

YOM KIPPUR AM 5776/2015

Attitude

This morning's Torah reading comes from the portion called Atem Nitzavim. *You stand here this day, all of you from the heads of your tribes to the ones who chop your wood and draw your water, to enter into a covenant with YHWH.*

This afternoon we will read from Atem Kedoshim. *You shall be holy because I, YHWH, am holy...Revere your parents, keep the Sabbath, leave food for the poor and the stranger, don't steal, don't lie...love the stranger as you would yourself.*

After the soul searching work of Rosh Hashanah and the days of awe since, today is Yom Kippur. Today self-reflection gives way to action. Today is the first day of the rest of our lives.

First the Torah calls us this morning to step up, to stand prepared to accept a covenant, to live with intention and purpose.

This afternoon, the Torah will remind us that holiness, our special status if we heed the call to live with intention and purpose, ultimately manifests itself in kindness: personally and collectively.

Reflection gives way to action.
Yom Kippur is about manifesting.

Values and principles are only as good as the actions that result from them.

As Jews who gather in a synagogue, I believe we share a commitment to infusing our lives with intention and purpose.

I am taking the liberty this morning of addressing three difficult recurring headlines of the past year with which I think mindful Jews should be wrestling and taking action.

First headline:
#blacklivesmatter

Honestly I am not committed to the official movement called Black Lives Matter. I commend their success in bringing forth the question that witnessing the first African American presidency didn't adequately generate: What are we doing to disintegrate the abundantly obvious vestiges of racism still present in our systems of governance and public discourse?

The problem with #blacklivesmatter is that it oversimplified complex statistics about disproportionate police brutality in African American communities without calling attention to disproportionate police support and service in those same communities. #blacklivesmatter also failed to embrace and collaborate with principled and concerned leaders among our nation's police forces. Police are not the enemy.

There is an enemy. Our laziness as a society, resting on the laurels of civil rights successes that are decades old. Changing laws is only the beginning.

How do we transform society? We, Jews, know what it is to get stuck in a history of persecution and victimization. Shared baggage is difficult to shed.

A Jewish blogger from Tulsa, Oklahoma, posted last year:

I've been feeling, lately, at war with myself. As a Jew, I say that I was a slave in Egypt. I live in the shadow of Auschwitz, only generations from the mechanized slaughterhouse of Nazi Europe.

But I'm also a white American. I have privilege my ancestors could never have dreamed of.

Sure, I often feel different and sometimes uncomfortable in our mostly Christian country.

Still I know that if I'm gunned down in the street, justice will be served. I'll never have to worry, as I enter my home, that the color of my skin will be probable cause to arrest me for breaking and entering, and the police will never stop me because it's threatening when I walk with my hands in my pockets.

The NAACP reports:

- Together, African American and Hispanics comprised 58% of all prisoners in 2008, even though they make up approximately one quarter of the US population
- One in six black men had been incarcerated as of 2001. If current trends continue, one in three black males born today can expect to spend time in prison.

Rabbi Eliezer of Pirkei Avot (2:10) says:

Let your neighbor's dignity be precious to you as your own.

We live in Central Oregon. It's not easy to talk about race and racism when you live among a predominately white and relatively welcoming population.

Last year I learned that among Bend's population of approximately 80,000, we have over 6,000 neighbors who identified as Latino and/or Spanish speaking in the last census.

And, at Back to School night last week at Summit High School, I am certain I eyed a woman with *hejab*, Muslim head covering.

The National Council of Jewish Women teach the Jewish ethic from Pirkei Avot (2:5), *Al Tifrosh Min Hatsibur - Don't separate yourself from the community*, in this manner:

When you feel different from others in your community, don't isolate yourself. Find allies and supporters who you can talk to. If you know someone who is feeling isolated, reach out; be an ally and a friend.

That's how we transform society.

Second headline: The New Warfare and Refugees

My grandparents knew World War II. My parents knew Korea and Vietnam. I remember our hostages in Iran. I remember secret wars: Chile and Nicaragua. I remember the drug war. And now, we are fourteen years into the war on terrorism.

War is totally different than my parents and grandparents remember. More precise targets and drones require fewer soldiers with higher skill sets. The war effort does not require that we all pitch in...or even sustain our attention.

Wars are happening and our lives don't skip a beat. We sip pumpkin lattes and wonder where we'll vacation next without batting an eyelash.

Until this summer. Weeks ago when a young man washed ashore in Turkey, having drowned trying to escape Syria, viral posts of the horrific image all over social media caught our attention.

How about the Hungarian journalist who tripped a refugee running from authorities? Again caught on video, a jaw dropping image grabbed our attention.

New barbed wire fences closing European borders, new quotas on refugees...old memories.

The Chief Rabbi in Great Britain spoke recently with Jewish community leaders and British government officials:

Our heritage must inform the way that we respond. This is a deep and tragic humanitarian emergency.

A Conservative rabbi in the same meeting was also quoted:

We see with horror the pictures of the drowned, the hungry and the exhausted, and remember that only a generation ago our parents were refugees, desperate for somewhere to let them in and allow them to live.

