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Rosh Hashanah 5778

In his firsthand account Alan Zimmerman, president of Beth Israel synagogue in Charlottesville, VA wrote, *Forty congregants were inside. Here's what I witnessed during that time.*

*For half an hour, three men dressed in fatigues and armed with semi-automatic rifles stood across the street from the temple. Had they tried to enter, I don't know what I could have done to stop them, but I couldn't take my eyes off them, either. Perhaps the presence of our armed guard deterred them. Perhaps their presence was just a coincidence, and I'm paranoid. I don't know.*

*Several times, parades of Nazis passed our building, shouting, "There's the synagogue!" followed by chants of "Seig Heil" and other anti-Semitic language. Some carried flags with swastikas and other Nazi symbols.*

*A guy in a white polo shirt walked by the synagogue a few times, arousing suspicion. Was he casing the building, or trying to build up courage to commit a crime? We didn't know. Later, I noticed that the man accused in the automobile terror attack wore the same polo shirt as the man who kept walking by our synagogue; apparently it's the uniform of a white supremacist group. Even now, that gives me a chill.*

*When services ended, my heart broke as I advised congregants that it would be safer to leave the temple through the back entrance rather than through the front, and to please go in groups. This is 2017 in the United States of America.*

Over the last few years we have watched the uptick in anti-semitic hate crimes, a rise in neo-nazism and white supremacy- Whitefish, Montana, Portland, Oregon, Charlottesville, VA. Hate in the streets- a hate that drives people to see the world not as a place of exploration, a place where difference, pluralism, striving, sometimes failing and collaboration lead us to a better

place, but rather as a world where the goal is a utopian *people's community- where some belong, but many do not and those that are different must be weeded out.*

Scene: Charleston, South Carolina- June 17, 2015- Dylan Roof attends a Bible study class at Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Kills 9 people.

Felicia Sanders survives the shooting with her granddaughter hiding underneath a table. She said:

"The weapon was in the hand of a white stranger whom Sanders and her fellow parishioners had welcomed barely an hour earlier and with whom they had read verses from the Book of Mark. Dressed in a long-sleeved gray shirt with a fanny pack hanging from his waist, the man rose from a white folding chair and announced: "I'm here to kill black people."

Dylann Roof, 21, an avowed white supremacist, unleashed a torrent of bullets, beginning with a point-blank shot that killed the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, 41. Then the shooter stopped to reload. Sanders's son, Tywanza, pleaded with the man. "No, you don't really have to do this," he said. "You really don't have to do this."

The man responded with another precision shot.

As we watch the coverage of these crimes, of cities, communities affected by this particular kind of hate crime--we might be asking ourselves-- "What is required of us as religious individuals in the 21st century?" These days ideologies travel very fast across the interwebs, we are in each other's living rooms constantly through facebook, twitter, and mass media. So what we believe, ideologies that motivate us, that inspire us- actually matter. What we say, what we teach, how we rally- actually matters. So...what does this new century demand of the religious person who is motivated and committed to the tradition while also grounded in the discoveries of science, equality, Enlightenment and the findings of the modern world. What does the rabbinic voice have to teach us about living in the 21st century? About the dangers of ideologies that deny

ideals of pluralism, that deny human dignity, ideologies that lack humility and command their own distorted view of utopia- and people who are willing to do practically anything to attain their own version of utopia?

I want to start the answer with a further exploration of why utopic ideologies are so dangerous.

Sir Isaiah Berlin, the Russian- British writer and theorist delivered a speech called “A Message to the 21st century” on November 25, 1994— it was an acceptance speech for the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws at the University of Toronto.

He said:

“Men have for millennia destroyed each other, but the deeds of Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Napoleon (who introduced mass killings in war), even the Armenian massacres, pale into insignificance before the Russian Revolution and its aftermath: the oppression, torture, murder which can be laid at the doors of Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot, and the systematic falsification of information which prevented knowledge of these horrors for years—these are unparalleled. They were not natural disasters, but preventable human crimes.”

