

**Back to the Past, Forward to the Future**  
**Rabbi Peter Knobel**  
**Rosh HaShanah 5776**

Elaine and I want to wish all of you a healthy and sweet New Year. May it be a year of healing for our nation and for a world that is so desperately in need of healing! I want thank Rabbi London for giving me the privilege of delivering this D'var Torah. Her ongoing kindness and support mean a great deal to Elaine and me. We admire her bold leadership on a host of very important issues.

Rosh HaShanah, as we all know, is *Yom HaDin*, Judgment Day. The judicial metaphors abound with God being the ultimate judge and we being the ones on trial. I often feel like the accused in the following story:

After a trial had been going on for three days, Finley, the man accused of committing the crimes, stood up and approached the judge's bench. "Your Honor, I would like to change my plea from 'innocent' to 'guilty' of the charges."

The judge angrily banged his fist on the desk. "If you're guilty, why didn't you say so in the first place and save this court a lot of time and inconvenience?" he demanded.

Finley looked up wide-eyed and stated, "Well, when the trial started I thought I was innocent, but that was before I heard all the evidence against me."

I am personally guilty of nostalgia. I look backward to the simpler glorious days when everything seemed right with world. Nostalgia can be dangerous. It can make you believe that there really were the good old days. There were no social media, only newspapers and televisions. There was racial harmony in our country like during voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama and there was unanimity in our foreign policy on the Vietnam War

like the Democratic Convention in Chicago. Nostalgia can be dangerous because it can trick us into believing that there was a time when we all believed the words of Emma Lazarus:

“Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

It can make us believe that when Rabbi Polish joined Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma that the congregation was united behind his attendance. It can make us forget that the bitterness over the Iran deal is no more divisive than battles over Zionism. It can make us believe that when Reform Rabbis with stentorian voices thundered the words of the prophet Amos “But let justice well up like water, Righteousness like an unfailing stream (5:24), that the congregation rose up and in one loud and unified voice sang “We shall overcome.” It can make us believe that when some Reform Rabbis burned their draft cards withheld their excise tax and counseled young men on selective conscientious objection during the Vietnam War that congregants were enthusiastic about the outspoken nature of their religious leadership. It can make us believe that all our rabbis were courageous prophets willing to risk their livelihoods or that all of our congregants were committed liberals willing to go to barricades for the causes which our rabbis proclaimed were the *mitzvot* God wanted us to perform. It can deceive us into believing if we only had a president like Lincoln, or an Israeli prime minister like Ben Gurion or Gold Meir or if we only had a charismatic leader like Martin Luther King Jr. everything would be better.

Realism is important. There were no good old days. Each time and each age has its challenges and its bitter disputes but we cannot allow realism to lead to depression, recrimination and paralysis. The magnitude of the problems and depths of the conflicts can depress and frighten us so that we believe ourselves helpless, or that all we can do is simply rage at the dying of light. No! We must commit to nurturing the few dying embers until they ignite the light of justice and compassion so the flame of peace burns brightly once again.

While nostalgia can give us an overly rosy picture of the past, it can also be an inspiration for the present and catalyst to revive a spirit which to some measure once existed. Nostalgia can

be aspirational. It tells us that looking back we can recover the spirit that our ideals could become real, that we could change the world that optimism must triumph over pessimism. It takes us back to what some of us remember or conceive as a heroic age. The post-World War II era was a time of dynamic rebuilding and change. The sixties and the seventies were times when dynamic causes gripped our imagination. They were the times when the Reform movement had the dynamism of a movement seeking to catapult us into era of social justice. As anti-Semitism diminished, American Jews became more confident, Israel shone as beacon of hope and survival and cracks appeared in the Soviet empire as Soviet prisoners of conscience emerged from gulags and from desperation to new homes in the United States and Israel. It was a time when we seemed more focused on *tikkun olam* (perfecting the world) than *tikkun hanefesh* (perfecting ourselves). Today the Reform movement is less of a movement and more of a series of institutions seeking to survive in a changed world. This does not mean that it is not important but merely that it is in a moment of transition—it is a time of not yet. Therefore, at this moment the individual synagogue and individual rabbi have become even more important as at the grassroots level. They engage Jews affiliated and unaffiliated about the Jewish future and our role in the wider world. They seek to heal troubled souls, offer a life of meaning and heal a broken world. I need not tell you about the challenges of maintaining vibrant and viable communities. You know that better than I. I am proud of our Rabbi and her leadership on so many issues. I am proud of our voluntary leadership who not only support her, but also explore the perplexing questions of how to reinvent Beth Emet by building on its great history but not resting on its laurels.

