

Rosh Hashanah 5778  
September 21, 2017

## **I Want to Hear Your Story. Will You Listen to Mine?**

I want to thank our Rabbi—Rabbi London for inviting me to give the D’var Torah this morning. Her continued generosity and support mean a great deal to Elaine and me. She continues to lead this sacred community with great moral insight, courage and creativity. This is especially important during these troubling times. Elaine and I want to wish all of you a happy and healthy 5778. We pray that in 5778 love and compassion will overwhelm hatred and prejudice. Every year Elaine implores me to begin my D’var Torah with a joke and after almost 52 year of marriage I have learned two important words “Yes, Dear.”

Two old Jews were sitting on a bench. One looks at the other and sighs, “Oy.” The other looks back and says, “Oy.” They repeat this exchange a few more times and then Max says to Irving: “I thought we weren’t going to talk about politics.” When I first heard this story it was not about two old men but about two old women in Miami and the

punchline was “I thought we were not going to speak about the children.”

This morning I want to share my “Oy.” I am deeply concerned about the state of our nation and of the world. Jewish history and tradition offer us a warning and perhaps an antidote. As I believe most of you know my father left Germany in 1932 because of rising anti-Semitism and my grandparents barely escaped coming to visit the US in 1937 or 1938 and returning to Germany because they didn’t believe Hilter meant them. Hitler only meant the East European Jews. Finally, they were able to emigrate from Germany after my parents paid a series of bribes, but they were broken people. I grew up among survivors and refugees. I had a close relationship with my cousin, Ilsa, who survived the inhumane medical experiments of Dr. Josef Mengele and her husband, Hans, who survived Auschwitz. The Shoah, its causes, its reality and its consequences have been a primary area of my study and thinking from an early age. Since the end of World War II, anti-Semitism in the United States has declined significantly and the

opportunities for Jews have expanded exponentially. Fighting anti-Semitism was a preoccupation of my youth and a deep concern of my early rabbinate, in recent years I had become to believe it was only a negligible threat. Sadly there has been a worldwide revival of anti-Semitism. Sometimes it masks itself as anti-Zionism where the word Zionist has become a synonym for Jew. Remember the Dyke March in Chicago where Jews marching for gender equality carrying a rainbow flag with a Jewish star were ejected from the March? The narrative among some progressives is Jews are Zionists and Zionists we are fascists. Recently we have observed incidents on college campuses where Jewish students were treated with suspicion and where BDS rallies have exhibited outright anti-Semitism. Sadly, legitimate criticism of Israel often morphs into attempts to delegitimize the State of Israel. There is a growing anti-Semitism on the left which we should not ignore.

However, what has been for me most disturbing were the images from Charlottesville with neo Nazis, the KKK, and white supremacists

carrying torches and chanting “Jews will not replace us.” It sent chills of fear down my spine. It brought back memories of the anti-Jewish riots in Germany before the Holocaust. The number of anti-Semitic incidents have significantly increased in the last year as it has become permissible to be openly racist, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, and homophobic. I applaud the House and the Senate for passing a joint resolution denouncing hate groups. It states in part: The Congress of the US

(6) rejects White nationalism, White supremacy, and neo-Nazism as hateful expressions of intolerance that are contradictory to the values that define the people of the United States; and

The Congress of the US(7) urges—

(A) the President and his administration to—

(i) speak out against hate groups that espouse racism, extremism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and White supremacy; and

(ii) use all resources available to the President and the President’s Cabinet to address the growing prevalence of those hate groups in the United States; and

(B) the Attorney General to work with—

(i) the Secretary of Homeland Security to investigate thoroughly all acts of violence, intimidation, and domestic terrorism by White supremacists, White nationalists, neo-Nazis, the

Ku Klux Klan, and associated groups in order to determine if any criminal laws have been violated and to prevent those groups from fomenting and facilitating additional violence;

What makes me sad is the reason that House and the Senate felt it necessary to pass this joint resolution.

While historical analogies are dangerous, I am reminded of the Weimar Republic where the real grievances about the state of the German economy and the changing nature of the culture went unresolved and became fertile ground for scapegoating and the eventual rise of Hitler and the Shoah.

In this country there are many who have been left behind by the changing economy and the changing culture. This dislocation is a source of anger, frustration and fear. It makes us ripe for demagoguery and nativism. One narrative that has taken hold among those who are unable to embrace the fast paced social change we have experienced during the last 50 years and among those who see their hope to experience the American dream slip away is to blame others. It is the Jew, the Muslim, the immigrant, the undocumented, the African American, the Hispanic

American, LGBTQ person who is to blame for whatever is wrong in their lives and in this country. We are developing a culture of blame.

