

Good Evening, Gut Yuntif

I'm Paula Wolk. My husband PAM Spierings and our children Hallie and David have been members of KB for seven years. PAM and I are especially grateful to KB because it has enabled us to convey a kind of Judaism to our children to which we actually ascribe both intellectually and emotionally. This has been a nourishing community for us all and we hope it has and will be for you as well.

Tonight, I am here to share my reflections as we begin the Days of Awe, the days when Jews throughout the world are given to reflect on the past year, and hopefully NOT only the last admittedly momentous week. Next we are supposed to consider how to behave in the year to come.

This year the scope of my reflections seems wider than in previous years. As many of you know my mother passed on in August of 2007 and we recently did a humanistic unveiling of her grave plaque; a simple, short, but meaningful ceremony. I am the one that remains from a small traditional nuclear family of my mother, father and older brother. That fact has given me pause for many months. I am aware of my mortality differently than I have been aware of it before. As bizarre as it sounds to me, not to you I'm sure, the truth is that I am going to die. Absurd, never absurd, but not reality for me, until recently. And so, that new awareness has forced me to ask myself with more urgency than previously, what is there left for me to do? What is really important in the time remaining? How do I balance what I enjoy doing with what I feel I "ought" to do? And with respect to the latter, what is enough?

In which spheres of my life have I been concerned with doing enough? The first that comes to mind does so with some trepidation in this forum. As some of you know, I have been concerned over the past several years and, only more so recently, with what some might call politics. And politics, they say, should be off limits here. In some general sense I do not disagree. My preoccupation has to do with what my grandfather would have thought about as "keeping things safe for the Jews". That is the way that my grandparents and parents had to think. Now most of us, fortunately, are able to think more inclusively than that. We can think about how to "keep things safe for us all".

Absolute power is absolutely corrupting. I won't bore you by reciting the experiential, experimental, and academic justifications for this proposition. I am one of the most ethical people I know. Yet I also know that I need for you to keep an eye on me and that if you don't, and I could do anything my impulses might lead me to, I would act badly. And further I know that the same is true of all of you, as well. All of us, are subject, often with the best of intentions, to breaking our own rules. In order for us as humans to be our best selves we need assistance, like the observance of Yom Kippur. We need the assistance of limits and revelatory lights on our behaviors.

This is also true at the national level. The balance of powers inscribed in our constitution has been one of the determinants of our success as a nation and we are in danger of losing that balance. It really does not matter if a democratic president or a republican president can sign into law whatever he or she wishes, it will be bad for the Jews, it will be bad for all of us. It really doesn't matter if a democratic president or a republican president can deem anyone an enemy combatant and that person can be arrested with no recourse to Habeas Corpus, it will be bad for the Jews and it will be bad for all of us. Recently, at a national convention two journalists wearing passes were covering a demonstration. They were assaulted by police and arrested. When a third journalist came over to the scene, showed his press pass, and asked to speak to whoever was in charge, his press pass was torn from his neck, he was manhandled and arrested as well. Permitting this kind of assault on Freedom of the Press is bad for us all.

I believe, passionately, in the principles that are supposed to guide our nation and our politics. For me, the principles that guide the politics are not the politics. I am not frightened by a debate about whether we should have a flat or graduated income tax. If we continue to have a graduated income tax, it does not terrify me for us to disagree about how the graduation should be structured. Reasonable people can disagree about the appropriate indices for determining the minimum wage. These, for me, are issues of politics and probably do not need to be discussed when we seek spiritual experiences. When, however, the Department of Justice fires employees for their political beliefs, and hires less competent ones because of theirs and when moreover, those believed partially responsible, can refuse a congressional subpoena to testify about it, I start to get scared. For me, this is breaking the rules that are supposed to guide the politics. When I learn that any group of people is actively trying to prevent another group from being able to vote, and this has happened on both sides, I get antsy, no matter the political persuasion. - - - You say, Paula, get real, our nation was founded on a patriarchy that permitted the institution of slavery and there have always been fascistic strains in America. Yes, that is true but the historic trend, from my perspective, has been toward greater inclusion and more rationality, until lately. From my perspective there are a growing number of Americans who believe that the executive branch of government should have what once would have been understood as sweeping powers, that a free press is not essential and lastly that there should not be a separation of church and state. In part I find the events, of the last week both ironic and heartening. When the President, Secretary of the Treasury and Fed Chairmen came to congress for 700 Billion dollars to be used with no oversight, no transparency, and full immunity, huge numbers of Americans on both the left, right, and middle, vociferously objected. With respect to money, people seem to understand that absolute power, no checks and balances, no transparency, and full immunity is a really bad idea. That is heartening to me. What is frightening, or ironic, is that we have not heard the same outcry with respect to the assaults on the principles which I am arguing are meant to guide our politics.

I am not really frightened for myself, but for the next generation and those who follow. I do not really believe that the effects of the current trends will be visited upon me directly, though I will be distressed about their effects on others. What is my role now? - - - I was active in the sixties and think it went well. I am proud of the effect our activism had on the course of civil rights if less so on the manner in which we wage war. What should I be doing in this time and what am I inclined to do? And how, if at all, should I think about KB with respect to these issues. I see them as issues of humanism, for an open and truly democratic society is what permits humanism and its principles to flourish. Believe me, I come to KB as much as anyone to find relief from my daily concerns and have an experience of spirituality. However, these days my capacity to leave issues of current events at the door is vastly diminished. Further, it feels appropriate to me, for that to be so, not because, as they say, it "could happen here," but because of my experience that it is happening here, and, if our financial crisis deepens, may do so even more. For those of you who are too young to understand that reference, perhaps you could speak with the older members of your families in the coming days, and think about the incremental ways in which civil liberties were abrogated in Weimar Germany. While I really don't believe the result will be another Third Reich I do believe it will be bad for us all.

So what should I, and what should our community, KB, dedicated to choice and the principles of humanism, be doing? We at KB often concern ourselves with issues of social justice, often in far away places like Darfur, or Sri Lanka, and of course Israel and Palestine. I agree, we should be concerned. But, what about right here? Is our house in order? And for me, should I simply continue my professional life, for a bit, do some research, write some papers, semi retire, take care,

as best I can of my husband and kids or kid's kids, do ceramics, write checks and sign petitions? And what as a community, should we do to preserve the society that has enabled us to flourish, that preserves our heritage and is inclusive of others? And, what is enough?

I don't know the answers to these questions. They are the ones I will be thinking about over these days of awe and beyond. I wish you well in reflecting upon what is important to you, but I know I would feel some relief if some of you felt that the things that are important to me, and that are frightening me, are important to you as well, and further that as we enter the New Year we will be working in various ways to keep us all safe.

L'shana Tova, Gut Yuntif