Rosh Hashanah 2018

Rabbi Mario Karpuj

Before I begin, I need to make an important announcement: Please pay attention to some changes we're planning for tomorrow's services back in our home at Or Hadash.

As you enter the building there will be two different tables to register. One will have a red tablecloth and the other a blue one.

You will have to choose, based on your political voting record, the right table for you. A blue or red dot will be attached to your ticket and grant you entrance to the sanctuary.

If you registered at the red table, you'll be entering the sanctuary through the doors on your right. If you chose the blue table, you'll be entering through the doors on your left.

Inside the sanctuary, you'll find a *mechitzah* running through the middle isle which will prevent each group from seeing or listening the other one.

I strongly encourage you to come early because we will need a quorum of 10 people on each side before we can consider that we actually have a *minyan*, given the fact that we are becoming, for all practical purposes, two different congregations.

We must ask a huge favor of everyone joining us, relating to the honors to come up to the *bimah* for both openings of the ark or *aliyot* to the Torah.

You see, the letters inviting some of you to participate in the service were sent before this new idea came to fruition, and therefore, we will have cases in which congregants will be coming up to the *bimah* from both sides of the isle.

If this happens during your honor, we ask you to act in a civilized manner—do not to respond to any provocations from other congregants, like if the person coming up from the right is wearing a red baseball cap instead of a kippah, or if the person coming up from the left is wearing a Nike shirt.

On this same topic, and for obvious reasons, we will be placing both flags on the right side of the sanctuary.

In terms of Rabbi Analia and my own place in the sanctuary, we believe both groups should feel validated by our location.

Those on the right will see us standing to your left, particularly when we talk about the current state of affairs in our beloved United States of America.

Those on the left we'll see us standing to your right, particularly when we speak positively about our beloved State of Israel…thus proving, in the process, what you already knew about our political leanings and ideas.

All in all, this is nothing more than our humble attempt to enact the aspiration of our congregation's mission statement: "offering a warm, inclusive, spiritual Jewish environment" by mimicking your daily experience of living in today's America.

We're confident that these measures should calm any apprehension you may experience when coming to Or Hadash—the anxiety of having to interact with someone who sees things differently, listens to other radio stations, or watches that network you won't even mention by name.

We thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Why did you become a rabbi?

I have been asked that question more times that I can count throughout the last 25 years of my life.

My answer traditionally includes the recounting of my unusual Bar Mitzvah preparation—and the subsequent chain of events that left me in charge of leading Friday night services for my congregation after my Bar Mitzvah—and the story of my beloved rabbi and teacher who inspired me to take on this unexpected journey when I was 15 years old.

What I don't usually tell is the story of the night I actually made the decision to become a rabbi.

It happened in August of 1985.

I was back in Córdoba visiting my parents after spending two years at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Even though I was really happy with my experience at Hebrew U, there were two significant developments that altered the course of the plan I had envisioned when I first arrived to Israel.

The first was a change in policy at the rabbinical school in Buenos Aires, which didn't allow me to start my rabbinical studies in Jerusalem (the way I had originally planned) and instead required me to go back to Argentina if I wanted to be ordained by that institution.

The second was related to a certain young lady I was interested in, who had chosen to stay put in Buenos Aires and go to medical and rabbinical school there instead of following me to Jerusalem.

In any case, there I was: back in Cordoba, trying to decide between going back to Jerusalem or moving to Buenos Aires to start my rabbinical studies.

During that time, I heard that a famous Israeli rabbi, Rav Shmuel Avidor HaCohen, who was teaching at the seminary in Buenos Aires as a visiting professor, was coming to our town to give a talk.

I went to listen to him, and after the class, I approached him to introduce myself.

I told him about my situation and about the fact that I had already registered to start my studies at the seminary a couple of weeks later, even though I was still debating which path to take.

It was that at that moment that I heard myself asking him to define for me what it meant to become a rabbi. What did people, I wondered, expect from a rabbi?

Rav Shmuel, with whom we ended up studying in Buenos Aires and in Jerusalem, and who was part of the Rabbinic Court that ordained both Analia and myself eight years later, looked at me and said:

"As you surely know, in most synagogues around the world, rabbis don't usually lead services.

That function is the role of either a cantor or a *sheliach tzibur*, a member of the congregation charged with the responsibility of leading prayers.

The leader, generally speaking, follows his or her own rhythm—with the exception of two moments during the *tefillah*:

At the end of the silent readings of the *Shema* and the *Amidah,* he or she will wait for the rabbi to finish praying those sections before moving on to the next prayers.

