

Erev Rosh Hashanah

Our National Character

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L'shana Tova!

Welcome

Thank You

An extraordinary event occurred in our nation this past summer, and nary a soul noticed. Our military, and our nation as a whole, acknowledged an historical mistake, and changed the history of an iconic American statue. The statue, near an entrance to Arlington National Cemetery has stood as the image of the American ideal. And yet, for more than 60 years, it was wrong. In the mistake, the ongoing lie, the and finally, in the quiet apology, much can be understood about the state of our national character.

That statue, of Marines joining together to raise the American flag after winning a battle in World War II represents everything good about our country. People of different backgrounds joining together to serve our country and defeat an enemy. Americans, working together, sharing the burden of war, savoring the blessing of victory.

The statue was based on a photograph taken by Joe Rosenthal in February of 1945, and both the photo and the statue were all American in every way. The photo was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. All was well--except one little problem that would not be resolved until this year: one of the men in the statue was misidentified.

For nearly 70 years, we Americans thought the men in the statue were Ira Hayes, John Bradley, Michael Strank, Franklin Sousley, Rene Gagnon, and Harlan Block. Only Hayes, Gagnon and Bradley survived the war, as Strank, Sousley, and Block were killed in battle within three weeks of the picture being taken. It is possible to assume that a simple mistake could happen, and since half of the people photographed were no longer alive, finding the truth could be tricky.

But it turns out that the one who was misidentified was one of the survivors, John Bradley. And even more, his son, James Bradley, went on to write one of the great American

history books on war—Flags of Our Fathers, and in it John Bradley plays a central role. The book even became a successful Clint Eastwood movie. So the battle of Iwo Jima became fodder for the most well-known book about war and became a well-known movie and produced a well-known statue, and, it turns out that the basic facts were incorrect.

John Bradley was indeed on Iwo Jima, but was not in the picture. It was Harold Schultz, another Marine, who was in the picture and is depicted in the statue. Schultz lived a quiet life in Los Angeles, never saying much, never receiving any accolades or attention. And it wasn't until an armchair historian named Eric Krelle, who happens to be the son of my elementary school librarian, put it all together and proved that the picture was of Schultz and not Bradley.

The whole episode—from the events in February of 1945 all the way through the Marine Corps' acknowledgment this summer that an error had occurred, illustrates our national character at its best and at its worst. The story shows American pride and American responsibility in the image of the soldiers raising the flag together.

But it also shows American egotism, and American individualism at its worst in the person of Bradley who knew he was not a part of the event yet let the myth live on, even earning his son acclaim and wealth. The story shows American perseverance in the person of the historian. And it shows the willingness to grow and change, even in the Marine Corps. Ours is a complicated national character, and now more than ever, our American society faces challenge and needs our Jewish worldview.

In just the 12 months since our last gathering for Rosh Hashanah, our nation has experienced violence, killing, hate speech, violations of civil rights, xenophobia, islamophobia, negativism to unknown proportions and more.

We are less trusting of our fellow citizens than any time in recent history. We are more likely to belittle, besmirch, besiege those with whom we disagree. We have failed at seeing ourselves as a nation and have instead become fixated on our own individuality.

In Hebrew, the name for the United States is *Artzot HaBrit*, lands of the covenant. Our national covenant has been nearly shattered, and tonight, our country needs Rosh Hashanah to re-establish the covenant, to return to the *brit* which links us to one another and reminds us of our ability to forge a more perfect union when we come together.

Three Jewish values necessitate a new covenant: a return to valuing human life, a return to valuing law and the rule of law, and a return to valuing differences and the holiness of differences.

The first realization in this new covenant needs to be a return to our valuing every human life.

Rich or poor, young or old, black or white or brown or yellow or purple, Jewish or Christian or Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist, immigrant or Native American, all of us in these United States believe in our national sacred scripture, The Declaration of Independence: we are created equal, endowed by our creator with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Black lives really do matter! And so do the lives of all of us. Torah reminds us that we face a constant choice—we can choose life or we can choose death. Says the Torah:

U'vacharta ba'chaim, l'man ticheyeh atah v'zarecha—Choose life that you and your offspring will live!

In too many cities this past year, violence became an acceptable outcome. Whether the victim was an innocent unarmed African American or an innocent police officer working for the common good, we have failed to value our most basic beliefs about life.

We find excuses, criticize and turn on those who feel disenfranchised, and believe that our own view, whatever that view may be, is the only correct view. We have lost our collective identity, and even more worrisome, we seem to have lost our collective will.

But Judaism, and Rosh Hashanah, cannot allow us to continue on this dreadful path. Our tradition recognizes and celebrates and demands an acknowledgement of the holiness of human life. In a nation where violence and hatred have become far too common, a return to the core value of the sanctity of life must be a top priority, and one of the primary vehicles for honoring life comes in the role of law for us as Jews.

We Jews value law like no other people. We Jews began arguing about law, and our understanding of law within moments of receiving the first laws in Torah. We wrestled, wondering what it all meant, ultimately concluding that we could have a normative practice and also minority views and that all were acceptable and all considered the word of God.

No wonder we Jews have felt so comfortable as Americans! The American way of life is a society where the rule of law endures, where order and justice are deemed sacred pursuits. American jurisprudence was built on a foundation of Jewish law, and our society desperately needs us to remember those sacred connections.

