Rosh Hashanah Day 1 5775/ 2014

Rabbi Micah Becker-Klein

**On Anti-semitism & Hope**

Shanah tovah. Good morning.

Last night, on Erev Rosh Hashanah, I began by speaking about the idea of self awareness or *Cheshbon hanefesh* and of how we can begin the process of personal inspection. It is a call to look at *teshuvah*, communal inspection, mindfulness in our communication, and making space for forgiveness. To find our inner compass. And today, I would like to frame this discussion in terms of relationships. Specifically a way to extend our relationships and create connections and build bridges in response to anti-semitism.

A little humor to begin.

Four friends are sitting in a restaurant in Israel. For a long time, nobody says anything. Then, one man groans, "Oy." "Oy vey," says a second man. "Nu," says the third. At this, the fourth man gets up from his chair and says, "If you guys don't stop talking about the news, I'm leaving!"

This morning I will discuss a topic that has been on my mind throughout the course of this summer with increasing concern. It is tied into the idea of the ways that apparently increasing numbers of people on this earth relate to Jews— anti-Semitism. The rise of anti-Semitism around the world and within the United States is very disheartening. This is a scourge that raises its head it seems in every generation to varying degrees-- while in my lifetime, until this point, anti-Semitism has not dominated my life’s story, I am fortunate.

Certainly, it has for those who survived the Holocaust or through other times of extreme prejudice, and it seems that the problem is surfacing again and in new forms. I believe that we are in a better position to strike down this way of thinking, and to continue to thrive in the safe and welcoming environment that we have here, mostly, in Delaware and in the United States. I believe that together we can represent the truths of diversity and inclusion of holiness and openness that is the recipe and hope for a healthy and thriving world. Part of our Jewish story is our survival in the face of adversity, our resolve in the face of oppression and our hope in the face of hatred and cruelty. I believe that by building bridges is one great way to combat the challenge of anti-Semitism.

Our story can be encapsulated in the moments where we faced oppression with redemption and revelation. This cycle is one that we can see in the pattern of our Jewish history, and one that we can learn from even today. Our way of understanding this begins with our journey from Egyptian slavery to Revelation at Sinai, and then the period of discovery that ensued in the desert. This pattern has been ours and part of the lens that we use to look at our experience of history. I’d ask you to begin by asking yourself a few questions. What is your view on what could be the key to Jewish survival? What do you think has been a crucial part of the recipe that has allowed us to thrive and survive for 2000 years outside of Jerusalem? What do you think is the secret to our success? What do you think is the secret to our future success? Can you see your role in that Jewish story?

The following is a poem by Charles Reznikoff, an American Jewish poet who lived from 1894-1975. This poem resonates with me as one artistic way of exploring a wider Jewish perspective of, and a stronger response to anti-Semitism.

Out of the strong, sweetness.

And out of the dead body of the lion of Judah,

The prophecies and the psalms;

Out of the slaves of Egypt,

Out of the wandering tribesmen of the deserts

And the peasants of Palestine,

Out of the slaves of Babylon and Rome,

Out of the ghettos of Spain and Portugal, Germany and Poland;

the Torah and Prophecies,

the Talmud and the sacred studies, the hymns and songs of the Jews;

And out of the Jewish dead of Belgium and Holland, of Rumania and Bulgaria,

of France and Italy and Yugoslavia,

of Lithuania and Latvia, White Russia and Ukrainia,

of Czechoslovakia and Austria,

Poland and Germany,

Out of the greatly wronged;

A people teaching and doing justice;

Out of the plundered,

A generous people;

Out of the wounded, a people of physicians;

And out of those who only met with hate,

A people of love, a compassionate people.

This year has been an intense year for many peoples of many nations. In many places it also has been challenging for Jews. Our world is not devoid of anti-Semitism, or prejudice against people who are not in the majority culture. Our dream is that it doesn’t have to be that way. It can be different. That is the Jewish message in all of these types of conversations, and why Jewish voices have been at the front of the call for social justice, women’s rights, civil rights, workers’ rights, marriage rights and religious freedoms. But, the reality of this world in this time is different. We Jews have many rights and equality—much more than we have enjoyed in almost any time in history. And I still see hope, hope that with a focus and openness we can have a lasting and positive future.