“If you are truly convinced that there is some solution to all human problems, that one can conceive an ideal society which men can reach if only they do what is necessary to attain it, then you and your followers must believe that no price can be too high to pay in order to open the gates of such a paradise. Only the stupid and malevolent will resist once certain simple truths are put to them. Those who resist must be persuaded; if they cannot be persuaded, laws must be passed to restrain them; if that does not work, then coercion, if need be violence, will inevitably have to be used—if necessary, terror, slaughter.”

Each of these fanatical dictators were driven by a vision of utopia, their own utopia- that one can create an ideal society and will do whatever is necessary to achieve it. Visions of utopia demand perfection. But the vision of perfection in this world, olam hazeh- as opposed to perfection as an ideal in olam haba is not only dangerous but antithetical to a strong thread of our tradition.

What has always fascinated me about the Torah is the underlying message that is given over and over again that utopia does not work in this world. We begin with Gan Eden- the absolute utopia created by God. Adam and Eve enjoy life in the garden and are told - everything in the garden you may eat, but the fruit from the tree of Knowledge-- you may not eat of it. So where was this forbidden tree placed? Rashi says b'emtzah..in the middle of the Garden. Not on the side, not off to the back but right there, in the middle. The rabbis of our tradition give us some more insight into this curious tree in the center of utopia. In the Zohar we learn of its unique ways of enticing Adam and Eve towards it. "Rabbi Yitzhak said, "The tree gave forth an aroma like the fragrance of a field blessed by Adonai. Because of that aroma ascending, Eve desired eating it. (Zohar, Breshit, 1:36a)

If utopia was to last here on earth, why the eitz hadaat, the Tree of Knowledge? Why in the center of the Garden? Why with an enticing aroma? Why with the infliction of death? The rabbis take this notion of non utopia even further by teaching us in the Talmud, Pesachim 54b that there were a number of things that God created before creating the world. This concept of phenomena that were created before the world gives us a unique view into the rabbinic mind- --- what they deemed as essential material for building the world. One of the phenomena that the rabbis identify as being created before the world-- were the clothes of Adam and Eve.

What this suggests is that the rabbinic mind believed that perfection was impossible. Utopia would never last in this world. Gan Eden would never survive as a permanent home. The Tree

of Knowledge was going to be eaten--- and how would God help Adam and Eve after eating? God would create clothes- primordial clothes, that would help them face the imperfect world.

Multiple times a week in prayer we utter the words Hadesh yameinu kikedem. Renew our days like kedem- Kedem meaning like before-we seem to be praying for God to Make things great again. What does this mean? Make things great like when? Like the Garden of Eden?

In a stunning midrash in eicha rabba the rabbis teach:

Renew our days as of old "Like the days of Adam, as it is stated, "God drove the man out, and stationed him east (kedem) of the garden of Eden, the cherubim and the fiery turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life." (Eichah rabba 5:22) The rabbis re-interpret the word Kedem as meaning East rather than as before. Which changes the entire way we understand what this prayer is actually saying. The midrash suggests that the Kedem we are referencing here is in its second iteration, once Adam has been removed from the garden. Maybe the ideal is not utopia says Maharat Dasi Fruchter- "but is rather a place where we can see the garden, and keep reaching for it. We'll never be there on every level. All of us are broken--reaching, grabbing for the tree of life. And this space is not a weakness--it's what we pray for, it is what makes us humans, it is where we are most whole. It is a re-imagining of the "good old days." "

If we move out from the garden of eden and all of the way to the end of the Torah- we are taken through an epic journey of a people from Exodus, through Numbers, through the desert, 40 years and the Torah ends not with the entering of the people into the land of Canaan- the promised land flowing with milk and honey but on the outskirts of the land. Looking from a distance like Adam harishon- the first human on the outskirts of the Garden of Eden. Never reaching the land within the last 4 books of the Torah.

So the question arises. What are we meant to do with the oft repeated desire of humanity to achieve utopia? What is the response from the midst of our tradition? How do we safeguard ourselves against the dangers of perfection, so that we do not fall into the trap of leading from hate? And even further, what can we as the collective Jewish voice bring to the world in the 21st century?

This question is not only relevant for the larger world in which we find ourselves, but the small worlds that exist inside each of us. The inner voice that is relentless in each of us pushing for perfection, the harshness by which we approach our inner lives, our own strivings, our distorted view of success and the endless ways we try to safeguard the image of perfection that we project to the outer world. It's false, it's untrue and it's dangerous. And it's not what our rabbis had in mind for the intentional life and practice of a Jew in the world.

