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Beth Emet The Free Synagogue  
*The Place Where We are Right* (Yehuda Amichai)  
Erev Rosh Hashanah 2014/5775

*Min Hametzeir karati ya, anani vamerchavya.*<sup>1</sup>

From the Narrow place I called out to God who answered me with divine expansiveness.

This verse from psalms is not part of the Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur liturgy, but part of the Hallel liturgy which we will recite on Sukkot. The psalm recognizes how trapped we can feel psychically and our desire to transcend our limited way of seeing and experiencing the world. It articulates our yearning to be free from the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual chains that bind us so that we might gain greater understanding and wisdom.

Lately, in the context of world events of the past several months, I've been feeling the need for greater wisdom. Whether the context is race relations in Ferguson, MO, and across the US, or the war in Gaza and Israel, I've been thirsting for greater wisdom, greater equanimity, and a bit less of the certitude that seems to characterize our discourse – as Americans and as Jews.

To me, this psalm feels like an antidote to the rancor and narrow-mindedness that has been poisoning much of that discourse.

One thing that struck me as protests erupted in Ferguson over the killing of the unarmed teenager, Michael Brown, was the gulf in how blacks and whites nationally tended to view what was happening there.

As the protests raged, a PEW research poll found the following:<sup>2</sup>

Fully 65% of African Americans say the police have gone too far in responding to the shooting's aftermath. Among whites, only half as many (33 percent) think the police have gone too far.

Whites are also nearly three times as likely as blacks to express confidence in the investigations into the shooting of Michael Brown.

African Americans have good reason to have much less confidence in our criminal justice system than whites. They are incarcerated at a much higher rate than whites, even when convicted of some of the same crimes, and blacks are more likely to be stopped or harassed by the police even when not engaging in illegal behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 118:5.

<sup>2</sup> "Stark Racial Divisions in Reactions to Ferguson Police Shooting," *PEW Research*, August 18, 2014. <http://www.people-press.org/2014/08/18/stark-racial-divisions-in-reactions-to-ferguson-police-shooting/>

Jennifer L. Eberhardt, a social psychologist at Stanford, has found that although an overwhelming majority (80%) of white Americans claim that blacks are treated fairly in our society and that race doesn't influence their thinking about someone, racial stereotyping has a profound impact on our subconscious, making us more likely to associate crime with blacks than with whites.

In one study she found that participants who had been exposed to pictures of black men were more likely to spontaneously detect vague images of weapons and other crime-related objects. In another study, she demonstrated that showing participants objects associated with crime, like guns, knives, fingerprints, police badges, and handcuffs, induced them to focus on black male faces.<sup>3</sup>

Last year on Rosh Hashanah, I spoke at length about the racial divide in our country and the racism that still exists and negatively impacts African Americans economically, academically, and socially. The Sankofa trip that teens from Beth Emet and Evanston's Second Baptist Church took together in the Spring of 2013 was eye-opening for so many of our teens who hadn't noticed racial discrimination before the trip, but were keenly aware afterwards of how black students are stopped more frequently in the halls of high school, called out more in class than white students who engage in the same behavior, and are more likely to be questioned by police, and how these experiences undermine the self-confidence of black students and their sense that the judicial and school systems will protect them and allow them to succeed.

Why am I bringing this up again? Partly because Ferguson is a stark reminder that, as polls and studies show, we continue to be inclined to draw conclusions based on the color of our skin and that we need to make ourselves aware of it if we are to seriously address the issues of racism in our country.

*Min Hametzair karati ya, anani vamerchavya*

We call out to you, O God, from the narrow places in which we see the world, help us to broaden our perspectives.

We witnessed a similar phenomenon at play during Israel's war with Gaza. As the fighting raged, a secondary war, a war of words, unfolded—on social media, in the news media, in personal encounters. Everyone wanted to make sure that the facts that would vindicate their side were heard above the din—they hit us first, they target civilians, more civilians on our side have been killed, we protect our civilians, their army is stronger and has more firepower, their charter explicitly states they want to kill us, they talk about peace, but continue to build settlements that preclude a territorial settlement. Like many of you, I found myself wondering, “Is this really the third war of this kind in the last six years? Isn't there any way out?”

