

YK day

This is the transcript of an actual radio conversation of a US naval ship with Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland in October, 1995.

Radio conversation released by the Chief of Naval Operations on November 10, 1995.

Americans: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the North to avoid a collision.

Canadians: Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision.

Americans: This is the Captain of a US Navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course.

Canadians: No. I say again, you divert YOUR course.

Americans: THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER USS LINCOLN, THE SECOND LARGEST SHIP IN THE UNITED STATES' ATLANTIC FLEET. WE ARE ACCOMPANIED BY THREE DESTROYERS, THREE CRUISERS, AND NUMEROUS SUPPORT VESSELS. I DEMAND

THAT YOU CHANGE YOUR COURSE 15 DEGREES NORTH, THAT'S ONE FIVE DEGREES NORTH, OR COUNTER-MEASURES WILL BE UNDERTAKEN TO ENSURE THE SAFETY OF THIS SHIP.

Canadians: This is a lighthouse. Your call

And that is our question once again today – the question of this entire Holy day period, shall we divert our course? Can we change our course?

We have been telling each other Shanah Tovah for more than a week already.

And yet we don't necessary recognize that the phrase is really a challenge – you see shanah can be understood two different ways and one way will lead us to a successful conclusion of this holy day period, will make this Yom Kippur experience meaningful while the other translation makes our whole 10 days of observance into an empty sham. Shanah can mean either repetition or change.

We can choose a year that just repeats the past along with all of its errors or we can choose year of good change which learns from rather than repeats the past.

As the Canadians at that lighthouse would say, we can change or not – it is our call

But that is, in fact the heart of Judaism: a challenge to go forward not to conserve but to risk, to grow, to strive, to adapt and to choose change rather than avoid it

That means that we are by definition a progressive religion. We chose to leave Egypt – to give up the safe life, the secure position of slavery, the guaranteed food – and although we complained plenty as Israelites in the desert about the good old days and the good food that we left behind in Egypt YET we kept going forward, we did not turn back to Egypt even when it looked like moving forward was too slow and growing as a people was so very hard. That is why our very Torah history makes us progressive. So no matter what positions you may hold in terms of voting, in this house, this house of God, we are all progressives. Not because of politics but because Judaism is based in the belief that that people can progress, change, can move forward and that progress is better than the good old days, than the way that it used to be, the food that we ate back in Egypt – no come to Sinai and take a risk on God

This progressive outlook is a part of our core document, our Torah, our commandments. This progressive outlook has made us the leaders in ethics and values which now have become universal goals.

We are the people who first believed and advocated for the right of every creature – rich or poor, high born or low born, to have a day off, a Shabbat, to not work incessantly but to care for the soul as well as for the body

We are the people who first believed that strangers had rights to fair treatment and could not be persecuted simply because they were not citizens. We gave the strangers rights which were protected by the legal code of Judaism, not the whim of a ruler.

We are the people whose tradition commands us to care for the earth as a gift from god that must be either returned to god in the same condition as we received it or account for the problems

We are the people who have said that saving a life is more important than any ritual, than any commandment which does not endanger another's life or soul

And let us return to that teaching by Rabbi Tarfon and look closely at its final sentence. He taught: the day is short, the task is great, the workers are lazy, the reward is enormous, and the Owner of the House is pressing.

So we are the progressives and this our World is filled with pain and trouble and needs us to change and God is pressing, impatient for us to take action, make that change.

Which leads us to a final question why are we waiting?

What are we waiting for?

We cannot wait for God – in this work God is dependent upon us. Listen to the very words that Rabbi Tarfon has chosen – the Owner of the House is pressing – God our creator does not take the House away nor banish us from the House. God our Creator is waiting for us to take up the challenge. As someone who believes that the relationship between God and humanity is interdependent, I understand this to mean that God cannot do this work – God can only impress upon us the urgency of the task. God has given us the gifts, the tools, and the power to take the steps that are necessary to progress in this world. But God, having given us power, is no longer in charge of this progress. God can go no further without our efforts. God can only be the Power of the Universe when we unite our power and energy and reenergize God. There will be no God unless we accept our role as those who actualize the Divine.

