

Oct 2, 2016

## HOPE AND MORAL COMPASS

Elaine and I want to wish all of you a year of health, blessing and safety. Elaine is not here this morning because she is at North Shore Congregation Israel where our grandson Stephen is reading Torah. Besides she says she can hear me anytime and, as you know, I still have to read my sermon to her in advance before I am allowed to deliver it.

I am deeply grateful to Rabbi London for giving me the honor of delivering the *Dvar Torah* this morning. I want to tell you how much I appreciate her continued kindness and graciousness toward me. Her leadership of this sacred community is a joy to behold. We, as the members of the Jewish people, benefit from her insight and wisdom and we, as part to the human community, are enriched by her pursuit of justice and peace.

Today is Rosh Hashanah It is *Yom Ha Din* Judgement Day. The center piece of today's liturgy is Unetana tokef. It is powerful but deeply unsettling. It describes God as a sitting judge determining our fate for the coming year. While there is no doubt that the future is unpredictable, the text tell us that our conduct and our attitude can help us deal with the vicissitudes of life. "*Teshuvah* (repentance) *t'fila* (prayer) and *tzedakah* (Charity) mitigate the severe decree." Attitude and behavior can help us confront whatever life deals us.

Perhaps this is best illustrated by this morning's Torah portion the *akedat yitzqak* the binding of Isaac which also happens to be my grandson Stephen's Torah portion for his upcoming bar mitzvah. Abraham receives the devastating command to sacrifice his beloved son

Isaac to which he responds “*Hineini*. Here I am” He is ready to serve God and to do whatever is required of him. Remarkably when the Angel rescinds the call, it is Abraham’s moral compass which enables him to obey the angel and substitute the ram for Isaac and to realize that God wants to end human sacrifice as means of worship. I owe the insight to my grandson Stephen that we must pay attention to our moral compass which will lead us in the correct direction. As Abraham was ready to answer the Divine call directed by his moral compass we need to be prepared to do the same.

We are living in a time of fear, hatred and uncertainty. Terrorism makes us feel unsafe. The proliferation of gun violence fills us with revulsion and dread. Xenophobia, homophobia, Islamophobia, sexism, racism are systemic and sadly renewed anti-Semitism has become worrisome. We live at a moment of great dislocations—wars, refugee crises, climate change, globalization, and demographic change. There is a cacophony of hateful voices which dominate the airwaves preventing us from really listening to one another. Social media and the internet have too often become the instruments of lies and hate speech. Truth seems to have been cast to the ground and trampled upon. Polarization prevents us from understanding the pain, fear and grievances of those with whom we disagree. There is too much noise and not enough civil discourse. We talk at each other, demonize each other and carry on separate monologues rather than a dialogue. This sadly is not a uniquely American phenomenon. It is a global problem. Partisanship and the desire to be reelected deter many of our politicians from pursuing the common good through bipartisanship and compromise. Bluster is misperceived as strength. Ethnic and identity politics exacerbate divisions. Entrenched interests zealously pursue the status quo. Many seek to turn back the clock to what they perceive were the “good old days.”

Dictators prevent chaos at the cost of freedom and human dignity. Religious fanatics murder dissidents as heretics. The Salem witches trials are nothing in comparison to the political and religious purges which take place on a daily basis in some parts of the world. Religious and political fundamentalists use violence to maintain power and to shut down dissent. The deliberate denial of science supports unsustainable practices for economic gain which is leading to an environmental Armageddon.

It is easy paint a dark and foreboding landscape but peeking out in the background are rays of light and bright yews of hope. Our planet has become a global village. Airplanes, the internet, mobile phones, computers and satellites have shortened the distance among the world's population. Remote places are no longer as remote. Social media can create virtual communities linking activists and supporting movements for social change. While the internet and social media have powerful negative possibilities, they nevertheless have the potential to transform our world for the better. Web and video conferencing allow us to be together beyond borders and to learn from each other as if we are in the same room.

Diversity is one of our greatest blessings and greatest challengers. Judaism teaches us not only that each person is created in the image of God but also that each of us is unique. Each life is the equivalent of a whole world. Loving the stranger and loving the neighbor are part of our sacred narrative because we were once slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. For most Jews social justice is hardwired into our DNA. It is part of our identity as Jews.

The key word in our declaration of belief in one God is *Shema* Listen. I ask myself. Can I listen with an open mind to those who believe that Heller Decision that individuals have the right to bear arms was rightly decided by the Supreme Court? Can the people who believe that

abortion is murder hear that a women's right to choose is supported by my Jewish tradition?  
These are only two of myriad of issues that are creating profound divisions in the United States today. If we cannot listen to each other respectfully how can we build what Martin Luther King Jr called the beloved community?