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<sup>3</sup> “Seeing Black: Race, Crime, and Visual Processing,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2004, Vol. 87, No. 6, 876 – 893.

Next week on Yom Kippur I'll talk more about the situation in Israel and give you my opinion on the state of Zionism today and the prospects of finding a resolution with the Palestinians. Tonight, I want to focus on a broader theme of the High Holidays in order to prepare us spiritually for these days. I want us to explore together our tendency to look at things from a narrow perspective—whether that means only seeing our own point of view in our intimate relationships or only seeking out facts that confirm our opinion in world affairs—and the corrosive effect this has on us personally and communally.

During the war between Israel and Gaza, there were those who stopped posting on social media because of the rage that had been directed at them. Others were hurt in online forums or in face to face conversations because they didn't feel heard or because they felt their views were dismissed or misconstrued. Many were disgusted by the tenor of discussion and frustrated by the baseness of the debate. In a desire to make sure that one's point of view was heard, words were often not weighed carefully.

Rashness and hubris ruled the day. Friendships were strained, respect for one another diminished, and understanding was compromised

A Muslim colleague of mine asked me and some other Jewish colleagues where the voices of compassion were in our community for the suffering of the Palestinians. We were able to point to examples from *Ha'aretz*, Rabbis for Human Rights, and the New Israel Fund among others, but according to this colleague (and many other Muslims have asked the identical question), these views are not being heard by most Muslims.

Meanwhile, everyone was convinced the media was biased against them. When I mentioned to this same Muslim colleague that the president of the CCAR (the Reform movement's Rabbinical organization) had announced publicly that he was cancelling his *New York Times* subscription because he felt the paper's coverage was biased against Israel (some of you probably agree), my Muslim colleague was flabbergasted; the Muslim community, as he pointed out, is convinced that the news media, the *New York Times* included, is biased against them and in favor of Israel.

To be fair, there were authors writing well-reasoned, intelligent pieces, but people who weren't already well-acquainted with where to find these articles or how to assess the validity of the arguments were often adrift in a sea of competing facts, half-truths, and skewed perspectives. It often felt to me that Israelis and Palestinians and their supporters thought that if they could only put out more verbiage than the other side—regardless of its quality, accuracy, or its ability to analyze the situation—their side would win the media war. But shouting tends to beget shouting and drowns out everyone and everything.

“The Daily Show” host Jon Stewart made the point especially cogently in an opening bit in the show's July 21 episode in which he attempted to talk about the Gaza war but was shouted down by actors playing people on both sides of the Israel/Palestine divide. At any given moment, these characters would declare Stewart to be either a self-hating Jew or a Zionist pig. There's nothing like name-calling to shut down civil and intelligent

conversation. To wit, after several unsuccessful attempts to discuss the conflict, Stewart finally gives up and says he'll talk about something safe, like Ukraine!

For so many people this summer was an anxious time made all the more anxious by our exchanges on- and offline. People came to me in tears or seething at friends and colleagues; people stopped talking to each other or looking at each other's posts.

Our world is seemingly getting smaller because of instant communication, but has this improved our ability to understand events or each other?

*Min Hametzair karati ya, anani vamerchavya*

I call out to you, O God, from my biased and limited way of seeing things, answer me by reminding me to seek out broader, more thoughtful perspectives that will help me deepen my knowledge and contribute to intelligent discourse.

Another example of this narrowness of thinking appeared on my Facebook feed a few weeks ago. A Jewish friend had posted a video of a Muslim student in a confrontation with a Jewish speaker on her campus. I suspect I'm no more immune than many of you to the allure of the posted link. So I clicked. The video was from a forum at a college in Southern California in which a Muslim student was saying hateful and anti-Semitic things and the Jewish speaker was egging her on with references to what he called her "terrorist neckerchief." The interchange was vulgar on all counts, but what was extraordinary was that the video was four years old.