Ours is a tradition which pursues equality under the law. Torah teaches that we are to have one law for all of us, for the stranger and the native alike. In Exodus 12 and many more times, Torah teaches us: *Torah Achat yehieh l'ezrach v'lager hagar b'tochechem*, you shall have one for the citizen and the stranger who dwells among you.

We Americans believe that justice must be equal, that all are entitled to basic rights, all deserve their day in court.

We believe in the Torah principle that we must have one set of laws for everyone in our nation. An America with different levels of justice depending on race or socio-economics is not just un-American, it is also un-Jewish!

And if we accept our Jewish understanding of the holiness of life and the importance of the rule of law, then our embrace of diversity surely follows.

We Americans believe in equality, even if our national life currently seems brutally unequal. Time and again Torah reminds us to be kind to the stranger, to welcome the stranger, to remember that we were strangers once in a strange new land.

Torah teaches: *K'ezrach mikem yehieh lachem hager hagar itchem v'ahavta lo kamecha ki gerim hayitem beretz mitzrayim*---The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love the stranger as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

So what about today, in 21st century America? Are we Jews going to be welcoming to immigrants and refugees? Are we willing to open our hearts and our wallets to help, or are we going to go against Biblical dictum and close ourselves from others? America is teetering, and America needs all of us, you and me, to answer affirmatively.

And if we do welcome those from foreign soil, how will we accept religious views different from our own? Will we be welcoming to Muslims, willing to lend a hand, build a relationship? Or will we instead insist on rounding-up based on religion, on religious litmus tests before entering the land of the free?

The xenophobia exhibited by a significant section of American society must not be tolerated!

We Jews know better!

We Jews have suffered as a result of such attitudes, our own grandparents and great-grandparents were attacked using similar means!

We more than most have a responsibility to stand up, to speak out, to open our souls to those who are different.

We Jews have needed such kindness from strangers for centuries, and now we have an opportunity to return the favor.

Will you hide behind walls and background checks and fear or will you allow your innate Jewish optimism to lead the way?

We Jews intuitively comprehend the value of difference. Most of us have spent our lives as a minority culture within a larger society. We have survived and thrived based on the grand American embrace of difference. But today too many of us have forgotten or ignored our own experiences, and our nation has suffered.

Honoring differences stands as a core value of Talmud, the major body of Jewish law. In story after story, case after case, we find in Talmud different views, different understandings, different ideologies. Talmud teaches us: *Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim chaim*—these and these are both the words of the living God. The Talmud stands as a single body, but it does not speak with a single voice. Instead, Talmud overflows with multiple voices espousing multiple views. Differences abound. And the whole thing is sacred!

Judaism has long embraced this notion of multiple streams within a river. In the modern world we Jews separate ourselves into Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Renewal and many other communities. And most of us, at least most of the time, recognize that the other paths can just as easily lead to truth, even while we may believe our own path is the best.

But America in 2016 lacks such understanding and appreciation. Instead of embracing diversity and seeing truth and holiness in differences, we have become a people who fear the other.

No longer do we honor those not like ourselves. Now we hide from those who are different.

America needs our Jewish understanding of multiple paths to truth.

America needs our Jewish belief in the power and holiness of diversity.

America needs us as individual Jews and as a Jewish community to stand up, speak out, and do the hard work of building respect and understanding.

Life, law and diversity. All are core Jewish values. All are core American values. Our nation seems like it is spinning toward madness, and we Jews, in our own sacred texts, our history, and our experience have the answers. We Jews can provide a light to guide our nation through this darkness. Our nation needs us, and our tradition call us to act!

We have heard a lot this past year about making America great again. And whether we recognize it or not, we have been uttering a very similar prayer in our High Holiday liturgy. The prayer is one you know, one we all sing with the cantor... Hadesh yameinu k'kdem. Renew us as in the days of the past. We say or sing the words fairly easily, but tonight, just for a moment, let us stop to consider the meaning behind those words.

On a simple level, we seem to be asking for another year, to be renewed in the book of life. We are asking God for another chance to get it right, another opportunity to continue our sacred partnership.

But on a deeper level, those words far more challenging. Are we seeking another year, or are we asking to go back to how things used to be? The modernists among us may choose to believe that we are seeking another year, but historically our scholars and sages suggest that this prayer asks for a return to the old ways. In a sense, we Jews are asking God to make us great again.

Do we really want to go back, either as Jews or Americans? As Jews do we want a return to the sacrificial system in Jerusalem with a Temple and an altar? Do we want to go back to a time when men and women were not treated equally? Do we want to go back to a tribal way of life? And as Americans, do we want to go back to less equality and less opportunity? Do we want a return to separation and segregation?

On this eve of a New Year, instead of a call to make us great again, let us affirm our commitment to making our nation greater than it has ever been. As Jews we see the world as a work in progress, each of us working in partnership with God to bring us ever closer to a time of Shalom.

The goal is still ahead of us. So too with us as Americans. Our greatest days are not in the past but in the future. We Jews believe in a messianic era yet to come, and we believe that we each have work to do to bring about that era. Tonight let us commit ourselves anew to that sacred call, and together we will create a Shana Tova u'metuka—a good and sweet new year for all of us.