

THE HARD WORK OF LOVE
Rosh Hashanah First Day
September 30, 2019 ☆ 1 Tishri 5780
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Before I say what I want to say, there is something I need to say.

We are living through extraordinary times; we are experiencing a rupture of political and social norms and rules of public discourse. Many of us are concerned about antisemitism, about Israel, about the stability of democratic values in America and around the world.

Rabbis are expected at this time of the year to speak about important issues without being perceived as divisive. Some people have approached me and said: "Talk about spiritual, religious matters." Other congregants say: "I hope you will talk about the political situation." To all, I say: "Yes, and Yes."

I have always spoken about politics and religion, that is, public life and moral values. But the polarized climate today makes the conversation especially charged and difficult. As a rabbi, I don't speak from a partisan perspective. I am sensitive to the fact that I have a diverse congregation, with a wide spectrum of opinions.

I do not presume to speak "the truth." I attempt to speak from a standpoint of humility and openness to the opinions of others, and I trust that whatever I say will clarify, inform and create a community guided by values of respect and coexistence.

Rabbi Joachim Prinz, who spoke at Sandy's and my rabbinic ordination 45 years ago, came to this country as a young Rabbi, escaping Germany. He reminisced: "bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, ... disgraceful, ... shameful, ... the most tragic problem is silence."

So.....as you can imagine, deciding on sermon topics for these High Holy Days has not been easy. Our children, David and Debbie are a psychiatrist and a research psychologist respectively. They suggested to me that people read themselves into sermons like they read themselves into a Rorschach test. Welcome to "Rorschach Shanah." Today I'll let you define your own inkblot.

The topic of my sermon is LOVE.

Ah! Some of you may be breathing a deep sigh of relief – no fireworks after the sermon, no elbowing the person sitting next to you. Perhaps, some of you may have been hoping for something over which to argue at your holiday table. But, love – how sweet, how trite. Who can argue over love?

Alas, let me disappoint you. People have been arguing over love for generations, and today, the abuses of so called "love" are in the news every day. Love is not sweet; it is hard. Why else would our tradition keep reminding us to "love our neighbor?" Why would one

of the most oft-repeated commandments in the Torah be – “Love the stranger?” If it were easy, we would not have to be told and reminded, over and over.

Eric Fromm, in his epochal book on *The Art of Loving*, asserts that love is not a “feeling,” but a “doing,” not a theory but a practice. And it is hard.

Love does not exist without its counterpart: Justice – “*Tzedek tzedek tirdof*” – “righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue” (Deuteronomy 16:22). This is the motto of our congregation: Beth-El Zedeck – The House of the God of Righteousness.

The Midrash imagines God creating the world by balancing the attributes of justice and mercy, *din* and *rachamim*. These terms abound in our High Holy Day’s prayers, when we appeal to the God of forgiveness to bend the arc of justice in the direction of love. One of the names for God, is *Harahaman*, from *Rechem*, the Hebrew word for “womb,” the protective, generative, nurturing source of inexhaustible compassion and love.

Is it not then discordant with our belief in a God of love for people of proclaimed faith to endorse and enforce the separation of children from mothers and families? To put ownership of assault weapons above the safety of children and families?

Our tradition calls us *rachamanim b’nei rachamanim* – “compassionate ones, children of compassionate ones.” No conception of compassion, no pursuit of justice, can countenance inflicting pain on children. We cannot, in the pursuit of an administrative goal, tolerate a distortion of justice, of fairness and love. We do not need to agree on a particular immigration or weapons control policy in order to agree that we must treat children with compassion and all human beings with dignity.

If love is the divine imperative, how do we approach the hatred directed at us as Jews? Antisemitism is present and real, from the right and from the left. In November, we will host Dr. Deborah Lipstadt, a prominent scholar, to address this subject, again “ripped from the headlines.”

Even as we take the necessary steps to educate our community about the history, the present perils, the grotesque distortions of antisemitism, even as we take the necessary measures to protect and secure our synagogues and Jewish institutions, let us not abdicate responsibility for upholding the values that define us as Jews, the spiritual and moral heritage that motivates us to defend and protect all vulnerable people and the institutions we hold dear.