Political correctness, which I always understood to be civility, speaking to and about people as how they want to be addressed, has become a term of opprobrium. Political correctness has also become an excuse to prevent people from expressing unpopular views. We have seen attempts on some college and university campuses to shut down right wing speakers. Protests are important but violence has no place in the debate on free speech. The political and cultural divide in this country is severe. We are losing the ability to communicate with one another. We are building walls and not bridges. It is perhaps exemplified by the inability of people with differing political views to date and marry one another.

There are no easy solutions. We must be vigilant, but vigilance alone is insufficient. In this morning's Torah portion when Abraham was called by God to do the unthinkable his response was "*Hineni* Here I am. I am ready to tackle this difficult and gut wrenching task." When the

prophet Isaiah experiences God's question, "Whom shall I send? Who will Go for us.?" Isaiah responds "*Hineni*, Here I am send me." It is easy for us to say. "These were extraordinary people. I am neither the founder of a great people nor am I a prophet. I never directly heard the voice of God and therefore, God's call does not apply to me. "I believe the call is meant for each of us. We must respond to hate speech not only with condemnation, but with messages of love. The cornerstone of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is each person is created in the divine image. Essential to our way of life is the commandment to love our neighbor as we love ourselves and to love the stranger. Our experience of Egyptian slavery is our *raison d'etre* for our moral obligation to all oppressed peoples. The stranger and the unprotected are our responsibility because we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt but we need not go back to Egypt because we still know firsthand the consequences of racial hatred and scapegoating as millions of us were consumed by the flames of the crematoria. Many of us can remember vividly the attacks on the civil rights marchers with clubs, dogs, and water cannons. Many of us still see in our mind's eye the image of the young woman

who was shot at Kent State during the Vietnam War protests. The images of recent genocides in Rwanda, Kosovo, and now Myanmar flash through my mind.

As David Zarefsky has reminded me, many of the divisions in this country have their origin in the unresolved conflicts of the founding of the United States and of the Civil War. This morning I am looking at the world through a dark lens but, there is also light which penetrates the darkness. It is the light of compassion. People are coming together to speak for justice and love. Religious communities are expanding their interfaith dialogues. Contributions to organizations which fight hatred are increasing. During natural disasters we experience neighborly responses from people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds, and various economic circumstances. Hurricanes and forest fires are blind to the distinctions which divide us.

Often in the past I been deaf, dumb, and blind to plight of so many people whose lives have been disrupted by all of the changes I seen in my life time. I have embraced these changes because I believe they are



moving us toward greater equality and greater justice for people of color, women, people with disabilities and the LGBTQ. I have embraced the economic changes which have improved my life and the lives of many of the members of our community. I have affirmed the principles that education is the key to success and inclusiveness is better than exclusion. I have assumed that the experiences of all us who live together in or near the great metropolises of this country are emblematic of what the rest of America experiences. I believe living in a global village is exciting. I believe tearing down the icons of oppression which are a source of pain to African Americans is an unambiguous good. I have done this without any consideration for the feelings of those whose lives have been negatively impacted and who live according to a different narrative than I or who experience loss where I perceive progress.

To digress for moment—is not part of the problem of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict competitive and, at the moment, irreconcilable narratives? Even among the Palestinians and the Israelis they are

conflicting understandings of history and theology. Can we find a way for each party to hear the narrative of the other and through dialogue construct a new narrative which changes the paradigm. Key to the solution to this and the problems which I have outlined above is great leadership accompanied by reframing of narratives so that all parties can acknowledge each other's fears and provide each greater dignity and justice which will hopefully inspire cooperation and diminish conflict.

I want to share with you a humorous example of reframing. The children of a prominent family commissioned a biographer to write a family history. There was one problem. Uncle Willie "the black Sheep" was executed in Sing Sing for murder. The biographer wrote "Uncle Willie occupied a chair of applied electronics at one of our nation's leading institutions. He was attached to this position by the strongest ties. His death was a true shock."

Why are narratives important because they are compelling. They make sense of our individual and collective lives. The exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah are the basic outline of Jewish

existence. They give rise to our primary ethical commitments and coupled with the words of the prophets are a summons to activism. The story of our exile and oppression gave fuel to our hope for redemption and formed the essential elements of our Zionism. The proximity of the Shoah and the rebirth of Israel became for us the myth of death and resurrection, the phoenix rising from ashes, leaving Egypt and entering the Promised Land. These narratives formed the basis of our commitment to Israel and to the rescue of Soviet and Ethiopian Jewry.