Cynicism leads to paralysis. Loss of community leads to dog eat dog individualism.  
Demonization leads to hatred. Prejudice leads to alienation. But hope leads to action.  
Community creates opportunity. Acceptance leads to friendship.

In my darker moment I remember the song

Olam chesed yibaneh עולם חסד יבנה

I will build this world from love...

And you must build this world from love...

And if we build this world from love...

Then G-d will build this world from love...

Building the world with love is our task. It is our challenge. It is our last best hope.

Tikvah Hope has sustained us throughout history. It is not a Pollyannaish optimism. It is a realist commitment to striving to make things better. Without hope there is only despair. Despair can often lead to paralysis or narcissistic self-interest. Hope sustains us when the day seems darkest.

What fills me with hope is that in my lifetime I have seen immense progress in a number of areas. The civil rights movement changed our country for the better. It is promise is unfulfilled. Racism remains deeply ingrained in our society, but people of color and their voices

are no longer restricted to the back of the bus. They have the ability vote in spite of those who would like to limit or prevent them from doing so. In the midst of many questionable deaths of African Americans we are seeing increased efforts to connect communities of color to those who guard their safety and ours. Yet we have long way to go. Poverty, gangs, drugs and easy access to guns make many urban neighborhoods unsafe. Nevertheless it is important to remember that many African Americans are participating in the American dream. While the equal rights movement has advanced the place of women in our society, but full equality is yet to be achieved. The Equal Rights Amendment must remain our goal. However, women now have more power and greater voices than ever before. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning people have emerged from the closet and they can stand under the Chupa with a marriage license in hand but discrimination and bullying still exist. And then there is the question. Which bathroom will transpeople use?

Israel has gone from a weak and fledgling nation to startup nation. Her military and economic power are great but peace is seems a distant dream. Two states for two people we pray that it is not too late. The power of the nationalist right and the haredim threaten the concept of an inclusive democratic Jewish country. Our dream to establish a heavenly Jerusalem in earthly Jerusalem was a naïve delusion. The BDS movement and anti-Semitism have infected our college campuses and some of our interfaith relations. Yet as Jews we are more secure in some ways that in almost any other era. But there are possible storm clouds on the horizon.

Interfaith relations have made great progress since the end of World War II and the Shoah. Jews and most Christian denominations are in deep connected conversations and work to together on making society better. Our differences have in most cases not deterred our cooperation. In some places our divisions are deep and the chasm remains unbridged. But

churches, synagogues and religious organizations regularly cooperate. We need to take these conversations to deeper level and use our joint resources to solve societal problems. Yet old alliances are fraying often over Israeli Palestinian peace.

Muslim Jewish relations have progressed. Today there is a number of dialogues and even trialogues with Jews, Muslims and Christians speaking and working together. Here too the Middle East and Israel- Palestine are often major stumbling blocks in our relationship to our Muslim brothers and sisters. We still know too little about Islam and they know too little about Judaism. In all these interreligious and intercultural dialogues where are still loath of acknowledge the dark side of our own traditions. We need to raise our voices in protest when our own religion is the source of evil in the world and we must demand that others do the same.

In these troubled times when demographic and economic change cause displacement, dislocation, fear, grievance anger and hardship it is convenient to become nostalgic. Remember the good old days. You and I know the good old days were not so good. However, we cannot bridge the cultural and political canyons that divide us unless we hear the plaintive cry of those who feel their place in America has been usurped by immigrants, GLBTQ people, women and people of color. If we do not feel the pain of those who believe the American Dream no longer includes them we cannot find a way to heal. Is there a way to reach out? Is there a way engage those who now feel disenfranchised? Is there a way to create a grand national conversation that allows to sit together and respectfully listen to one another? I do not know but we must try. For the most part I have no relationship with the America that lives in the rural areas in the South, the Midwest and the Rust Belt. Most of my relationships are with people similar to me. I have never spoken to a coal miner who has lost his/her job or an industrial worker whose job has gone to

China or Mexico. My only contact with people on minimum wage is when I buy fast food. The cultural, economic and demographic divisions are not new but they seem intractable.

