

**ROSH HASHANA 5779 – SECOND DAY**  
**September 11, 2018**

Our tradition teaches that Rosh Hashana is the date on which the world was created. We are also taught that the world was created with one person so that no one could claim a superior ancestry. We are all family, sharing this one world. So why is it that so many people seem intent on destroying our home and our family members?

Rosh Hashana is the day to begin the process of improving ourselves, our community, our nation and our world. All of those and all of us have plenty of work to do. Some of us, admittedly, are more prepared to acknowledge our faults than others.

However, I have long wondered: what would motivate someone to intentionally create products which would damage the lives of others? Why would someone devote what little time they have on this Earth to creating something like a computer virus, which seeks to damage that which brings so much benefit to others?

If the motivation was money, that would be unfortunate, but understandable. However, so many of the destructive forces in our society and our world seem to have little purpose other than to create havoc. Why would someone devote their life to damaging or destroying the beauty and wonder of creation?

What is it which causes so many people, especially in our nation, to lash out violently at those whom they know and those they don't? Why do so many Americans shoot and kill innocent co-workers, school children and people just minding their own business?

Why is there such ugliness and hatred? What motivates people like the Westboro Baptist Church or Alex Jones infowars to try to inflict emotional pain on people, especially those who have already suffered so much? What drives someone to dedicate the one life they have to hatred and hurting?

Just last week, a local chapter of a national fringe group was making its periodic appearance in front of the Pearl River Post Office. The one time I tried to engage them in an intelligent conversation I was met with what I will generously call "attitude," before just walking away. Of course, what should I have expected from people displaying a large poster of Barack Obama with a hitler mustache?

Putting aside partisan debate over political candidates, Supreme Court nominees and the like, I wonder why so many people are incapable of simply enjoying this world. What makes them focus on sowing conflict?

All too frequently, after a tragedy, we learn that mental illness was a contributing factor. Tragically, our society still often views mental illness as a character flaw, rather than, well, an illness . . . such as heart disease, cancer or diabetes. Like many illnesses, mental illness is treatable and often curable.

Back in 1980, on the eve of winning his first presidential election, Ronald Reagan spoke of America as a “shining city on a hill.” However, since the 1980’s, that city has thrown millions of people onto the streets, rather than providing meaningful and effective medical care for them. We have asked the ill to care for themselves or forced overwhelmed loved ones to do so.

Why do we do it? Why do we allow people’s psychological condition to deteriorate to the point that they are a risk to those around them, rather than provide effective treatment for them? As we have repeatedly seen, the consequences of neglecting the mentally ill are often deadly to themselves and to so many around them.

It isn’t necessarily their fault, but it is someone’s fault. . . ours. It is only when we elect political leaders who promote the message that “mental illness is an illness” that we can effectively cure it and lessen its impact on our society. We can reduce crime, lessen the threat of violence and save more of our young people from the scourge of suicide.

However, as tragic as the results of mental illness sometimes are, the mentally ill are not evil . . . they are ill.

Today, on Rosh Hashana, we celebrate God's creation of the world.

Today, on September 11, we mourn the massive destruction we witnessed seventeen years ago today less than thirty miles from this Sanctuary, as well as in Washington and Pennsylvania. Perhaps you, like me, remain mystified at the level of evil which causes some people to plan such destruction.

In the Middle East, young Palestinians have been swayed by their leaders to blow themselves up, along with innocent Israelis, rather than engage in dialogue. Throughout the Islamic world, we have seen decades filled with people committed to blowing up buses and restaurants, rather than building bridges. We have witnessed cultures filled with seething hatred and the desire to destroy. The leadership of Hamas continues to teach the mantra "we embrace death, like the Israelis embrace life."

Most of us here today remember the terror of this exact time of the day seventeen years ago. I was pulling into a funeral home parking lot, shortly before 9:00 am, when I heard a news bulletin about a commuter plane crashing into the World Trade Center. Half an hour later, the funeral

service was over and all of the bridges that would have taken us to Long Island were closed.