There are competing narratives which dominate the DACA debate. One narrative is these young people, in spite of having been brought to this country as children by their parents, are in the country illegally and they are taking jobs away from real Americans. Kick them out. It is reminiscent of the narrative used by the Nazis who first excluded Polish Jews living in Germany and then excluded German Jews. They blamed the Jews for Germany's economic woes and asserted that the Jews were taking jobs from real Germans.

The second narrative is these young people were brought to this country by their parents as they sought a better life for themselves and for their children. These young people know no home other than the United States. They are contributing members of society they deserve our protection because we identify with their plight. And quite frankly, these young people are Americans.

President Obama acted because Congress would not. He allowed compassion to override what many believe was his legal authority. For me he acted using the well-known principle in Jewish law *lifnim meshurat hadin* to go beyond the letter of the law. In the Halacha we find cases where ethical concerns override the letter law to enforce the spirit of law. Our greatest Jewish legal authorities were never afraid to act when they determined that the law was unjust. In the Talmud Moses criticizes God for promulgating unjust laws and God changes those laws because of Moses' ethical critique. It is time to recognize these stranger as the citizens they are. It is now up to Congress to right this wrong. But as we support the Dreamers we must also find a way to support and help

those who believe that it immigrants or Dreamers who have made their lives worse. We ignore them at our own and their peril.

Maybe the following verses from Exodus can offer us an opening to think about our relationship to people with whom we profoundly disagree.

“When you encounter your enemy’s ox or his ass wandering you must take it back to him. When you see the ass of your enemy lying under its burden and you would refrain from raising it you must nevertheless raise it **with him** (Ex 23:4-5)” The key phrase is “with him.”

One day while listening to NPR, I was struck by an interview with a former member of a white supremacy group. The man was now engaged in trying to get others abandon their hateful ideology. He was asked what caused him to change his attitude, he said that when he was in straits his neighbors came his aid. He was shocked and surprised because his neighbors were victims of his vile ideology. He now viewed them differently. In other words, love matters. Love can conquer hate. Deeds of loving kindness create openings for new relationships.

In my view one key to changing the mood in this country is engagement. First we must listen more. Second we must ask, “Where is your suffering? Where is your fear?” Third we must acknowledge the reality of that suffering and fear. Fourth we must find ways to overcome that suffering and fear.

There are hard core haters with whom we will never succeed. There are those armed and dangerous militias who are a real threat. Our hope is in law enforcement and government institutions which protect us. Should they fail as they did in Germany we will never be safe. The rhetoric of our leaders can enflame and embolden hatred or it can douse or discourage it.

On the left and on the right and in the middle we must work to make people’s lives better. We must use the instrumentalities of the public and private sector to see that all are cared for. Among our Jewish goals are universal healthcare, good schools, good jobs, opportunities for all to have a decent standard of living, fair treatment under the law, safe streets etc. How to achieve them is a matter of dispute. I am convinced

that many American share same goals. Therefore I believe, perhaps naively, that with a persistent commitment to genuine human interaction and real dialogue we can create the good will which is necessary to establish what Martin Luther King called the beloved community.

During my rabbinate I have seen how suspicion and fear have become friendship and cooperation first through conversation and then genuine dialogue. Differences do not disappear but we learn to care for each other, to stand with each other when one of us is attacked and to join together in small and large coalitions to make the world better. Judaism is neither liberal nor conservative. Our concern must focus on all who feel displaced and disenfranchised. The divisions in our country and in our world will not be healed unless we address the real and perceived grievances that people harbor. We must construct a narrative not of pulling ourselves up by our boot straps or of blame but of people joining together because two are stronger than one and many are stronger than the few and that holding hands and walking together is the only way to the Promised Land

Abraham when called said “*Hineni* Here I am. I am ready.” Isaiah said “*Hineni* Send me.” If we pause and listen we can hear the call. God is waiting for our response but more importantly our neighbors are waiting for a response. As we must return our enemy’s ass or ox and as we must help our enemy raise his ass when it is lying under its burden; we must return dignity and justice to all who feel disenfranchised, alienated or displaced, whether friend or foe. If we do we will transform enemies into neighbors and strangers into friends. We must lift up the fallen and give strength to the weak. Then justice will roll down like a river and righteousness like a mighty stream. (Amos 5:24) Amen.