Regrettably, the conflict between Hamas and Israel this summer has been hijacked by some and turned into a new expression of an old hatred. While I firmly stand in the belief that Israel needs to have a secure and lasting future, the situation itself is troubling. Associating Israel and its government and its right to self defense with all Jews is not the same as Jewish belief or Jewish action. Claiming that all Jews are responsible for Israel’s actions as a country is simply wrong. Nonetheless, I am here today to say that we need Israel to continue to be our homeland, and the ugly growth of anti-Semitism that was spurned by Israeli action is not equivocal, it only reinforces old stereotypes and fears. The cycle is crazy and it has to stop. As Rabbi Sandy Sasso wrote this summer, “That cancer of anti-Semitism that has long afflicted Western societies, which we thought had been cured, appears to have only been in a state of remission. We must be stronger in our ability to seek a just world, and we also must be resolved, without falling into prejudice and scapegoating ourselves, which interfere with our ability to discover true and lasting solutions to complex issues we face.”

Even some 60 years after the Shoah, the Holocaust, as much as we never thought it would happen again, it did— that the gassing of Jews would be heralded in the streets of any European city. And at the same time, what we have believed to be the dead communities of Russia and Poland and Germany have risen like Phoenix from the ashes. There are over 110,000 Jews in Germany today, with rabbinical seminaries ordaining progressive rabbis to serve these communities. Life is thriving in European Jewish communities in ways we could never have imagined 60 years ago.

My mother’s parents, my Papa and Grandma, may they rest in peace, were Holocaust survivors who met in Paris in 1939 just prior to Kristalnacht, the beginning of the Nazi Holocaust. They were from different areas of Poland, my Papa from a shtetl near Lodg called Prushka and my grandmother from a town called Nove-Sanz near Auschwitz. They certainly experienced violence and hatred leveled against them as Jews. They knew first hand the level of brutality that was possible. But that was not the story that my grandparents passed down to me or my sisters or my children. My grandparents brought to me the love of human beings. They survived because of the goodly, brave, and often unrecognized acts of so many non-Jewish people. My grandmother in particular would often tell me of episodes when someone who could have done otherwise provided her with much needed assistance. When I would say, “Papa, it is a miracle you survived.” My Papa would say to me, “it wasn’t **a** miracle, it was **many** miracles.”

There were so many kind people who helped my grandparents survive, escape, and make their home in the United States. From the porter at the evacuated American embassy in Paris who retrieved my Papa’s visa, to the gendarmes whose thumbs covered my Grandma’s *Juif*/Jew stamp on her passport. To those who provided food and water to them and so many others who were on a ship unable to embark. They taught me the value in looking for the holiness within everyone. They had hope that they also embodied and they passed that on to me. The trauma that they survived helped create for me a message of hope and faith. My grandparents had good relations with immigrants who came to the US after they did, regardless of ethnicity or background, with people of color, priests of the Catholic Church, or anyone they would meet.. That was passed onto me with the hope that deep down, people are good. People are just people my grandmother would say. And she would end saying, “peace on earth, that is all we want peace on earth.”

We are in a world today that is very polarized. And the question for us to probe is how will Judaism respond?

I believe the response is answered with another question—how will your Judaism inform your answer? My Judaism is shaped by many forces—my schooling, my family, my community. I think one answer is written in our Torah, it is the central mitzvah found in Leviticus, the verse *ve’ahavta lereyacha kamocha*. You shall love your fellow human being as yourself (Leviticus 19:18). It is a simple idea, but not easy to carry out. It’s been a challenge to face ever since it was written, and Rabbi Akiva, one of the first rabbis, taught us that this text is the most important mitzvah, the rest is commentary. To me, I understand this as a Jew to mean we are to be a *dugma*, a symbol, of how to be in this world, you, me, all of us here are representative voices for Judaism. We here, the Temple Beth El congregation—are all ambassadors of Judaism, our civilization— even if we are not all Jews. And we can help determine how Judaism will be expressed into the future and how the world in which we live will perceive those expressions of our faith and religion. We can build bridges of connection and support.

We are here in this life to help each other through with the values of justice, truth, and love. To balance the scales as it were. In a world that is not void of violence and hatred, we speak for justice, peace, and possibility. In a world that often sees the “other” the “outsider” as threatening, Judaism says, we understand because we have been in that position.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we look to do this work together as a community. We begin as a team—and begin the new charge for a new year. To build bridges and reach out to those around us in the other local communities of faith. To be able to show the pride in Jewish community and the support of our friends. I ask you to look at today as the day when our team starts our work, but in another two day or two months, you will need to continue that work on your own to help us to keep those connections. We will be together and be collaborative partners in this venture. Of course this is helped with a spiritual check in now and then— at moments like Shabbat services, discussion groups, community gatherings, and interfaith opportunities.

