

KOL NIDRAY 5778

(Sound of groggers)

Our sages of old noted that “Yom Kippurim” means a day like Purim. While it was not their intent for us to get out the groggers today, we do make lots of noise with them on Purim. On that joyous holiday, we read the Megillah describe how the evil Haman, was defeated by Queen Esther, Mordecai and the Jews of Persia in ancient times.

The Torah commands us to blot out the name of Amalek, one of the perennial enemies of the Biblical Israelites. This is why we make all of that noise on Purim, as Haman was a descendant of Amalek, whose name we are commanded to blot out.

Amalek was considered to be so evil because, during the Exodus from Egypt, they preyed upon the most vulnerable members of the Israelite community: the women, the children, the elderly and the infirm.

On Erev Rosh Hashana, I talked about the importance of listening to others, because we are much more likely to grow from listening than from talking. And so, practicing what I preach, I want to share with you a new interpretation of Amalek I recently learned from my colleague Rabbi Daniel Bogard of Cincinnati.

He notes that while our people are commanded to wipe out Amalek, we never really succeeded in doing so, despite defeating them overwhelmingly in Biblical battles. Rabbi Bogard suggests that the reason for this failure is that Amalek was not an actual people, but rather an inclination.

He teaches that Amalek arises and must be fought in every generation, because it is the urge to pick on the most vulnerable members of society. While bullies today have gained the power of social media for harassing others and making their lives miserable, we know that the affliction of bullying is nothing new.

Our Torah, however, teaches us not to stand by idly while our neighbor is hurting. Our Torah teaches us that the stranger who dwells with us shall be accepted as our equal, since we were strangers in the land of Egypt. Our Torah teaches us to protect the widow, the orphan and the stranger, the most vulnerable members of Biblical society.

Today, there are others who are just as vulnerable. Judaism is about ensuring that all people are treated fairly and with the respect due to those created in the image of God.

The world has changed enormously since Biblical times. Today, many people do not identify as heterosexual males or heterosexual females. They may be gay, lesbian, transgender, bi-sexual, queer or other. One does not have to like these alternate sexualities or be comfortable with them, in order to agree that they should not be discriminated against, simply on the basis of their gender status. Discriminating against people based on their sexuality is just as wrong as discriminating against people based on their race, their religion or their nationality.

The great theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught: “in a free society, where terrible wrongs exist, some are guilty, but all are responsible.”

Whenever we hear the message that these people must be singled out for special treatment, we should shudder. History has shown, in Europe and in America, in the past and in the present, that those who persecute one group of people will continue to persecute other groups until someone makes them stop.

To their immense credit, the leaders of our United States military have resisted intense pressure in stating that there will be no discrimination based solely upon gender identity, until there is proof that allowing non

heterosexuals into the military has a negative impact upon the military readiness of our troops.

Of course, we Jews know persecution as well as anyone. However, putting aside the specifics of several newsworthy cases in recent years, there is little doubt that it is far more dangerous to be a black man, in today's America, than any other race, ethnicity, nationality or gender.

Black lives do matter, white lives do matter, blue lives do matter. The point should not be that that black lives matter more than white lives or more than blue lives; the point should be that all lives of good people need to matter. We have to stop killing innocent and even not-so-innocent black men for actions which would not result in the killing of innocent and not-so-innocent white men and women.

Seventy five years ago, the United States watched, as did almost every other nation on earth, as the Holocaust occurred. We may not have known about the first million before their murders, but America and the rest of the world could have done something significant to slow down or stop the murder of the last five million Jews . . . if they had wanted to . . . if we had mattered.

Only Jews did not matter. We had no political clout. We were strangers. We were vulnerable. Few protested as regular reports hit the newspapers of the atrocities in Europe. It was as if we were the transgender, the Mexicans and the Muslims of that time.

Times change and so do we. Twenty years ago, I would not have officiated at a wedding of a same sex couple. Like most principles I live by, I regularly evaluated this viewpoint and after about a decade, my position on this and other issues evolved and even changed.

I understand that many heterosexuals are not totally comfortable with and do not totally “get” gender identifications other than heterosexual. However, that is not a valid argument for why people should be discriminated against on the basis of who they love.

We are all created in the image of God. Just as no one deserves to be shamed, discriminated against, bullied or otherwise targeted because of their religion, so no one deserves to be shamed, discriminated against, bullied or otherwise targeted because who and how they love is not what makes most people comfortable.

I don't have to be gay to understand that gay people deserve the same rights as non-gay people. The fact that someone's sexuality intrudes upon my comfort zone is no justification for me to discriminate against that person in any way.

We pray today and in the days to come to be better people and to create a better society for all. That means that everyone needs to have access to basic services, basic rights and basic protections.

Our sages taught us that Amalek arises anew in every generation. Just as it was the Biblical responsibility to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and protect the most vulnerable, so it is our responsibility to safeguard the rights of the most vulnerable in our society.

We don't have to love them; we don't even have to feel comfortable in their presence. However, we do have to treat them with the same respect which we would want from others.

We live in a society in which there are so many poor, so many mentally challenged on the streets, so many who are disabled and elderly, so many with a variety of problems not of their own making. It is a mitzvah to help

them; it is a moral failing if we continue to live our lives without finding a way to be of some help to them.

Poor people, like transgender people, like black people, like Jewish people, women, mentally and physically challenged people, gay, lesbian and bi-sexual people, Muslims, immigrants . . . all who do not fit comfortably and conveniently in the neat pre-set which so many have set up in their minds, all deserve the basic respect due to one created in God's image.

It's not my fault if someone who meets me is uncomfortable because I am a Jew. In the same way, it is not the fault of any of those groups of people I have mentioned, nor those I have not included, if any of us are uncomfortable because of their identity.

In every generation Amalek returns; now is the time for our generation to stand with the vulnerable and to battle against and defeat Amalek. We stand together as a community, though we are made up of very different elements, often not in harmony with one another. However, just as a choir blends different voices into a beautiful harmony, so we need to stand up for a more inclusive society, for those who are like us and especially for those who are not. **AMEN**