

ROSH HASHANA 5778 (Day 1)

Most years when rabbis get together, in person or online before the High Holy Days, the question is “what are you talking about?” This year is different. The question everywhere was “are you talking about Trump?”

Rabbis, like everyone else, have diverse opinions on a wide range of issues. Yet this has been a year of such emotional distress and agita for so many people, for so many reasons, that many rabbis have chosen not to contribute any further to the anxiety which so many people are feeling, regardless of political party affiliation. One of the beauties of this space is that it is a sanctuary, a place where we can get away from the stresses we confront on a daily basis.

And yet, how can we not speak up when we witness injustice and dysfunction in our society and in our world? The Talmud teaches “if you see wrongdoing by a member of your household and you do not protest – you are held accountable. And so it is in relation to the members of your city and in relation to the world.” Our Torah commands us not to stand idly by while our neighbor bleeds.

Standing here in front of five hundred people, I know that some of you agree with my personal stance on many issues and some of you disagree.

That is all well and good, because Judaism, for the past two thousand years, has been about the respectful interchange of opinions.

We all live among people with different beliefs about almost everything, from music to sports loyalties, child-rearing practices to where to go shopping. Mature adults should be able to disagree agreeably, but our nation has clearly grown polarized and ultra sensitive, especially since the last election.

Eight months ago, one week after the inauguration, I delivered a very strong political sermon to a regular-sized Friday night crowd on a cold, January evening. Most of the people present loved it. At least four people hated it; two walked out during the sermon.

I spoke with all those who showed a very negative reaction to the sermon. I felt that it was important to assure them that my views regarding political developments had no impact on my views regarding them and I think that it is important to say that again today.

America in general and Judaism in particular has a history of speaking truth to power. When something is wrong, it is our responsibility to make it known, whether it is popular or not.

The Torah teaches us not to follow the crowd, but rather to do that which is proper. We are not to side with the mighty, just because they are mighty. Both as Jews and Americans, we have always taken the side of the underdog. It is a source of pride that the teaching of our Torah “proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all of its inhabitants,” is inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia.

This is our personal sanctuary and I want it to be a place of comfort for all of us. However, America is also intended to be a sanctuary from the prejudice which our nation’s founders fled from in England. As Jews, we have known the wrath of the oppressor more than most other peoples. As such, we have an obligation to feel compassion for those whose world is collapsing around them, regardless of whether it is due to a hurricane or to being classified as evil because of their race, religion or ethnicity.

Some people thrive on conflict. Personally, I hate it and I strongly dislike being around people who incite conflict. However, on this anniversary of creation, we see so much of the world we knew crumbling like the polar ice caps. How did this happen?

The world is a cyclical place. Those who are scorned and mocked become powerful. Those who are used to being on top find themselves on the bottom. Neighborhoods decay and then bloom, just like nature.

Fifty years ago, the State of Israel was the darling of the world, following its victory during in The Six Day War. However, before too long, the Palestinian cause came to gain greater acceptance, not through the exchange of ideas, but rather through hijackings, kidnappings, bombings, murders and more.

Despite the thousands of Israelis who were murdered by Palestinian terrorists, the world began to speak of the rights of the Palestinians, as opposed to the rights of the Israelis.

As is often the case today, facts stopped mattering to people. More and more, people saw the terrorist murderers as representatives of the just cause of the Palestinian people and refugees. Members of the news media began to see a moral equivalence between the cause of the murderer and that of the one murdered.

This culminated in a horrendous story run by CNN about a 17 year old female suicide bomber who killed a 17 year old Israeli Jewish girl. CNN ran a long feature interview with the mother of the bomber, presenting her and her daughter in a sympathetic light, while totally ignoring the Israeli victim of the bombing.

The reaction in Israel and elsewhere was overwhelming. CNN was banned from Israel and only returned after a public apology by the head of the network.

However, the process of blurring right and wrong, good and evil, had already gained enormous momentum. It is important to be open minded, but do we really want to understand the nazi perspective to the Holocaust and to give it equal weight with the Jewish perspective?

People will not always agree, but it is incumbent upon us all, regardless of who we voted for in the last election, to realize that when we mainstream nazis and white supremacist as just additional perspectives, we are opening a very, very dangerous box.

Back in college sociology, I learned about the “revolution of rising expectations.” Essentially, everyone from slaves to hate mongers will keep their actions fairly muted when there is no expectation for success. However, once they start to believe that there is an increased chance for success, their acts grow increasingly decisive.

While that might be a blessing with the oppressed, the vision of armed nazis and white supremacists standing outside of a synagogue in Charlottesville should fill all of us with dread. This is not just a news story

about a tragic rally hundreds of miles away. This is about opening a door to legitimizing that which has always been considered unacceptable.

It was telling that Sean Spicer appeared on the Emmy's the other night and mocked his own declaration about the inauguration crowd being the largest of all time. Spicer was telling us what many people have been saying about many of the words coming out of Washington.

However, it isn't funny. Words do matter. In Jewish tradition, the power of words is compared to that of a sword. Our words have the power to uplift or harm both the speaker and the subject.

During our services on Rosh Hashana, we recite a lot of words. For some, they are a blur of sound. Yet, to others, they offer a profound opportunity to gather insight into living a better life.

Believe it or not, politics offers the same options. There is plenty of mindless blather; however there are also opportunities to profoundly impact our society for the better.

As Jews, we are called upon to be a light unto the nations. We are taught to protect the most vulnerable members of our society. We are taught not to follow the majority to do evil.

It is a fragile line which we walk. There is right and wrong, but there are also multiple perspectives on many issues.

Many years ago, I stopped addressing a particular topic during my High Holy Day sermons. It seemed that no matter what I said, a certain number of people listened with their emotions, rather than their ears. They heard words which I never spoke and grew very upset at what they heard, rather than at what I said.

It became clear that the topic was just too sensitive and that's a shame, because when we are unable to disagree agreeably, we can't make any progress.

I certainly hope that this does not happen with our country. Far worse than people arguing about politics would be people not caring.

I care. I care about America from my political perspective and I imagine that you do from your political perspective. We don't have to agree; we just have to treat one another with the respect owed to any and all people who are created in the image of God, just like us.

It is because of that respect that I am not reading from a statement composed by dozens of Reform rabbis, many of whom I admire and

respect. Many parts of that statement are being read by dozens or perhaps hundreds of Reform rabbis around the country today.

I, like many other rabbis, have made the decision not to use the statement as part of today's sermon, on this holy day. I have no doubt that some of you will applaud this decision and others will be disappointed by it. Like many decisions we all have to make, it is not an easy one. Yet there will be many other opportunities to discuss the statement; it doesn't have to be on this day, in this place.

Debating issues is as Jewish as matzo ball soup. We boast of there being three opinions for every two Jews. The rabbis tell us that even during the creation of the world, God's heavenly host of angels were arguing with one another as to how God should do it. Create a world based on justice argued one group. Create a world based on compassion, argued another. While they were arguing with one another, God created a world based on justice, tempered with compassion.

Facts matter and we should never be afraid to speak of facts. However, I think that most of us have already sufficiently discussed and debated the issues which confront our nation. We need a Shabbat, a day to focus on building up our world by bringing us together again.

We dare not sacrifice our humanity or that of those with other views, for the sake of a political discussion. Mature adults can discuss issues from various perspectives and can disagree agreeably.

Working together, we can elevate the level of our humanity and the level of our nation's excellence in the year ahead. Working together. Talking together. THAT is what I am talking about! AMEN