I am deeply worried about the vitriol that has in large measure characterized the current debate about the Iran deal and about the politics of disrespect which seems to dominate the news. I believe good people can differ sincerely and passionately but without rancor and personal animosity. My fervent hope had been that the conversation would be handled with respect and understanding that our passionately held positions were motivated by a deep common concern for the safety of the world and our existential worry about what a nuclear Iran would mean for our security, the security of Israel and the security of the whole Middle East. But the rhetoric on both sides has often impugned the motives, intelligence and integrity of those who took the opposite position. We asked. Who was really pro-Israel? Were we guilty of dual loyalty? Were

we leading Israel to the doors of the oven? Were we war mongers? Was our president an anti-Semite ? Were we appeasers? Were we self-hating Jews?

I, like Rabbi London, believe we should support the deal because it is the best hope for preventing Iran from getting nuclear weapons. Now is not the time for me to defend this position. I simply want remind us about the ideal Jewish way of conducting difficult conversations by turning texts I quoted last year.

We must become like the disciples of Hillel who remained respectful in their controversies with the disciples of Shammai. We read in Talmud (Eruvin 13b):

R. Abba stated in the name of Samuel: For three years the House of Shammai and that of Hillel disputed one another, the former claiming, ‘halakha (the law) is in agreement with our views’ and the latter contending, ‘halakha (the law) is in agreement with our views’. Then a heavenly voice issued forth announcing: ‘These and these are the words of the living God, yet halakha (the law) is in accord with the House of Hillel’.

Talmud now asks, “Why is the Halacha according to the house of Hillel?”

It answers:

Because they were easygoing and humble, and would not only consider the rulings of the House of Shammai together with their own, but would give precedence to those of the Shammaites in relation their own

The Jerusalem Talmud offers an even more profound response

R, Yudah b. Pazi asked, Why does halakha follow the House of Hillel?: because they would not only give precedence to the rulings of the Shammaites in relation to their own, but would [often] see the Shammaites’ point, and retract their own position. (*Yerushalmi, Sukkah*, 53b).

The time has come for us listen to each other more. We need both JStreet and AIPAC. The time has come to follow the advice of Pirkei Avot. “Be deliberate in judgment and may another’s honor be as dear to you as your own.” Before we condemn let us try to walk in the others’ shoes so that we may understand each other better. Perhaps we can comprehend the fear that motivates them and perhaps we can feel their pain. If we can feel each other’s pain, than we can learn to love our neighbors as ourselves and treat the stranger like the home born.

The Talmud teaches us the Second Temple was destroyed by the sin of *sinat hinam* baseless hatred. I am deeply concerned now about how we heal the ruptured and fractured relationships in Jewish community. I worried about the divide between Netanyahu and Obama administrations and the political battles which demonstrate the deep divide and mistrust in this country. I learned from David Zarefsky that many of current political battles in the U.S. often stem from unresolved conflicts going back to the Revolutionary and Civil Wars and that the nastiness of the current political campaigns have precedents in the past but that makes them no less worrisome. The pace of social and economic change has created fear and consternation for those who have seen their conception of right and wrong and their place in society crumble before their very eyes.

I believe in vigorous debate for our problems are complex and do not have simple or simplistic solutions. I believe that compromise is not a dirty word and that progress is often made a step at a time and not in one fell swoop. I believe our politicians are sent to Washington and to Springfield to make this country better even at the cost of their own careers.

Immigration is not a new issue. Xenophobia is a primal American sin. We have a history of trying to exclude the “undesirables” including your and my ancestors. The concept of herding people into boxcars is appalling. The demonization of other people is, I believe, a result of our own insecurities and our discomfort with difference. The changing American landscape brings into dark relief that simple dichotomies have now become blurred complex landscapes where race and gender have become the focal point of deeply hurtful political rhetoric. When the Supreme Court protects the minority and politicians proclaim that it is an assault on religious liberty, I worry. Sometimes the line between religious liberty and religious bigotry is hard to determine. *Brown vs. the Board of Education* was resisted by quoting the Bible.

