

ROSH HASHANA 5779 – FIRST DAY

In his immortal book “Night,” Elie Wiesel wrote “I remember: it happened yesterday or eternities ago. A young Jewish boy discovered the kingdom of night. I remember his bewilderment, I remember his anguish. It all happened so fast.”

“I remember: he asked his father: “Can this be true?” This is the twentieth century, not the Middle Ages. Who would allow such crimes to be committed? How could the world remain silent? . . . And now the boy is turning to me: “Tell me,” he asks. “What have you done with my future? What have you done with your life?”

And I tell him that I tried. That I have tried to keep memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices.

And then I explained to him how naïve we were, that the world did know and remained silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes, we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant.

Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe.

Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz, of whom I spoke at last year's second day service, famously declared "a rabbi who doesn't anger his congregation is no rabbi." Many members of our congregation would agree. They would argue that when the rabbi has his/her congregation together, it is his/her responsibility to speak about the issues of the day. Not to do so would be irresponsible and I completely agree.

And yet . . . our nation and our world are in the midst of turmoil and tumult. Our communities and even many of our families are polarized by the "very interesting times" in which we live, which have frayed the nerves of people on all sides of the political spectrum.

Shabbat and the holidays of the Jewish calendar are special gifts. For those of us who take advantage of them, these beautiful and sacred days provide a break from everyday stresses and aggravations. Especially today, we who are on information overload and emotional overload, need the break provided by these days to recharge our spirits, our bodies and our souls. They are an oasis, not an escape, from reality.

A well-known illustration of Jewish thinking involves the shtetl rabbi, back in eastern Europe, doing marital counseling in his home. The wife details her side of the story and the rabbi nods repeatedly, declaring “you are right!” The husband then tells his side of the story, which completely contradicts that of the wife. The rabbi nods repeatedly and declares “you are right!”

The rabbi’s wife, overhearing the encounter from the next room, bursts in and declares, “their stories were complete opposites and yet you told them both that they were right. They can’t both be right!” And, of course, the rabbi declares, “you are right.”

Many people argue that the Sanctuary should be devoted to spirituality, not to politics, not to that which debases us, but rather to that which elevates us. They don’t want to come to the synagogue and hear more about the same subjects which accost them on a daily basis.

Yet others feel that it is precisely during a service which preaches the ideal of social justice that we should speak to those issues which confront our society.

From the bottom of my heart, I want to tell you that this is a major struggle for me. In my second year of rabbinical school, I spent thirteen weeks as

the “rabino” of Congregacion Bet El in Guatemala City. This was at the time of the political upheaval in El Salvador. The first instructions I were given were not to talk about politics. It was less about dividing the congregation and more about returning alive to America after the holidays.

One week after the current Administration began its term, I delivered a very strong sermon. A few dozen heard this late-January sermon, others heard of it. Most people loved it, while about 20% of the congregation strongly objected to the content.

Sermons are an incredible challenge, especially on a holiday when most of the congregation is actually present. We sit here a congregation of liberals, moderates, conservatives, indifferents and those unable or unwilling to speak.

We sit here as a congregation of those who care deeply about Jewish values and live those values daily, as well as those who would rather be somewhere else, doing something else.

As a rabbi, I sit with Elie Wiesel and Naftali of Ropshitz on one shoulder. On the other shoulder are congregants and friends who understand that their views are the minority in this congregation. Do I stand with the

majority or do I embrace the minority? For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Emboldening some means discouraging others.

There is no easy answer.

The essence of Judaism is struggling with the most profound of topics.

As a people, we are known as Israel, Yisrael. The word literally means “struggling with God,” which we do quite well. We also struggle with our consciences, with our communities, with our loved ones and with ourselves.

This year’s struggle may be the second most intense I have ever experienced. Back in 2001, Rosh Hashana fell one week after the terror attacks of September 11. Whether or not to deliver a sermon about 9/11 presented a major challenge to me and many other rabbis who felt it was too soon.

To the consternation of many, the only mention I made of 9/11 that year was why I wasn’t going to talk about it. However, I knew that the whole congregation would agree with my message if and when I delivered it, as I did on Yom Kippur.

This year, however, is very different. We are a nation which has grown so polarized, so . . . scary and I have decided that I don’t want to do that to

further antagonize our Temple community. Especially in troubling and traumatic times for so many, the Sanctuary should be a source of comfort, security and solace, rather than a place of intimidation and negativity.

In our Temple classes, in the community, on social media, I have and I will continue to speak my mind and do my thing and I encourage you to do the same. At times, we will agree and, at other times, we won't. That is exactly as it should be.

However, I don't want anyone to feel that they are not loved, liked or appreciated just because the rabbi or someone else disagrees with them. Jews always disagree. We revel in the concept of two Jews, three opinions.

Many in our country, now and in the past, have seen America as a "love it or leave it" proposition. . . as if being critical is not being patriotic.

However, our nation is filled with political opponents who are personal friends and even spouses.

Though it is becoming more difficult for Americans, on all sides of the political spectrum to remember this, we can and we should be able to disagree with one another and still respect one another, like one another and even love one another. Mature adults can disagree agreeably.

I don't want us to fight with one another. Just because we can doesn't mean we must. There is enough hostility being spread outside the walls of this Sanctuary that I choose not to add to the fire today.

Speaking out against injustice is central to what it is to be a Jew, yet so is pursuing peace. I want this temple to fight injustice, but I want this Sanctuary to be a place of peace, especially when we all come together, as we do on this day. As far back as Abraham and Sarah, the Torah promotes the fundamental concept of *Shalom Bayit*, a peaceful home.

For those of us who feel a sense of moral outrage when looking at what is happening in our country, the response is to get involved and to vote on Election Day, November 6. And, if we live in New York, we should vote in this week's primary election on Thursday, September 13. The same applies to those of us who approve of the direction in which our country is moving.

The Torah begins with the message that we are one, just as God is One. We were all created from one person to teach that none of us has a greater origin than the other. We are all family.

What will we do with our lives in the year ahead? Will we strengthen the community through involvement in social justice, politics, religion and

more . . . or will we make excuses and wait for someone else to do the job?

We can kvetch or we can make a difference.

On Rosh Hashana, we hope that our names are written in the Book of Life.

However, we are judged by our actions, not our hopes. And so, whatever your beliefs, I encourage you to be as politically active as possible; I urge you to be as active in promoting social justice as possible; I hope that you will be as active in Temple life as possible.

Part of that involves speaking out against injustice and evil. Part of that involves considering the feelings of our friends and our family. Balancing the two is the conundrum. Life is complex.

All of us can do better; all of us can be better. Ken y'hi ratzon, may this be God's wish and ours as well. AMEN