Antisemitism is part of the web of hatred that pervades our society. It is not just the oldest hatred, it is the symptomatic hatred. Where there is antisemitism, there you will find other prejudices; where there is hatred against others, there is fertile ground for antisemitism to flourish.

Antisemitism has another effect. It has the potential of weakening the fiber of our own Judaism. If the hatred directed at us by others causes us to become cautious and defensive about who we are, or suspicious and callous towards our neighbors, then anti-Semites will have

accomplished their goals. If enmity causes us to hate, if intimidation makes us fearful of standing up for our tradition, then our enemies will have triumphed.

Let us not for a moment believe that the rants of "go back home!" aimed at people of color are not consonant with "Jews will not replace us!" Let us not for one moment believe that proclamations of love and support for Israel are sincere when they come from those bent on the eventual conversion of Jews, or from those who falsely imagine Israel as an ethnically pure State and propose it as a model for an ethnically pure white America. Anti-Semites will hate us to death; others, will pretend to love us to death.

And what about Israel? I am afraid about the future of Israel, the relationship between Israel and the United States and, more so, between Israel and the American Jewish community. It concerns me that the relationship between the United States and Israel is being weaponized to become less bipartisan and more dictated by political expedience. The mainstreaming of racism and white nationalism by the right and the excusing of antisemitism and anti-Zionism in the guise of the pursuit of social justice by the left, are disingenuous and dangerous betrayals of Israel's vision and of the American dream.

Because of what Israel meant to the Jewish people following the tragedy of the Holocaust; because of the determination and dramatic heroism of its founders and soldiers, Israel became to us legendary and romanticized, extraordinary, infallible. Israel became our vicarious Judaism; our alter ego.

The early founders of Zionism were idealists, but they were pragmatic. They realized that Israel would not be a fantasy. They did not labor for a state that would be a "light unto the nations." They just wanted a State "like the rest of the nations." Israel was supposed to bring "normalcy" to the Jewish people. But we, in the diaspora, yearned for Camelot; an Israel that would be our surrogate Judaism. We would send our money. We would send our kids there to have a "real" Jewish experience.

Carly Pildis, a young Zionist activist, reminds us:

"Israel is a place, not a parable. It is neither a perfectly good nation nor an evil entity. It is a country full of real people and their philosophies, politics, religious beliefs and ethnic backgrounds, and corresponding frictions."

We need to recognize and criticize Israel's faults; to celebrate and promote its successes. We need to understand that Israel lives in a complex part of the world and that it needs more than just Jews and America as its allies.

Many American Jews, and especially young Jews, are beginning to feel, at best tuned off, and at worst, disappointed and indifferent to Israel. Jews from the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist branches of Judaism are ignored and defamed by governmental institutions and elected officials in Israel. Issues surrounding equal rights for women, the lack of recognition of the rabbis of non-Orthodox streams of Judaism, the growing militant religious and nationalist

messianism of West Bank settlers, causing many American Jews to feel distanced and disenfranchised.

The vision of Israel's founders espoused a Jewish and democratic state striving for peace, with equality for all its citizens. The courting of political and religious forces that espouse extremist religious and nationalist ideologies presents a crisis of morale for many young Americans who value their Jewish identity but who also cherish democracy, human equality and the pursuit of justice and peace. We cannot expect American Jews to condone in Israel what we deplore in America.

Israel's recent repeat elections highlighted the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian issue is not the only conflict facing the State. Internal political tribalisms, the divide between right and left, Arab and Jewish citizens, religious and secular nationalism – all challenge the meaning of Zionism and the future of the State of Israel. The elections showed how divided the Israeli public is. However, inconclusively, they also pointed in the direction of change, a recognition that the status quo could not endure.

We are not Israeli citizens. We do not live and vote there. The best way that we can stand by Israel and be its partners is by being fully engaged American Jews, active in our synagogues and communities, faithful to our heritage, not uncritical defenders, but loving and loyal critics. Love is hard. It is about critical solidarity.