In the midst of the ugly immigration debate we might ask “What is the role of the United States in current refugee crises?” I am pleased that President has announced that we will admit 10,000 refugees but is that adequate? If you want to donate to organizations which are helping refugees go to the website of the Religious Acton Center [www.rac.org](http://www.rac.org) and you will find links to them. But we still must ask: “What is the role of synagogue? Should synagogues adopt refugee families as we did with the boat people? What is role of Israel? A country formed in response to our own homeless, should it now shelter the homeless coming from its neighbors and its enemies?” Language is important. A “refugee” deserves shelter. What about a migrant, an alien, an illegal? Are we not all created in the image of God? How do we debate the ethics of welcoming the stranger with the genuine concerns of people about a good immigration policy? I still believe in the words of Emma Lazarus I quoted at the beginning.

There is much fear mongering today whether in domestic or foreign policy. Gun violence is rampant and I am pleased that Beth Emet is a gun free zone. Although I did not notice metal detectors nor did I see a place where those who were carrying guns could deposit them during the service. I am not trying to make light of people’s concerns. I was proud when I first came to Beth Emet that we were leaders in Evanston in banning handguns. Court decisions have undone what I believe was very positive. I am not enough of a lawyer to argue about what the second amendment really means but I do believe that sane gun legislation is necessary and possible. The debate needs to be reframed because too many are dying on the streets of our cities, in our movie theaters our schools and colleges and in our homes because of ready availability of legal and illegal guns, our failure to have universal background checks and provide better services to the mentally ill. The armed hate groups in this country also represent a threat. No hunter that I know wants an assault rifle or armor piercing bullets to hunt deer. I do not feel safer if I know you are carrying either concealed or openly a handgun. What is our fascination with guns? Should we not be a nation which wants to beat swords into ploughshares? Or as Yehuda Amichai suggested let’s beat the ploughshares into musical instruments so that those who want to make swords will have to first beat the musical instruments first into ploughshares.

It is clear that we do not live in a post racial America. The numerous instances where racism seems to have played a role in death of young African American males at the hands of police have given birth to Black Lives Matter. We are now alert one of important aspect of

American racism. We must be sure that policing is fair and unbiased and that we are all treated with the same kind of respect. However, the demonization of the police is also dangerous. Police officers keep us safe and they do so much good. They put their lives at risk for us every day. Their lives matter as well and the assassination of police officers put us all in danger. The quest for racial justice and racial harmony needs to be revived. We must find new ways of relating to one another and supporting one another. America belongs to all of us. I applaud Rabbi London for having participated in the American Journey for Justice organized by the NAACP and supported by the Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement. The march is from Selma to Washington and Rabbis carried a Torah scroll along the way. Rabbi London courageously and inspirationally invited the new pastor of Second Baptist to join her. To the best of my knowledge she was unique in bringing an African America colleague.

My friends, these are urgent and desperate times. Our fate hangs in the balance in so many ways. The sound of the shofar beckons us.1) “Be like the disciples of Aaron making peace where there is strife.” 2) Model respectful conversation about the difficult issues we face as individuals, as a community and as a nation. 3) Call out our leaders and each other when rhetoric becomes ad homonym and our own voices are so loud we cannot hear each other.

I come to learn that on any issue I possess only a portion of the truth. Let us be humble. The solutions to complex problems are almost never straight forward. Judaism constantly reminds of the preciousness of every person because of our link to the Divine. Nostalgia is dangerous if it deters us from taking action today. Nostalgia is wonderful if it inspires us to create today what we believed we could do in the “good old days”. Namely, “You and I can change the world” and make “justice well up like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream” and see that Lady Liberty once again lifts her lamp beside the golden door to welcome the homeless and the tempest tossed. And at the end of our most important controversies with winners and losers willing to say, “*Elu velu devrei Elohim chaim*. These and these are the words of the living God.”

Back to the past forward to the future. Amen