

Yom Kippur 5778
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All of Us Stand Together

Over the summer, my family and I enjoyed one of the real pleasures of summer vacation. We took the great American road trip. A cousin's son was having a bar mitzvah in Dallas, and we decided to make an adventure of it. So, we packed our bags, hitched up the horses to the wagon, and hit the road.

For two weeks we traveled through Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas, a bit of Pennsylvania, and New York. Along the way we sang along with favorite songs at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, watched the eclipse on Beale Street in Memphis, stood on the 6th floor of the Texas School Book Depository looking out at Dealey Plaza. We marveled at the NASCAR track in Kentucky, cheered at a few major league baseball stadiums, stood on stage at the Grand Ole Opry, saw the homes of two presidents and more.

Melissa and I both appreciate a good road adventure, so long road trips for both of us are exciting and not at all dreadful. We have been taking the kids on long trips for years, driving to see family in Michigan and Nebraska nearly every year. And those trips, like the one this summer, all went well.

We made a decision years ago not to have screens in the car. So no Ipads, no movies, and generally speaking, not even a lot of phone time for either Melissa or me. Instead we had time to talk with each other, laugh together, sing together, and see the beauty of our country. We watched as the landscapes changed, as the accents changed, and we embraced the role of being explorers.

We learned a lot about this great country of ours during the trip this summer. We stopped, whenever possible, at local establishments. We read local papers, talked with locals, and took special effort to notice all of the similarities and differences we encountered.

Our trip began the same weekend as the events in Charlottesville, so we were especially attuned to questions of equality as we traveled. And a day spent at the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis only served to increase our focus on seeing the other, and even more, seeing ourselves in the other. What we discovered, and what troubles me today is the separation so visible in our nation today.

As we were driving across Tennessee on a hot and sunny Thursday, we saw the usual signs for restaurants and rest stops and hotels and parks. At one point we began to see signs for state

parks, and one of those parks jumped at me. The park is General Nathaniel Bedford Forrest State Park. I have no idea of its amenities or attributes, but I do know something about its name.

General Forrest was a rough tough Civil War General on the Confederate side. And after the war, he became one of the founders of the Ku Klux Klan. And the State of Tennessee, in its infinite wisdom, saw in him one worthy of honor, naming a state park for him. And today, all of these decades later, Tennessee still believes he is worthy of honor.

My eldest, Zachary, a history buff, was the one who first noticed the sign. He knew only of Forrest's Civil War history. When I explained the other aspects of the general's life, Zach, and all of us, felt disgusted by what we saw. We agreed that the state park was not a welcome place for us. I was and remain mystified that in 2017 enough good Americans in Tennessee tolerate such backwards thinking.

All over the south monuments stand to those who fought for the confederacy. Monuments to racists, to people who saw those of other races as less than human! Rare is the monument to those who were kidnapped, enslaved, tortured and more. Those are the monuments our nation needs. And those to the perpetrators of such atrocity need to come down. In the last year, finally, some have started to come down, but not without a fight.

Can you imagine any other country on earth with monuments erected for the losing side's leaders? Would the British place a monument for George Washington? Can you imagine seeing a monument to Rommel in North Africa? Go to Germany today and you will see not monuments to the generals but rather monuments for those who were killed, injured, maimed. The Germans got it right, and we Americans got it wrong!

More than ever we live apart, separated from our neighbors. Yes, we Jews no longer live in the ghetto-ish enclaves our grandparents knew. But look around any major city and you will see divides of race, socio-economics and more. Central High School in Little Rock, once the epicenter of integration, sits surrounded by poverty. Our cities are divided just as Syracuse is—white and wealthy in one part, people of poverty and color in another. The program of reconstruction began at the end of the Civil War was never completed, and we continue to suffer as a result.

Our Torah reading this Yom Kippur morning emphasizes the importance of equality. In Nitzavim we will read,

Atem Nitzavim hayom kulchem Lifnai Adonai elohaychem....

You stand this day, all of you, in the presence of Adonai your God—your tribal heads, elders and officials; every man woman and child of Israel; and the stranger in the midst of your camp; from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water—to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God and the oath that Adonai your God makes with you this day, to establish you as God's people and to be your God, as promised to you and sworn to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And not with you alone o I make this covenant and this oath, but with each one who stands here among us this day

in the presence of Adonai our God, and with each one who is not here among us this day.
(Deuteronomy 29:9-14)

Yom Kippur calls us to come together as one, from the wealthiest to the poorest, from the native to the foreigner, male and female, young and old. All of us have a share in the covenant with God.

