

Erev Rosh Hashanah. Here we are. One year ends as yet another begins. Did the past year fly by? Or was it a struggle, hour-to-hour and day-to-day? What is different this Rosh Hashanah from last Rosh Hashanah? Who are we missing dearly? Who is new in our lives? What haven't we done in ages? What are we doing that we never imagined we would?

This time of year for us, Jews, is a time for reflection. A time for noticing how we've changed during the course of the past 12 months...or perhaps how we haven't changed. What are the joys we experience? What pains us? How do we love others and ourselves well? Where do we continue to miss the mark?

What draws us here to synagogue to contemplate such matters? Habit — that's what we Jews do? Guilt — A desire to please a parent or grandparent, alive or passed on? Magic — A secret hope that maybe this year something will shift if we just start it right...whatever "right" means?

How about exploration of our Jewish identity or connection with it, even when we aren't fully sure what that means?

What does it mean, after all, to be Jewish in the world today? What does it mean to integrate our Jewish-ness into the lives we carefully curate for ourselves?

Think about where we choose to live. Central Oregon attracts seekers of a certain quality of life, right? Small town but big enough to avoid having to go to the other side of town. Not too fancy, but fancy enough, with amenities big city and suburban folk enjoy: Good food and drink, stunning views, a sense of adventure, the convenience of a local COSTCO and Trader Joe's.

Look around. We all came to Central Oregon from somewhere else for the beauty and the ease of life here. Like Abraham and Sarah, we left our places of origin, perhaps we visited here and there before settling in Bend and Redmond and Sisters, Sunriver, Powell Butte, and even rural Prineville.

I won't lie. I have thought before I had arrived in a place I would stay forever. Alaska and New Zealand. But, I didn't stay. It turned out *this* is the place and space and community in which I want to settle down. I like the landscape. I like the people. I like you. I feel like there is something meaningful to cultivate here, and to tend.

At the same time I am forever humbled by a memory that challenges the arrogance, perhaps even imperialist, quality of choosing where to live by curating a set of standards around my and my husband's lifestyle preferences.

Some sixteen years ago I was invited to speak at the Alaska Federation of Natives annual conference in Anchorage. I was asked to join a panel discussing meaningful rites of passage for young men that matched the manner in which they live today, no longer engaged in tribal warfare.

On the panel were Maori men from New Zealand who were shirtless and performed a haka, which if you watch international rugby you know is rather intimidating with its chest beating and facial expressions. There was a native Alaskan chief from the interior of Alaska. And me. I went last.

When the Maori men spoke they introduced themselves as Maori living in New Zealand for generations. They knew the names of the wakas, the boats their ancestors travelled in from other Pacific Islands and how long they had been in those other islands. The Native Alaskan chief in turn introduced himself. Again, he mentioned his ancestors and how many generations before him lived off the very same land he did. And that he had been sober for more than thirty years.

My turn. I was suddenly and unexpectedly acutely aware of the fact that I had no connection to any piece of land on which my ancestors lived. Completely forgetting my notes, I introduced myself beginning with my people, the Jewish people who became a people not when Abraham stayed where those before him lived. But rather, my people came into being when Abraham and Sarah and their small cohort left the land of their birth and parents, to go somewhere else. Somewhere unnamed. Only that Abraham would know once he arrived.

I continued. My father's people came to North America in the late 1600 and early 1700's. I imagine they looked right past local indigenous people and saw vacant land they liked and got cheap as long as they did something with it.

And then I took one step further. I, personally, came to Alaska for adventure and seemingly unending wilderness. Because I wanted to. I thought it would be fun.

I pulled it together and gave a compelling talk about what I, a landless person, and this constellation of indigenous persons had in common. All of us, as community leaders, felt a need to adapt to modernity, its blessings and curses, and at the same time keep our rich cultural heritage and wisdom relevant to the people we serve.

Still, the memory of perceiving myself, my story, so differently than I ever had before lingers in the recesses of my mind. Who am I to decide I can have whatever life I want? I felt arrogant. I felt exposed. I saw myself as a continuation of white imperialism. A colonizing force.

Now I know about “white privilege.” I get it. I totally get it. But even ten years ago, the concept was not articulated in the white, liberal circles I travelled.

Fortunately, I noticed none of the people around me at that conference seemed to be offended by me. In their eyes, I was an elder from another nation with some interesting ideas to share. Some wisdom and experience that might be helpful to them in their efforts to keep their ritual practices relevant in their communities.

Still, I knew something in my perception about myself in contrast to my hosts shifted. Today I understand that paradigm shift better. Today we have an idiom for it: White privilege.

We, Jews (Ashkenazi and light-skinned Sephardic Jews) have it. Mizrachi (Jews from Arab lands: Iraq, Morocco, Yemen) Indian Jews, Ethiopian Jews don't have it. Pay attention to Israeli media. Black Lives Matter is there among the Mizrachi and especially Ethiopian Jewish population.

