil was sick and feverish and his mother had left him in bed in their cottage with the door open so that the Germans would think it was empty. Other people were missing as well and since the Germans had a policy of only exterminating entire populations the folk of Vyarhee were spared. In the next town every last person was gunned down in the village center. One person, who survived told the tale. Daniil's eyes were damp as he spoke of all this. The experience was not an ancient memory, but fresh as yesterday. The fields where he'd worked and played still held the spirits of his family, the narrow street still sounded with the tramp of boots and heartbeat of fear. We found the house he'd lived in – but it was no more than a gray, slumped shambles. And we found a small monument to all the residents who had died at the front – four Krivchenias among them.

The next day, ever the guide, Daniil took us to Brest fortress, where a remnant force of 3500 poorly armed men fought off the German forces for two weeks before defeat. On a crest above the catacombs in which the scant troops had crouched was a long smooth monument with the names of all the known dead.

I had grown up knowing of the 6 million Jewish lives lost in the death camps and of the many American soldiers – and, really, the rest of European history had been a dim and distant reality – carefully filed under the heading “war is hell” in my consciousness”. But after the newly built streets of Minsk with their monuments, the sad dirt roads of rural Belarus, and there by the small church riddled with bullet holes and the battlements where the occasional small bunch of flowers would appear in a hidden corner, and beneath the huge sculpture of the soviet soldier scowling over the graves – a sculpture that suddenly represented to me the 23,000,000 killed by Stalin through execution and starvation – I awoke – the ravages of the war remain a wound in Europe. The suffering of war now had a personal face – many faces – in our new family – as they led us through the fortress, as Daniil told us of the heroism of the grown ups around him. I had to stop and sit on a wall and gather myself. I felt brutally awake and keenly aware that it's not simply a smooth saying that our fates are connected and the suffering of one is the suffering of all. I sat, wept, wrote, and returned to the family with a stronger sense of belonging than ever.

We stayed up late that night feasting with family and waiting for our train that came in at 2:30 in the morning to take us to Warsaw, Poland where we'd take a plane back to Paris and from Paris home. In Chicago, we have the largest population of Poles outside of Warsaw itself. Warsaw was pounded into rubble by the Germans. The lovely old town was so painstakingly reconstructed that you'd never know that it had been utterly destroyed. The Jewish community had fought back in the famous Warsaw ghetto – and been decimated. The Polish resistance was strong and the city of Warsaw did not surrender without heroic struggle. In the most surprising places – behind bus stops and in back streets, we found plaques commemorating the resistance of the Polish people.

For us, in America, the war is far away and even long ago – and, as the generation that fought in that war and that lived through it, ages and dies, we are, as Americans too often are – falling into amnesia. And I -- I had through habit, enshrined the suffering of my own people and glossed over the deep wound carried throughout Europe. More than anything else – that was the gift of our travels in Europe. The gift of more honest remembrance and the chance to do T'shuva – to turn and honor that remembrance.

It was a time of terror in the world. A time when between 12,000,000 and 17, 000,000 were killed by Hitler and millions more died under Stalin and Mussolini. When the movie, *The King's Speech*, came out last year, it brought alive that moment just as the war was about to engulf Britain and, in the terrifying silence of God, the King found his voice and gave courage to the people. And still God – at least the God of the literal Bible was silent. Is it possible for such a God to be indifferent? It is possible for such a God to be overwhelmed? Is such a God mighty? Or just? Or is God just more complex than conventional theology would lead us to believe?

If we wait for God to save us – now or at any time – we will perish. There is no God who intervenes in that way – otherwise that God would have stopped the countless sufferings of human beings over the ages. Jeff Hamrick, our director of music, told me back in the spring that he had this piece of music – the one they sang earlier – called *Even When God is Silent*. I heard that silence – at Dachau, at Brest, at Warsaw, in Vyarhee, in Paris under the plaques on walls that told of people taken away to death camps. Palpable silence. A silence that has, I think, made of Europe a far less church going place than America. And a place far less eager to march off to war.

I believe in the sun  
even when it isn't shining.  
I believe in love  
even when I am alone.

I believe in God

even when he is silent. (*from Even When God is Silent*)

Those words were found scrawled on the wall of a cellar in Cologne, Germany and set to music to honor the losses of Kristalnacht – the night when the Nazis destroyed thousands of homes and businesses and hundreds of synagogues and God was silent.

And we gather in houses of worship – not because we expect God to speak – but because we expect to become open here to our best selves – to be prodded – even when it is unpleasant -- toward our higher aspirations. We gather in houses of worship to remember in some way – that it is not only Nineveh that had to turn – and not only Jonah who had to find courage – but it is always the challenge that humanity faces – to turn – toward life and to raise our own voices. For *that* is the voice of God and the end of silence.

It is not simple – there is no conflict on earth where it is simple. It was not simple in the death camps or in the shtetls or the small towns of Belarus, or in Bosnia. ....Whether in Israel itself, in Palestine, on the streets of Syrt, in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, on Wall Street, in a Paris suburb, in Sudan. It is never easy and always the temptation is there to run and to hide – whether in the belly of a great fish or in the distractions of modern culture or in the small portion of the stories we have heard and heard repeated... but the moment we can stop running and hiding – we can hear again – the only voice of God that I believe that we can hear – the one that Viktor Frankl heard in Auschwitz and wrote about in man's search for meaning when he wrote: "The truth — that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. ... *The salvation of man is through love and in love.*

We hear the voice of God when people speak up for fairness and justice. It is the voice we hear when Natalie asks us to walk to end hunger. It is the voice we hear when we sing words that are noble and brave and mean them. Whatever God you may believe in – the one that can write us into the book of life sits among us now – is in the chair you sit in, sits beside you in every occupied seat, and will greet you over coffee. Whatever God you may believe in – *this* God is called to speak, to protest, to act, to make a difference and, through all that, write us all into the book of life. Amen.

### **Closing words of Matthew Fox from the afterword of God On Trial**

So great is humanity's capacity for evil that the God of justice is indeed silenced by humanity's evil deeds – but the God of the sun and moon and stars, of time and space and the fifteen billion years that brought humanity into being, the God of life itself... – that God is not silenced. The God of the cosmos is not silenced.