

Kol Nidre 5781

Equality for All

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L'Shana Tova!

Long ago, one of the most dramatic parts of the service on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur would be the moment when the Cantor offered a seemingly private prayer. Sometimes the Cantor would leave the bima, praying from a spot hidden from view. Sometimes the cantor would stand in the back of the sanctuary, behind the congregation. And the cantor would begin to chant, turning quickly to wailing, in an effort to seek mercy from God.

The prayer is called Hineni, and Cantor Kari still says this prayer at the beginning of the Rosh Hashanah service. Hineni is one of the very few prayers offered in the first person singular throughout all of the holidays.

The Cantor chanting the prayer calls out to God, acknowledging his or her own personal shortcomings. It is actually the only prayer where individual sin is acknowledged. In Hineni, the cantor cries out, asking god to not punish the congregation because of the sins of the one praying on their behalf. Modern versions include a second request, that the sins of the congregation not be counted against the prayer leader. In both examples, individual actions are acknowledged, rather than the traditional first-person plural of what WE have done.

In a very real sense, the Hineni prayer stands as a powerful equalizer. By stepping off the bima, the cantor recognizes his or her own humanity, the very fact that the role of cantor, or for that matter, the role of rabbi, carries no special weight. When it comes to making mistakes and facing shortcomings, we are all equal.

Each year I look at those few moments as a great relief and a mighty burden. Relief because I can acknowledge my own shortcomings, my own mistakes, my own

failures. And a mighty burden because I know that I am called to be a model, that I am given the great honor and challenge of living to higher set of standards.

Above all, that moment shines for the cantor and me because, for just a few short minutes, we stand with all of you, no pretense, no difference in status. We are all held accountable. We are all equal. We are all humans in search of better selves, a promised land, a more whole world. Tomorrow we will look more at the journey to the promised land, but tonight let's turn to the pursuit of more wholeness, more Shalom, for ourselves and our world.

We arrive at this Yom Kippur living in a time filled with hate and fear. We have watched over the last twelve months as division and discord have erupted like a volcano, burning lava covering us all. We are living in a nation more filled with racism, more separated, less trusting and holy. Tonight, we are called to confront the hate, to acknowledge hard truths, and to take a side, committing ourselves to pursuing the good or taking responsibility for being part of an ongoing problem.

A wonderful midrash tells of how we humans came to have this little indentation between our upper lip and our noses. According the midrash, we were created with full knowledge of everything, but during the birthing process we lose it all, and end up with that little mark. Over the course of our lives we work to regain the knowledge, knowing that learning becomes a central element of living a good life.

Just as we teach our children to love, to be kind, to care for all of humanity, others in our midst teach their children to mock, to hate, and to destroy. Yes, hate is not a genetic trait. Hate is learned, taught by parents and grandparents to children and grandchildren. If we want to make the world more complete, teaching love over hate, hope over fear, becomes paramount.

From the time of the Torah until today, leaders, kings, and dictators have used fear and hate to build support and take down opponents. In Torah we learn of Balak, the king of Moab who became filled with fear of the Israelites. He called in Balaam, a prophet to come and curse the Israelites. Balak could have attempted to meet with Moses and the leaders of the Israelites, he could have searched for understanding. Instead, he allowed fear to prevail, and he sought harm for Israel.

Instead of cursing, Balaam uttered words we still sing at the beginning of nearly every morning service—Ma Tovu ohalecha Yakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael—how beautiful are your tents o Jacob, your dwelling places, o Israel. Balak reacted with fear and sought destruction rather than seeking to reach out. It was only the intervention of God in the form of the words from Balaam that saved our ancestors.

Balak fed his fear, but God intervened. In too many other instances, in generation after generation fear won, and too many people suffered. We Jews have learned that we cannot always rely on an intervention by God. Sometimes we need to act ourselves.

The division we face stands as one of the hard truths we face at the dawn of 5781. We are living in times of rising racism, rising anti-Semitism, rising hate, rising distrust and rising fear. Instead of hearing messages of equality and equanimity, our leaders instead stoke hatred, pitting one side against another.

Rising division forces us to look at our own lives, and on this day of atonement, we are called to see the ways in which we have contributed to the problems as well as the ways we have helped bring healing. Knowingly or unknowingly, all of us have added to the separation so striking in society today. When we choose where to live, where to shop, where to send our children to school, our choices have profound and far-reaching effects.

Each of us who has chosen to live in the suburbs must reckon with the economic and racial divisions plaguing our city. While we made the best choices for our families, other families felt the results of our choices. We can no longer look out only for our own—the upheavals in society have reminded all of us that we are interconnected, that we need each other, that we must look out for each other. Yes, until black lives really do matter, all lives are at risk.

On this Kol Nidre, we must own the truths of our modern world. Yom Kippur calls us to look in the mirror, individually, as a congregation, as a community, a nation, and a society. And once we have acknowledged the painful truth, Yom Kippur begs us to get to work!

We Jews have been reminded again and again that we must not remain neutral. A few weeks ago, we read in Deuteronomy that we are not to be indifferent. Apathy is not the Jewish way. Instead, we are commanded Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof—Justice, justice we must pursue.

The great 20th century Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that opposite of good is not evil, but rather indifference. When we stand idly by, we are in fact causing harm!

Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel taught the same lesson. He wrote that as Jews we are commanded to take sides, to get into the battle and work for good. The battles taking place in our streets are not those of others—they are our battles too!

This past summer we began a book group at the Temple to study Ibrahim Kendi's book How to be an Anti-racist. One of the truths Kendi teaches, and one that we in our own temple group understood anew involves this idea of taking sides.

Kendi teaches that to stand quietly when one views racism is to allow the racism to continue. The only clear path for change is to become an Anti-Racist. He teaches us that we must become vocal and active in our support of those who are targeted. Kendi reminds us that our call for tikkun olam requires us get involved, to speak out, to protest, to see that all of us need each other, that an attack on one is an attack on all.

We who read and discussed the book together recognized a powerful new truth: We have arrived at a moment in history which needs every one of us to step up and speak out. Yes, we are facing terrible challenges. But our times provide a gift. We can rise up and be better and build better. We are called this day to make a choice!

Join me in choosing the choice of our faith and our people.

Join me in choosing to make the world better for our children and grandchildren and the children and grandchildren of those we see as 'the other.'

Join me in raising a voice, in being present, in listening to the suffering of others, and in the hard work of making our world more equal, more hopeful, more filled with the divinity so visible in each and every one of us.

Join me in engaging in this work this year, and together we will bring ourselves and our world closer to the promise of Shalom.

This year, for a change, when we hear hate and fear, we must respond with love and hope. When we hear or see racism rear its ugly head, we must speak out, we must call out the hate, and we must stand with the most vulnerable among us to offer protection.

This year we need to be in the streets with people of color, we need to hear their pain, we need to support their pursuit of equality. This year we must not tolerate hate speech from anyone—not from an acquaintance, a relative, a friend, or even the President of the United States.

And when we read or hear those awful statements we cannot stand idly. We are called to respond. We are called to raise our voices, to go to the voting booth, to speak to our friends and neighbors and encourage them to do the same.

Tonight, as we atone for too much silence, let us also pledge to engage, to enter the fray, to add our voices, to make the cause of equality our cause, to truly change. Ani v'atah, nishaneh et haolam. You and I can change the world. Let us begin here and now.