Even more, all of us have a share in the covenant we make with each other. When we fail to recognize the broad equality of humanity we cause harm to ourselves and to others, and we diminish God's creation. When we equivocate and say that good people exists on both sides, we cause harm to all humanity and we distance ourselves from the Almighty. Our call is to come together, to see in the other something sacred, to recognize the holiness of difference and to celebrate that difference.

Ours is a Torah of equality. We believe that none of us was created superior to anyone else, that all of us are God's children, that humanity does best when the least of us receives the same care and concern as everyone else. Our torah reading this morning reminds us that the equality of the covenant was not a one-time event but rather a continuing journey, bringing each successive generation into the holy brit linking us to each other and to God.

The Talmud teaches, "If you see wrongdoing by a member of your household and you do not protest—you are held accountable. And so it is in relation to the members of your city. And so it is in relation to the world."

As Jews we are held accountable in ever-widening circles of responsibility to rebuke transgressors within our homes, in our country, in our world. One chutzpadik medieval commentator teaches we must voice hard truths even to those with great power, for, "the whole people are punished for the sins of the king if they do not protest the king's actions to him."

Today I speak words of protest joining hundreds of my Reform rabbinic colleagues across the nation in fulfillment of our sacred obligation. We will not be silent. We will, without hesitation, decry the moral abdication of a President who fuels hatred and division in our beloved country. This is not a political statement. We, like the prophets before us, draw from the deepest wisdom of our tradition to deliver a stern warning against complacency and an impassioned call for action.

We call on you to rise up and say in thousands of ways, every day, as proud Jews and proud Americans, "You cannot dehumanize, degrade and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation. Every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, woman, man, and child is beloved of God and precious in the Holy One's sight. We the people, all the people, are created b'tzelem Elohim, in the image of the Divine. All the people are worthy of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

We Reform Jews read the words of Nitzavim as both a blessing and a challenge. We are called to pursue equality, called to do all we can to insure freedom for others. Sometimes that means opening the eyes of others, and sometimes that means opening our own eyes.

I was not born into a family with a coat of arms. But as I learned and grew, I adopted a motto of sorts which fuels my every action. It is important enough to me that I have it

embroidered on the atarah of my Talit and have it framed in my study. The words are simple: *Da Lifnai Mi Atah Omed*. Know before whom you stand.

I placed the sign above the doorway of my study, and I look at that sign every day. When I am walking out to greet someone, I see that sign. When any person walks into my study, I see that sign. And when I am all alone in my study, I look up and see that sign. As a people and as a nation, we need that reminder now more than ever.

Da Lifnai Mi Atah Omed reminds us of the holiness of every person, of the holiness we carry within ourselves, of the holiness of God, sometimes hidden, sometimes vibrantly arrayed before our eyes.

When I see those words I am reminded that I exist in relationship with others, that none of us lives in a vacuum. We all stand before God, and we all stand before each other, sharing a sacred spark, each of us a party to the same unifying covenant.

Da Lifnai Mi Atah Omed teaches us to see holiness in the world, as Jews and as Americans, here in the United States, in Israel, and everywhere else. We are called to proclaim the holiness of humanity, the holiness of equality, the bond we share with each other and with God.

Da Lifnai Mi Atah Omed reminds us this Yom Kippur of the need for healing in our world. Our world seems to be spinning out of control, led by those who simply cannot see the holiness of another person.

Even more, they fail to see God in the eyes of another, fail to see that we share the same covenant with the Almighty, no matter our faith or race or immigration status or socio-economic status or any other means of dividing us.

They fail to see that our connections strengthen us, enrich us, bring us closer to the wholeness of shalom.

They fail to see that the highest level of holiness in our shared covenant comes from the inclusion of all of us!

On this Yom HaKippurim, our day of atonement, our faith and our tradition call us to respond to our world.

We are called to see the connections.

We are called to build more connections, ever strengthening our sacred covenant of equality.

We are called to celebrate the sanctity of the self so visible in all of us.

We are called together, all of us this day. And to that call let us respond, loudly, and in one voice: Hineni. Here I am.