No one knew what was happening. There was terror. There was fear. There was panic. People were missing. Skyscrapers were collapsing and heroic individuals, so many of them from Rockland County, went streaming towards lower Manhattan.

The ability to conceive of such evil is, of course, nothing new. Eighty five years ago, one of Europe's most educated, cultured and sophisticated nations made a charismatic brawler and thug their leader. We know what followed, how this evil man succeeded in transforming friends and neighbors into enforcers and murderers.

If a nation like Germany could not only watch, but systematically build a society capable of carrying out the Holocaust, why should we be surprised at what the world is capable of today? If the nations of the world could watch and even celebrate Palestinian terrorism against innocent Israeli civilians and athletes for so long, why should we be surprised at the terror and violence which has been spawned throughout Europe?

In America, we have a plethora of groups devoted to harming people of different races, religions, nationalities and sexualities. We have psychological profiles of who is more likely to be the next mass killer. What we do not have is an answer as to why so many feel the need to make hatred their *raison d'être*, their reason for being.

We understand that if we did not have evil, we would not appreciate blessing. That may be true, but when evil strikes it is painful and fearful. We may not be committed to solving mental illness, but we know how to do it. However how do we effectively combat evil?

While there is no simple solution, we do know that so many of us are content to live our lives, doing our own thing, while hoping that others will deal with the bad guys. We may donate money to wonderful causes which fight the evil, but that is about as far as most of us are willing to go.

However, unless we actively combat hatred, it grows and flourishes. For some of us, political activism is the answer. However, I am asking everyone here to get involved in another way.

On this Rosh Hashana, a day on which we celebrate the world's potential; on this September 11, a day on which we mourn how low humanity has

sunk, I ask you to make a conscious effort to be nicer . . . kinder . . . and friendlier . . . particularly to those who need it most.

New Yorkers (and by that I mean everyone who lives in this metropolitan area), like to think of themselves as tough, rude and a bit aloof. However, the truth is that most of us are really caring and giving, especially when we need to be.

Seventeen years ago today, thousands lined up to donate blood for people whom they hoped would be alive to need it. New Yorkers have a strong attitude, but being insensitive and aloof only perpetuates hatred and negativity. Our Torah teaches “do not stand idly by, while your neighbor bleeds.” We need to engage the more vulnerable members of our society and let them know that they have a friend who is watching and who cares about them.

As individuals, we may not be willing, ready or able to confront those whose goal it is to destroy. However, we can be there to comfort the afflicted, to heal a bit of the pain they feel. We can help to mend the world.

Perhaps we will keep a disenfranchised person from spiraling out of control and maybe not. However, by practicing *tikkun olam* and making

our world a better place, one relationship at a time, one day at a time, we do God's work, we make a positive difference.

Many of us, of course, are quite settled in our ways. However, the message of Rosh Hashana is that we need to change. We shouldn't be embarrassed to bring out our more positive emotions and discard that tough, unfeeling New Yorker image. We can do better; we can be better.

We know that a lot of kids and adults are suffering, whether from mental illness, the effects of bullying, abuse and more. We can't stop all of the negative behavior, but each of us can do something to counter it, by actively promoting kindness towards others.

Nineteen centuries ago, Rabbi Tarfon was quoted in the Mishna, the first section of the Talmud, as saying: *Lo alekha ham'lakh ligmor, v'lo ata ven horin l'higamer mimena* . . . it is not up to you to complete the task, but neither are you free to refrain from it.

On this Rosh Hashana, it is not enough to remember or even to celebrate the world's creation. On this Rosh Hashana, we commit to more actively tending the garden which God gave us. We draw inspiration from the heroic men and women, in our area and elsewhere, who actively confronted evil on September 11, 2001.



**May we act, this day and every day, to comfort those whom we have avoided before, to get involved where we have looked aside before, to bring a positive message, to help combat the messages of hate and violence all around us.**

**It may not help . . . but, it just might! AMEN**