Because of diaspora Jewry's concern about Israel's security and survival, social, religious and political developments there will continue to play a defining role for the meaning of Judaism and Jewish identity the world over. What does it mean to say *Kol Yisrael arevim ze baze* – “All members of the household of Israel are responsible to one another”? How will our sense of interdependence unfold in the years and decades ahead?

I return to the premise of my sermon: Love is hard. It is about honesty, not excuses.

I recently came across an article that I wrote in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, an early manifestation of the white supremacist nationalism that has metastasized over the last years. It scares me how eerily relevant these words remains I wrote:

A highly charged rhetoric inflames [our] political climate.
Words that are hurtful are tossed about freely; epithets that are demeaning are spoken casually. Language has consequences. It makes certain actions permissible.

Speech can uplift or it can destroy; it can wound or it can heal.
America is being wounded today.

In the months ahead, we will experience, in increased decibels, this climate of verbal assault and vitriol. Let us make it clear that as Americans and as Jews, we do not condone or endorse discourse that distorts and undermines the foundations of democracy. Whether from the right or from the left, inflammatory rhetoric and disparaging remarks are an assault on our

nation, which began with the proclamation “that all men (human beings) are created equal.” That this wasn’t always so, is a stain on our nation. We have, in the best of times, worked to make it so. That work is far from over. These past years of increased rhetorical and physical expressions of hate demand urgent action by all us who value American democracy as enshrined in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Love is hard. Its partner is justice.

As Americans and as Jews, we are the bearers of two great civilizations. We need to acknowledge both their greatness and their limitations, to recognize the wisdom and the injustices of the past, even as we celebrate and build our rich dual heritage.

Rabbi Tarphon (in the 2nd century) and Abraham Lincoln (in the 19th century) reminded us of the unfinished tasks of citizenship and of Judaism:

Rabbi Tarphon said, “It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it” (Pirkei Avot).

Rabbi Lincoln said, “It is for us the living...to be dedicated here to the unfinished work...to the great task remaining before us...that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” (Gettysburg Address).

Our nation, and the Jewish people, are polarized today. Rabbis hesitate to address fundamental issues in their sermons out of concern that they will divide the congregation. My friends, Jewish values, love, justice, and the pursuit of peace, are not partisan. They are the heart of who we are and for what we stand.

At family dinner tables, in community and in congregations, people berate one another or have stopped talking to one another. Arthur Brooks observes that our problem goes beyond incivility or intolerance. The issue is “contempt,” the “unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another” (Arthur Schopenhauer). This makes political, civic and religious compromise and progress impossible. We need to learn, says Brooks, not to “disagree less but to disagree better;” to treat others with respect, warm-heartedness and good humor; with generosity and, yes, with a little love.

Stephen Hawking, the theoretical physicist challenged us:

[There are] “big questions on the planet which must be answered...: How will we feed an ever growing population? Provide clean water, generate renewable energy, prevent and cure disease and slow down global climate change?” Hawking expressed the “hope that science and technology will provide the answers to these questions,” but warns that “it will take people, human beings ... to implement these solutions. ...for every woman and every man ... to live healthy, secure lives, full of opportunity and *love*.”

I find it interesting that the scientist par excellence invokes “love” as essential to the solution!

I ended my 1995 article on the Oklahoma City bombing with these words –

We live again at a time when we must choose between the voice of decency and the voice of demagoguery; between ill will and compassion....

To “love your neighbor as yourself,” ... the most important commandment, may yet prove to be not merely a [pious] ideal for which to strive, but a practical imperative by which to live.

On this Rosh Hashanah, this day of remembrance and new beginnings, on this clarion day of the sounding of the shofar, let us not merely wish, and hope, and pray.

Let us do **love's hard work** individually and together;
Let us **vision** and **voice** a future of promise;
Let us **volunteer** to make it happen;
Let us **vote** with our hearts, our minds, our conscience
that justice and goodness,
freedom and peace
be our blessing for years and generations to come.

L'shanah Tovah Tikatevu – May we be inscribed for a New Year strengthened and blessed by the hard work of love.