The United Kingdom will admit 20,000 refugees this year. And the Jewish community will step forward and help.

In the past week Hungarian Jews have collected about \$5,000 and half a ton of food and nonperishables for refugees. There are currently between 100 and 150 Hungarian Jews involved in the relief effort.

An NGO in Israel, IsraAID, has been actively responding to the needs of Syrian refugees and their host countries for over two years, focusing on Jordan, Iraq, and Bulgaria. Their attention is now turning to other affected countries, primarily Greece and Italy, providing relief items, backpacks filled with hygiene kits and various winter clothes.

IsraAID also facilitates training for government and non-government professionals on the

frontlines of the crisis, providing them with the tools for supporting and caring for a population that has gone through extreme suffering and trauma.

In the United States, the historic Hebrew Immigration and Support agency that settled many of our grandparents and great grandparents in the early 1900's has advocated our government to take in 100,000 thousand Syrian refugees over the next year.

If witnessing the suffering, devastation, and violence of whatever reformation is taking place in the Islamic world doesn't stir compassion in us for the victims, there is something very wrong with our humanity.

Third headline:

The Iran Nuclear Arms Deal and what it says once again about our relationship with Israel

Two weeks ago, the Jewish Journal in Los Angeles released the following survey results:
48 percent of Jews support the Iran arms deal
28 percent oppose it, and
25 percent hadn't heard enough to form an opinion.

Jewish support for the deal was 20 percentage points higher than for Americans overall.

American Jews prefer even tenuous opportunities for diplomacy over war. This, despite the fact that Prime Minister of Israel, Binyamin Netanyahu, has vociferously opposed the deal and clearly identified himself in relationship with the most conservative elements of the Republican party.

Once again, American Jews are at odds with Israel. Or, are we?

I hope many of us read Thomas Friedman's op-ed piece in the New York Times on the deal from Israel's perspective.

If I were an Israeli grocer, just following this deal on the radio, I'd hate it for enshrining Iran's right to enrich uranium, since Iran regularly cheated its way to expanding that capability even though it had signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Iran held "death to Israel" marches and in 2006 sponsored a conference to promote denial of the Holocaust. Iran's proxy, the Lebanese Shiite militia, Hezbollah, in 2006, started an unprovoked war with Israel, and when Israel retaliated, Hezbollah fired thousands of Iranian supplied rockets all across Israel.

No matter the safeguards – I as an Israeli grocer would reject this deal from my gut.

If I were an Israeli general, I'd share my grocer's skepticism, but end up somewhere else (as many Israeli military officers have).

I'd start by recalling what the Israeli statesman Abba Eban used to say when Israeli hawks would argue against taking risks for peace with the Palestinians, that Israel is not a disarmed Costa Rica.

Israel not only possess some 100-200 nuclear weapons, it also can deliver them to Iran by plane, submarine and long range rocket.

There are many reasonable positions to take regarding the Iran Nuclear Arms Deal. In the end, we all work together to mitigate damage and reap rewards.

What bothers me is that both the current government in Israel and the leadership of American Jewish organizations still intentionally exploit fear and victimization to influence our political action and support.

Yes, we live in volatile, violent times.

Yes, antisemitism still exists.

Yes, Israel has many enemies.

While the haters gotta hate (a Talmudic idiom, for sure) the truth is that Jews are doing well in America, in South America, in Cuba, even in Europe. We are integrated into society. We have amassed wealth and influence beyond our numbers. Israel is strong: militarily, economically, technologically, and intellectually.

Vigilance is reasonable. Paranoia is neither reasonable nor healthy. The values we preach are worth lifting ourselves to act in pursuit of justice and peace.

We live in good times. We have the luxury of cultivating principled lives. We should not allow ourselves to be moved by reactionary demagoguery, exploitation of fear and guilt.

In describing how people coped in the concentration camps of the Holocaust, Victor Frankl articulates a paradigm shift that is essential not only in times of crisis, but in our maturation from childhood into adulthood:

What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life.

We, ourselves, had to learn and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men in the concentration camp that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us.

We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly.

This is the task of Yom Kippur. This is the task of adulthood.

The question is not what does life owe me? The question is what can I do with the life I have? Daily and hourly? Cumulatively? The years add up if we're so lucky.

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Atem Kedoshim. You shall be holy because I, YHWH, am holy...Revere your parents, keep the Sabbath, leave food for the poor and the stranger, don't steal, don't lie...love the stranger as you would yourself.

On Yom Kippur self-reflection gives way to action. Today is the first day of the rest of our lives.

There is so much to do...

I wish each and every one of us a Shanah Tovah, a year filled with health and prosperity, companionship and purpose.

I offer this blessing from the Talmud:

May we live to see our world fulfilled. May our destiny be for worlds still to come; and may we trust in generations past and yet to be.

May our hearts be filled with intuition and our words be filled with insight. May songs of praise ever be on our tongues and our vision be on a straight path.

May our eyes shine with the light of holy words and our faces reflect the brightness of the heavens. May our lips ever speak wisdom and our fulfillment be in righteousness. Berachot 17a