Why were Jews posting—essentially reviving—this isolated video from 2010? Was it for the shock value? When we see a video like this, I suspect that our instinct is to deduce that where there is one vile example of anti-Semitism there are surely a hundred, or a thousand. And I suspect that was the poster's intent—to try to warn us that Muslims hate us and we should be very afraid. The message communicated by the video, whatever the motivation of those who share it, is that Muslims are hateful and dangerous.

This is not to deny that anti-Semitism exists. Or that it doesn't exist among Muslims. The challenge is to unpack our reactions to these online sensations. The Muslim speaker in the video endorses some frightening statements. But what conclusions do we draw on the basis of this? And what broader messages are we assimilating about Muslims when we feed on a diet of such vitriol?

Hannah Rosenthal, who is the director of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation and formerly President Obama's envoy on anti-Semitism, spoke at Beth Emet last spring at our JUF event. She commented on the recent ADL study that pointed to an increase in anti-Semitism globally. While she agreed that the data was worrisome—after all, her job had been to monitor global anti-Semitism—she also urged us to contextualize this phenomenon. She pointed out that hatred against many groups is also on the rise globally. Hatred, she said, is what's on the rise. And this is dangerous. But it should also make us think differently—more expansively—about data showing a rise in anti-Semitism.

When we see things only from our own narrow perspective and then express ourselves and act on that basis, we fail to understand how others might suffer because of our words. I have Muslim friends who are nervous about the discrimination they might face because the brutal ISIS militants call themselves Islamic; they constantly have to explain to their children and others that ISIS' behavior is not how they understand, teach, and practice Islam.

One of the great accomplishments of the Jewish-Muslim Community Building Initiative that I have chaired for many years through the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs is that whenever there are anti-Muslim or anti-Semitic incidents, leaders of the Jewish and Muslim communities are there to support each other and to issue public statements condemning hateful actions and statements directed toward one community or the other. Over the years, the Council of American Islamic Relations-Chicago has publicly condemned acts of anti-Semitism directed at Chicago-area synagogues and in 2010 our partnership with the Muslim community was instrumental in prompting the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago to include programming on anti-Semitism at a convention on Islamophobia.<sup>4</sup> In 2012, the Council of American Islamic Relations-Chicago publicly condemned an anti-Semitic "prayer" delivered by an Imam in Egypt, attended by then President Mohammed Morsi and other Egyptian officials. Ahmed Rehab, the organization's director issued a statement that such prayers are "morally offensive and wholly un-Islamic," adding, "I have not been the only one offering a challenge to the Imam."<sup>5</sup>

Our partnership with the Muslim community has been an invaluable way to combat discrimination and hatred directed at both of our communities. And yet I believe its greatest potential is yet to come. When anti-Semitism rears its ugly head, we need allies in the Christian and Muslim communities to stand side by side with us, and the friendships and alliances we are building today will prove vitally important.

During her visit to Beth Emet, former Ambassador Hannah Rosenthal shared a story with us about how powerful standing up for another community can be. At a conference on global discrimination, she and her Muslim colleague decided to swap speeches. Hannah spoke about anti-Islamic activities and attitudes and her Muslim colleague spoke about anti-Semitism. She said that this made a dramatic impression on the conference participants and that it was all people at the conference could talk about afterwards.

Building relationships among diverse communities, instead of demonizing them, is the path to building a safer and more peaceful society. You may have read about a rally against anti-Semitism on September 14 organized by the Jewish community in Berlin.

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<sup>4</sup> Asaf Bar-Tura, staff for the Jewish-Muslim Community Building Initiative, spoke at this event, <http://jcuaneews.wordpress.com/2010/10/28/a-diversity-united-in-the-pursuit-of-justice-reflections-on-anti-semitism-and-islamophobia/>

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed Rehab, "Unholy Prayer: 'Jews' are not our Enemy," ar Blog, October 29, 2012. <http://www.ahmedrehab.com/blog/2012/10/unholy-prayer-jews-are-not-our-enemy/>

Organizers were surprised when a group of non-Zionist critics of Israel came to join them, holding signs decrying all forms of hatred, including anti-Semitism. In other words, they were posing a challenge to the notion that criticism of Israel, even opposition to Israel, could be simplistically dismissed as anti-Semitism.