And even at moments like now, this very moment you can deepen your connection to **this** community. Look around you—find someone in front or behind you. Find eyes and take a moment to appreciate the blessing of being in community. Don't overlook this moment of potential. We are a community of values and meaning. We are here for each other and to help each other in this life.

We are very blessed to be in this larger community in Newark, Delaware. It is a gift that we should value, for this is not the case everywhere in the world. We enjoy the good relations with many neighbors and the other communities of faith in our locale. In the past, I have spoken about our deep connection with the Islamic Society of Delaware, and last year we established a great connection with the local Sikh community. We have strong connections with the University of Delaware and the academic community, as well. This value of being a part of an open community and ability to be present in each other’s houses of worship and to accept one another’s dialogue is exceptional. I think this is key to creating a positive atmosphere for our continued good relations for the future. And this is not only true for our interfaith relations, it is also true for our inter-Jewish relations as we enjoy a strong a warm connection with the 3 other Jewish congregations of New Castle County, the Siegel JCC in Wilmington, and the Jewish Federation of Delaware. You, my friends are the ambassadors, the messengers, or the angels. You are the voices now of this time. We represent the manifest reality of coexistence and the ability to manifest a reality that embraces the diversity of our world—financial, religious, and racial. Our welcoming community is a blessed example.

One part I love about TBE is our diversity. The true reality of what **is** a face of America and Judaism within North America. A welcoming, open community with roots in its past , but with eyes to a hopeful and promising future. A congregation that is open to interfaith families, single families, inclusive in our practices.

And we will not let the haters, the nay-sayers, the terrorists, anti-Semites, anti-gay, anti-love get in the way of marching toward a greater tomorrow. I believe that possibility, even if the dream seems far from the reality of now. To dream—that gives us hope. To believe—as our prophets put into words—that one day everyone on this earth will be accepting and open to the diversity of human beings in this blessed world in which we live. And the gift and blessing of diversity is still unfolding before us in ways that continue to cause us to have a renewed sense of awe.

I believe that it is our relations with others that helps us maintain a relatively low rate of incidents within our community. And while there have been some acts of vandalism, it is nothing compared to the individual physical acts of violence that have occurred in various cities within the U.S. and Europe. I believe that by maintaining those positive relations, if not extending them to be more significant, will help us to continue along a similar path. I would like to help TBE connect and reconnect to the local communities of faith, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Sikh, Quaker and other cultural associations who are our best opportunity to continue to be blessed to live within a welcoming, and accepting community around us. To gather together and to be able to listen to the narratives in others, to share our narrative, to hear concerns and questions, and to be able to share the weight of our stories together. But I am also hoping to collaborate on creating a connection between our congregation and the local Interfaith Power and Light non-profit organization. IPL is an organization that connects house of worship with ways of helping to green our congregations and actively seek ways of repairing the environment. And this brings together two important values-- helping our earth and deeper connections through our interfaith efforts.

I believe that the only way to overcome hate is with love, the only way we can do that is to manifest the openness and humanity we expect from our world. Perhaps we can explore the extension of our interfaith relations deeper and in time find our way to travel as an interfaith trip to Israel. To learn from a variety of perspectives the narratives and values that have created a deep sense of meaning of the land of Israel. Our good relations with our neighborhood churches such as the Newark United Methodist Church may be a good place for us to begin. Reverend David Palmer is the senior pastor, a friend to Temple Beth El for many years, and a colleague with a deep interest in creating a connection between our congregations on a theological and philosophical way. This is an opportunity to help strengthen our relationships and forge a stronger path.

I have hope in a positive future. I believe that light will overcome darkness, and that with truth we will overcome lies. We are blessed to live in this country and in this society. May we continue to do so, to be a community of diversity and of inclusion, and a community that can continue to be a light of hope. May our country continue to be a beacon of freedom and hope of democracy and liberty.

May you be inspired this Rosh Hashanah to find yourself connected to the community, to your neighbors, and to be the light, be the inspiration, be the model for how we all share in the benefits from a diverse world. Together we weave a new tapestry for a new year, a garment of brightness and one of joy and light. May we protect one another from the hurts and harms that his world may bring to us, and may we know the blessing of community support throughout the journey.

May we all be sealed for another year of life and health, blessing and peace. May your families and those who are dear to you be blessed with vigor and goodness.

Shanah tovah umetukah.