The way we speak to each other makes a difference. The attack on political correctness has become code for we do not have to treat people with respect. It has become an excuse to promote a lack of civility. Political correctness is falsely blamed for many of our ills. Treating people with respect does not prevent us from stopping terrorism or crime. In age of terrorism we must feel safe and secure but not at the expense our civil liberties. *Pirkei Avot* reminds us “the world is sustained by justice, truth and peace.”

We need to appeal to the angels of our better nature. In Jewish tradition we would say we need to appeal to our *yetzer tov* our propensity for good while keeping our *yetzer hara* our evil inclination in check

The loss of respect for government and other institutions that are the instruments of democracy is particularly worrisome. Idle talk of armed rebellion keeps me awake at night. Religious institutions which were traditionally the locus of social justice have become places where the needs of individuals are to be met and where the sermons are to make people feel good. Prophetic Judaism and the Social Gospel have been submerged by the therapeutic and consumerist understandings of religion. Churches and synagogues especially in the mainstream have become so afraid of losing members and therefore losing revenue that ministers, priests and rabbis have been told stick to religion and that their pastoral duties are far more important than tikkun Olam. Thank goodness Beth Emet’s leadership still believes in Beth Emet’s founding principles and its history of social justice.

To describe and contemplate all of the world's ills, to think about our deep concerns about growing anti-Semitism and the increased polarization in Israel and lack of a serious peace process and to deal with ugliness that has dominated our own politics It is easy to become overwhelmed and believe we are powerless. When I feel dispirited I turn once again to the admonition of Rabbi Tarfon. "It is not incumbent on you to complete the task but neither are you free to desist from it."

According to the Jewish philosopher Levinas the face to face encounter with the other imposes upon us infinite ethical obligations. The starting point of our ethics is the concept that each person is created in the image of God. Presented with the face of the other we are called upon to respond. We are asked to say *Hineini* Here I am. Then guided by our moral compass we must follow the path of righteousness and justice even if it is counter intuitive, frightening or counter cultural. Human sacrifice was part of the Abraham's culture. For him God's demand to sacrifice Isaac seemed natural. However, Abraham's moral compass allowed him to see that his faithfulness to God meant he must reject human sacrifice as means of worship and usher in a new era.

Abraham's famous argument with God about the people of Sodom and Gomorrah sets the stage for us Abraham's descendants who must stand up for justice and to speak truth to power. In these troubled times we cannot waver in our commitment to human dignity, to our roles as stewards of our planet, champions of the rule of law, advocates for poor, homeless, the abused, the citizen the refugee and the immigrant..

I am reminded of Franklin D Roosevelt's first inaugural address Where he offered hope to a devastated and demoralized nation..



This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself-- nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.

President Obama's recent address to UN General Assembly reminds us that

.... the future we must seek together *sic.* is To believe in the dignity of every individual, to believe we can bridge our differences, and choose cooperation over conflict -- that is not weakness, that is strength. It is a practical necessity in this interconnected world.

Today is Yom Hadin. What the next year will bring I cannot guess. But I continue to hope that United States will live up to her promise of liberty and justice for all and that Lady Liberty's torch will continue burn brightly as she renews her welcome

*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-tost to me,*

*I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

I hope that the moral compass of the American people will ultimately lead us in the right direction and tomorrow will be better than today for all who feel that the promise of America has left them behind, or failed them or betrayed them. .

I hope that Israel will live up fully to her promise in the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

If we follow our moral compass, I believe tomorrow we can fulfill the Isaiah's promise that if we take care of the weakest members of society then when we call, God will answer; and God will say: *hineini* Here I am.

But hope is not enough we must say *Hineni* We must stand up and be counted. God's *hineini* is meaningless without ours.

God is calling to us in the faces of the Syrian Refugees. God is calling in the face of the African American mothers and fathers whose children have been unjustly killed. God is calling in the face of the mothers and fathers of every police officer murdered defending us. God is

calling us in the face of the transperson who is denied access to a bathroom according to their own gender identity. God is calling in the face of every person who is a victim of terrorism. God is calling us in the faces of each of our human brothers and sisters whose lives are broken. God is calling us from the parched field that was once a lush garden and from houses that have been ravaged by superstorms. God is calling each of us from each nuclear warhead demanding we beat it into swords then into ploughshares and then into musical instruments.. God is calling. Are we listening? Will we say Hineni? Will we say, Here I am?

*Kein yehi ratzon May it be so!!!*

May we all say,” *hineni* “when God calls us to stand up for what is good, right and just. God bless this congregation. God bless the United States of America. God bless all of the people of world for we are one world, one community we must stand together in hope that world will better tomorrow than it is today for hope is our greatest asset