These demonstrators were drawing a line in the sand where I believe that line belongs: They were declaring that not every opinion deserves a seat at the table. Not every website is worth reading, not every YouTube channel or radio show is worth listening to. We should recognize narrow-mindedness, hatred, and bigotry for what they are, call them out and build broad coalitions across racial, ethnic and religious lines that are prepared to condemn them.

To be sure, there are times when critics of Israel have adopted language that seems to target Jews as a group. The Jewish-Muslim Community Building Initiative has been at the forefront in confronting such cases, helping our Muslim neighbors understand how their statements may cross the line from acceptable criticism to dangerous stereotypes and even anti-Semitism.

Tonight, I call on us to examine our own speech, our own generalizations and stereotypes and to ask whether in our words and actions we are helping to build a safer world.

*Min Hametzeir karati ya, anani vamerchavya*

I call out to you God from my narrow way of seeing only the plight of my own people that I might also be concerned about discrimination and hatred of others. When we stand up as diverse groups for all kinds of bigotry, we build a safer and stronger society.

Rabbi Sheila Weinberg, my meditation teacher, taught me that the word WAIT is an acronym for Why Am I Talking? There's so much wisdom in this simple teaching. How often do we speak before we have listened, considered, or weighed what we are about to say only to regret what came out of our mouth? In our digitally interconnected world, we should add to this advice, "Why am I posting this?" Who will I harm by sharing this? Do we really think whatever war of words we're engaged in will be won by volume of words? Whoever posts the most wins?

*Min Hametzeir karati ya, anani vamerchavya*

We will hear this prayer numerous times during the year on various holidays, including soon on Sukkot. What if every time we heard it this year it served as a reminder that we need to listen more and work to gain a broader perspective before expressing ourselves?

After this summer of rhetorical overload, the High Holidays have not come a moment too soon.

The High Holidays are a time to restore our capacity for introspection, humility, and compassion. We are aware of what is wrong in our world, and it is easy to point fingers and blame everyone and everything else. Although it's important that we confront evil, our tradition teaches us that before we focus our energies outward, we need to do inner

work. We take these ten days to look inward and to see where we have fallen short; first, we need to take responsibility for our behavior. We need to ask ourselves, “How does my limited way of thinking and expressing myself prevent me from acting constructively, in ways that promote peace and understanding?”

The High Holidays are both the most personal and universal celebration. Not only do we evaluate our personal lives and think about how we want to grow in the coming year, we also contemplate our interconnectedness to all of creation. Rosh Hashanah is the celebration of the creation of the world; we are reminded today that we are part of the interdependent organism of the universe. Our words and our actions have an impact on ourselves, our loved ones, and on the world.

I'd like to conclude with a poem by Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, who made *aliyah* from Germany in 1935, fought in three wars and died in the year 2000.

“The Place Where We Are Right”  
by Yehuda Amichai

From the place where we are right  
flowers will never grow  
in the Spring.  
The place where we are right  
is hard and trampled  
like a yard.  
But doubts and loves  
dig up the world  
like a mole, a plough.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
where the ruined  
house once stood.

The place where we are right doesn't allow us to grow. Trampling on differences of opinion might make us feel safe, but doesn't it also harden us and prevent the flourishing of understanding? Doubt and love may unsettle us, but do they also create space for truth and compassion to emerge? Amichai reminds us to see how our stubbornness and narrow-mindedness impede our growth.

But perhaps in this new year if our desire to understand and care is greater than our hubris, then there's a possibility that we'll begin to hear the whisper of truth that Amichai alludes to. Perhaps the whisper in the poem is telling us to build our lives (including our lives online!) on a solid foundation of introspection and compassion instead of a flimsy edifice of arrogance, defensiveness, and certitude.

*Min Hametzair karati ya, anani vamerchavya*

Out of my limits, O God, I call to you. As we enter into a new year, show us the life-giving way of living with greater wisdom.