How do I know we have it in our congregation? Because we are here, newcomers to Central Oregon, to Bend, because we like the way of life here and we can afford to pick up and move here. This is white privilege. Paying attention to it, acknowledging it, reflecting on it, owning it with some humility, brings about internal shifts that I believe are positive. Positive for us and for society.

This summer I listened to an academic from Harvard University speaking about reasons for discussing some form of reparations for African Americans descended from the legacy of slavery. I was most moved by the professor's invitation to consider African American history on a timeline. The first slaves were brought to the colonies in 1619, 400 years ago. Slavery was abolished in the United States in 1865. 154 years ago. Civil rights were guaranteed in 1964. 55 years ago.

Agree or disagree with affirmative action or reparations, this historic perspective has to shift our understanding of the experience of African Americans.

Consider our own stories of coming to the United States. My great grandparents on my mother's side and my 8th and 9th great grandparents on my father's side came to this country seeking opportunities to build better lives. I inherited between 100 and 300 years of an American experience of hope and upward mobility. I am truly privileged.

But wait a minute, Rabbi. We are Jews. Do we really fit into the experiences of white privilege when our history is replete with persecution and antisemitism? What a great question. Thank you for asking.

I think the concept of white privilege both fits us, as American Jews, and doesn't fit us. Those far to the left of the socio-political spectrum see us as white and privileged. We have done very well in the United States. Our success and power as an identifiable cultural group is disproportionate to our numbers in the population. Those far to the right of the socio-political spectrum see us as white, but not quite white enough. We are not Christians. Israel gives us dual loyalty.

Democratic congresswomen Tlaib and Omar question American economic and military support in Israel, asking whether or not our disproportionate influence in politics hides human rights violations in the Occupied Territories. Our president told us this summer that if we don't vote in favor of his way of supporting Israel we are disloyal. Disloyal to Israel. Disloyal to our people. Both points of view, both criticisms diminish us into a monolithic collective, for or against Israel.

Is that who we are as a people? For or against Israel? I feel insulted and objectified by this rhetoric. While as a Jew, I have an attachment to Israel, my connection is far more complicated than for or against. For or against what? The mythology of the Promised Land? Hardly. Still, I am attached to a national or ethnic identity that includes religion as well as a history and language, literature and music, ethics and a prophetic pursuit of a better world.

Concerned about the divisive quality of our public discourse and our democracy, I have been re-reading Cornell West's 2004 book, Democracy Matters. In addition to pointing out the nihilism that has infused our politics and social discourse, West dedicates an entire chapter to the Jewish prophetic voice of the Bible and important Jewish leaders including Abraham Joshua Herschel as forces of vibrant democratic energy.

"...the Jewish invention of the prophetic...not only put justice at the center of what it means to be chosen as a Jewish people but also made compassion to human suffering and kindness to the stranger the fundamental features of the most noble human calling...the distinctive Jewish refusal to allow raw power to silence justice or might to trump right."

This is the mission that keeps me Jewish today. Compassion to human suffering. Kindness to the stranger. Learning, justice, and decency over power and might. Clearly one does not have to be Jewish to value compassion and kindness, learning, justice and decency.

The prophetic call to engage in the world in this manner was and is a call to elevate our engagement with our heritage from blind faith and obedience to principled self-betterment and betterment of society at large. It is not that we follow mitzvot, commandments, but that our

adherence to practice reminds us daily of our values and ethics. It is not that we support Israel or don't support Israel, but that we foster in Israel the Jewish values and ethics we hold dear: safety and democracy, security and human dignity.

Michael Lerner, editor of Tikkun Magazine, writes:

“Jews did not return to their ancient homeland to oppress the Palestinian people, and Palestinians did not resist the creation of a Jewish state out of hatred of the Jews...each side has at times told the story to make it seem as if the other side was consistently doing bad things for bad reasons. In fact, both sides have made and continue to make terrible mistakes...As long as each side clings to its own story, and is unable to acknowledge what is plausible in the story of the other side, peace will remain a distant hope.”

Lerner continues: “Those of us who truly believe in the validity of the state of Israel and truly believe in the decency of the vast majority of the Palestinian people...are systematically excluded when the media represents the sides of the conflict.”

This final statement is in my opinion not only true for discourse about Israel, it describes the state of public discourse in our country in recent years. The overwhelming majority of us are neither radically leftist Democrats nor Trumpian Republicans. Our democracy is a sum much greater than an anti-Israel radical left and a white supremacist alt-right.

Irshad Manji, an independently thinking feminist, Muslim academic wrote a book this past year entitled, Don't Label Me. In it she tells her own story as a left-leaning, devout Muslim, lesbian academic and activist. She tells her story through her relationship with her pet dog. Muslims are not supposed to like dogs. Their folklore and stories associate dogs with demonic energies and filth. Manji, herself, writes that she never saw herself in a deep relationship with a dog. And yet, she finds herself not only caring for a pet dog, but deeply moved and changed by the experience. This simple endearing contradiction that Muslims and dogs don't get along leads in her writing to the apparent contradictions of being lesbian and feminist and Muslim, and being left leaning and Muslim.