Now that is daring theology – God is dependent upon us – God is not in charge but rather we are in charge along with God. Certainly this approach looks at God in a way that is different from the picture of a powerful old man holding the book of life in one hand and a fancy quill pen in the other. But throughout Jewish tradition there has been the recognition that while we human beings would prefer to believe in an omnipotent God because it takes all the burdens and responsibilities off of us – in truth an honest view of God presents us with more limited theism, a God engaged with us and not in control of us, a God that cannot be all powerful. In fact, in the middle ages, our mystic, Yehudah Ha-Levi wrote about this different way of seeing the human divine relationship and its inter-dependence. In one of HaLevi's best known poems, he asks a question of God that speaks for all of us across the ages. He wrote, God, Where shall I find you? And he answered that question as well – I look for you and you are coming to meet me. HaLevi wants us to understand that God can only move towards us when we move towards God. God wants us to join in relationship and God needs us in that relationship as much we need God. It takes our efforts, our commitment, our actions to ensure that good endures, that God endures.

Take a look at our world. Does it seem like a place where God is present? In so many ways, it feels as though our actions have shut God out. There is no room

for the holy while rancor exists between individuals and violence is a daily presence in our lives. There is no room for the holy when we treat the earth as though it was a renewable commodity. There is no room for the holy while children starve, others die of treatable illnesses, and people place their desire for power above the desire for peace. I know that most of us do expect to claim victory over the global issues and I know that many of our smaller problems are very complicated as well. But unless we are living in such a way that God, the Holy, a feeling of love and optimism – that these are part of our daily actions and our way of thinking – then we are contributing to the absence of God.

Our faith calls us to be devoted listeners – as in the Sh'ma prayer and the shofar whose voice we will hear again soon. We must be devoted listeners in order to hear God in our lives – God in whatever terms you name, whatever understanding that you place within that word – but again, it is our job to pursue our life's journeys so that God can find us and we can find God. The small steps are as valuable as the large. We do not know that one small action might change the world for another person.

So I challenge us all, dear friends, stop waiting for God – God is waiting for you, for all of us. We will know that we have stopped waiting when we have names

filling every slot on those volunteer lists outside our main doors. We will know that we have moved towards God when we have filled up 50 barrels of food easily and we need more barrels. We will be able to feel that we have taken steps towards our role as God's partners when the night shelter doesn't need to beg for help and our social justice committee is the most active committee in the synagogue. We have done well as individuals, even in some ways as a congregation but we have not done well enough. We can hear the cries of pain throughout the world and those cries should tear at our hearts and command us to do more.

There is a wonderful Jewish teaching which states that one should never say that when I have time then I will study because you may never have time. I would suggest that we apply that same saying to our acts of social justice in this world: do not say when I have time then I will act because we may never have time.

There is never enough time, never enough money, never enough energy. We all know that. But God is waiting on us and perhaps, God will grow weary of this process. Perhaps God will not want to see if we will finally get up and walk towards the holy, walk in partnership with God. Perhaps God will look at where we are, so far away from the Divine in whose image we have been fashioned, perhaps God will search for us and not be able to find us amid the chaos and the

pain and the ugliness. Perhaps God will say, “let’s try again” but not mean to include us in that next try.

Let us take seriously Rabbi Tarfon’s warning – the Owner of the House is pressing, impatient, finding it so hard to believe that we are not aware enough to do more.

Let us feel afraid for all that we have not yet done and all of the work that has been set aside. Let us feel ashamed that we have not felt God’s impatience before. Let us feel that same sense of impatience with ourselves. We have been given everything – a Torah filled with wisdom, sages who have shared from their insights, a world abounding in resources, the gifts of compassion, intelligence, creativity. Yet with everything in our hands, we have not taken the steps towards the world that we are meant to create with God.

And so I end with the question of the day, of the year, of our lives:

Why are we waiting?

Please God, keep waiting for us.