Our goal is not utopia, it is not perfection, it is failing and then striving, it's humility, it's creativity and in a more global sense it is radical curiosity infused with humility. When we are grounded in our identity as Jews then we can engage in cultures around us with curiosity, with a sense of wonder without losing the uniqueness of what makes us Jews. Our imperfections give us a key to connection. Perfection closes one off to the outside world because you believe you have everything you need in your utopia. Failure or imperfection seeks connection- an open mind to rebuild, to keep stretching until something else emerges.

In the world we find ourselves living in today a religious person must live with humility at the forefront, the obligation to safeguard human dignity, and the ability to intermingle in cultures and spheres that are wholly other from where she calls home. This includes getting out of our own echo chambers, speaking across the political divide and using active listening as a religious practice. Our midrashic tradition teaches, truth is scattered amongst humanity and the only way to get closer is in relationship to the other. We can only have access to the depths of

consciousness, of betterment through truly seeking relationship with those who are not like us with the understanding that they hold a piece of the Truth and they as well as we are striving always towards someplace which is better than where we find ourselves now.

The magnificence of humility is that when cultures, religions, practices can dance together- truly remarkable advancements are made.

In a stunning speech to the Hebrew Teachers College in 1966 Dr Gershon Cohen, the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, said:

“If there is anything that modern Jewish scholarship has taught us about Jewish culture, it is that a general familiarity with the milieu in which Jews lived is indispensable to understanding any particular phase of its history. How can we understand the “Golden Age” of Spain, or the theological and moral emphases of Franco German pietism, or the mystical doctrines of the Hasidism of medieval Egypt without some acquaintance with Arabic literary tastes, Christian theology, and Sufism respectively? And what is the appropriation of many of these tendencies if not religious and intellectual assimilation?

Even though many of these innovations evoked strong protests from conservative contemporaries--the fact remains that subsequent generations have acknowledged that these thinkers and writers made essential contributions to their age and served as sources of renewed vitality for Jewish life. ---The great transformations that overtook the Jews during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have likewise been in large measure the products of assimilation--the rebirth of Hebrew, the growth of *Judische Wissenschaft*, the liberalization of the Jewish religion, the acceptance of Yiddish as a respectable vehicle of Jewish literary expression, the growth of Jewish nationalism, and the State of Israel itself.”

The understanding that we don't have it all means that we must seek connection. The intermingling of ideas of people, cultures, religions has led time and time again to the birth of innovation, creativity and longevity of our beloved tradition. It has pushed us to find the strands- and they are almost infinite- that are worthy of preservation and mixing in the beauty, wisdom, and brilliance of other cultures and religions without losing the essence of who we are.

As we move forward into a new year- 5778- let us be driven by these principles:

The world that our rabbis built was one of imperfection. The rabbis taught that Repentance was created before God created the world. Failing is part of living. Perfection is not a Jewish value.

Utopia is not meant for this world- that is why it failed. It is other worldly. A vision of harmony, peace and perfection is something we should strive towards, but our existence here as mortals will only allow for striving and viewing at a distance the perfection of olam haba.

A religious person must live with humility- the notion that we do not own the entire Truth. Every person, culture, religion has something to teach- we do not give up who we are as Jews by being curious, by exploring what others have brought into this world- by even integrating some of their teachings. This exploration pushes us to be in touch with who we are as a people, what our tradition is and is not and when something cannot be integrated- knowing that it has a place on its own in this world. It is a world where Jews should never have to escape through the backdoor of a synagogue, where African Americans never hide under desks for the color of their skin, it is a world where my imperfect self can be both loved and pushed to grow- as much as your imperfect self.

I don't know that we can change the problem of hate that abounds in the human condition, but I know that as a people we have a responsibility to bring the wisdom of our tradition and the first question God asks of Adam and Eve is not why are you not perfect? Why did you ruin utopia? But rather, Ayeka? Where are you? Where are you today and where do you want to be tomorrow? Ebbing just a little more towards the land of promise. A place where multitudes dance together in their individuality and their collectivity- unafraid of difference and unafraid of imperfection.

May we see this soon and in our day. Amen.