Manji's conclusion is that she is not any one, single identity. Rather she is a complex constellation of multiple labels. For short, she calls herself a “multiple.” She calls us, her readers, to take notice of our multiple identities. She invites us to engage moral courage to be “multiples” with her. Moral courage to attend to our multiple identities in our personal reflection and public discourse.

We, each and every one of us, is here, in Shul on Rosh Hashanah, because we are Jews or married to Jews or simply find satisfaction living among Jews. We are drawn to be amongst our people, to connect with Jews in Shuls all over the world on this day, and to recalibrate our way of being in the world according to the values and ritual practices of Rosh Hashanah: expressing gratitude for life's sweetness, drawing strength for life's challenges, embracing one another in relationship, experiencing the embrace of our small town, Central Oregon, Jewish community.

Black, brown, white; straight, gay and bi; cisgender and transgender; rich and poor and possessing just enough, liberal and conservative; Jewish born, convert, and ger toshav (resident alien); married, divorced, widowed, and single by choice; with children and without children; young family and empty nester and aging and saging; Democrat and Republican and Independent and centrist; dog owner and gardener and folks who like neither dogs nor dirt... We are all members and friends of Temple Beth Tikvah. And we are here to welcome in another new year.

In addition to re-reading Cornell West and Irshad Manji, I have also returned to a 1993 work by Amitai Etzioni, The Spirit of Community: The Reinvention of American Society. In it Etzioni writes: "American men, women and children are members of many communities—families; neighborhoods; innumerable social, religious, ethnic, workplace, and professional associations; and the body politic itself. Neither human existence nor individual liberty can be sustained for long outside the interdependent and overlapping communities to which all of us belong. Nor can any community long survive unless its members dedicate some of their attention, energy, and resources to shared projects."

We are tired of politics, exhausted by rhetoric. One voice tells us to withdraw, to avoid conflict, because the world feels so full of it. Another voice suggests our withdrawal and avoidance only exacerbate our feelings of impotence and despair. What is happening to our country? What is happening to our democracy?

These questions bring me back to the beginning of my remarks this evening. Our privilege, whether it is white privilege or simply the privilege of having resources and means is not balanced by a personal sense of responsibility to community institutions that encourage the values we share. We are so involved with building the best life possible for ourselves we are forgetting that "no man is an island."

Etzioni writes that when we fail to share our creativity and labor with partners in shared projects – like Temple Beth Tikvah, neighborhood schools, the Assistance League, Back Door Café, Family Kitchen, local and national government – we “erode the network of social environments on which we all depend.” That “network of social environments” can no longer support either our individual liberty or protections.

“The preservation of individual liberty depends on the active maintenance of the institutions of civil society where citizens learn respect for others as well as self-respect; where we acquire a lively sense of our personal and civic responsibilities, along with an appreciation of our own rights and the rights of others; where we develop the skills of...governing ourselves and learn to serve others, not just the self.”

I believe Temple Beth Tikvah can be a social institution in which we practice the art and skill of governing ourselves and learning to serve others. I believe that as a congregation, our whole is greater than the sum of our parts: Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative, for or against any particular legislative goal.

The challenge before us is to manifest our pleasantries and good wishes in our engagement with one another and with our congregation. Etzioni argues: “America’s diverse communities of memory and mutual aid are rich resources of moral voices—voices that ought to be heeded in a society that increasingly threatens to become normless, self-centered, and driven by greed, special interests, and an unabashed quest for power...” (In 1993...and how all the more so today.)

“...Originating in communities, and sometimes embodied in laws, *moral voices* exhort, admonish, and appeal to what Lincoln called ‘the better angels of our nature.’ They speak to our capacity for reasoned judgement and virtuous action.”

It is my hope that throughout this Jewish New Year: we will make the effort to inquire of one another; listen to one another; and pledge to one another our commitment to building our congregation into a social institution that does not simply satisfy our need for a brief Jewish fix, but rather pushes us to lean into better versions of ourselves.

Through learning and reflection, we can further cultivate inner resources we already have: self-awareness, caring for others, determination, and long-term commitment. Sustainable change, whether in our congregation or in our country, requires effort from us all. Moral courage in speaking our truth and moral courage in listening to the experiences and conclusions drawn by others with whom we share time and space.

Our shared goals are most simply: integrating Jewish wisdom and practice into the fullness of our lived experience and cultivating a community that can both support us through difficult challenges and celebrate simchas (joyous occasions) with us.

Loving each other requires breathing through moments of discomfort and sometimes deferring our personal preferences to the benefit of the greater whole. Loving each other is about identifying and practicing shared values together.

Alaynu l'shabayach la'adon hakol...It is on us to give praise and honor our values and one another. It is on us to grow our understanding and capacity to grow smarter and kinder.