"What this means," Rav Shmuel continued, "is that the congregation waits for the rabbi to say the last word of the third paragraph of the *Shema*, *"Adonai Eloheichem emet,"* and the last word of the last blessing in the *Amidah* "*Hamebarech et amo Israel ba'shalom.*"

"That's the answer," he said smiling. "People expect two things from their rabbi: *Emet*, truth, and *Shalom*, peace."

That night I decided that I would not go back to Jerusalem to finish my Bachelor's. That night I decided to become a rabbi.

For most of the last 25 years, the lesson I learned from Rav Shmuel have served me well.

But lately, I have to confess, it has become more complicated.

Truth used to mean that something was in accord with fact or reality.

When someone relating a story said that the story was “true,” he or she meant that the events of the story were presented in accordance with the way they happened.

But then, some time ago, history was confronted by social narratives, facts were challenged with alternative facts, and reality proved not good enough. We needed a parallel reality.

When our narratives are a filled with a good dose of alternative facts, we enter a parallel reality in which the immersive environment can be either similar to the real world, or it can be fantastical, creating an experience that is not possible in our ordinary, physical reality.

An experience that, in effect, doesn’t need to be in accordance with any fact—as long as it conforms with the way we want to see the world around us.

I have personally experienced—and sometimes fully embraced—this kind of parallel reality in every country I’ve visited and every city I’ve lived in.

These days, I experience it at a very particular place in our beloved city.

The place is the Mercedes Benz Stadium, and in my parallel reality experience, the Atlanta United team is the object of my narrative.

In that space, my world is ruled by what some may call alternative facts. Let me explain:

It is a world in which every call the ref makes that favors our team is just and right; and, on the flip side, each call he makes against us is a perversion of the natural order.

In my pious passion for a just world, I make every effort to correct the ref and the linemen when they make a mistake…by outrageously screaming at them, as my wife can attest.

It is a world in which I always know between right and wrong, a world in which if you are not with me, you are against me.

That’s why I don’t want any fans from the other team to be near me; I’m perfectly happy sitting around people that see the world in the same light I do.

On the rare occasions in which fans of the opposing team come close, I just yell at them as loudly as I can—with the intention of both intimidating them and preventing them from presenting any argument that may disprove mine.

During the two hours I spend at the stadium, I am transported to a primal world in which my tribe is always right and their tribe is always wrong.

A tribal world of us versus them.

On the days my team wins, all is well in the universe and the MARTA journey back home is filled with joy and laughter.

On the days we lose, all kinds of conspiracy theories cross my mind and my mood is anything but festive.

But in either case, once I get home and I take off my tribe’s jersey, I reenter a different world—the one I like to believe is the real world.

A world in which we are not always right and they are not always wrong.

A world in which decent people abhor physical or virtual *mechitzot* that prevent them from seeing each other or listening to each other.

A world in which we actually welcome being confronted with ideas that question our own, because we know these have the potential to help us grow.

A world in which we see those who disagree with us not as enemies, but as partners in thought, who are also trying as hard as possible to make this world a better one—even if we disagree with their politics or methods.

A world that, as we were taught by Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel in the Mishna, "stands on three principles: *עַל הַדִּין,* on justice, *וְעַל הָאֱמֶת*, on truth, *וְעַל הַשָּׁלוֹם*, and on peace."

Allow me to finish with a story from the Talmud, found in the tractate of Shabbat, 21b.

The story describes a famous discussion by the most renowned houses in our tradition, the House of Hillel and the House of Shamai, regarding the lights of Hanukkah.

The House of Hillel maintained that on the first day of the holiday, we should light one candle, on the second day, two, and so forth until the eight candles of the last day are lit.

The House of Shamai, on the other hand, were of the opinion that on the first day we should light eight candles, on the second day, seven, and so forth until, on the last day, we light only one candle.

I don't have to tell you which house won the discussion. As you all know, we follow the tradition presented by the House of Hillel.

The fascinating thing to me is that the Talmud follows the discussion by immediately telling a different story: one of two sages who lived in the city of Sidon, a port city that is still standing, located south of Beirut in modern Lebanon.

According to the story, one of the rabbis acted in accordance with the opinion of the House of Shammai, and the other one acted in accordance with the opinion of the House of Hillel. Each provided a reason for his actions.

There is no account in the Talmud telling us they didn't talk to each other, no recollection anywhere in our sources that they spent their holidays yelling at each other and calling each other names.

My dear friends, a lot is being written these days about the future of American Jewry, and many see bleak days ahead of us.

As long as we allow the partisan divide in our country to enter our sanctuary and our Congregation—to create a rift among us—that prophecy of doom will become more and more of a reality.

But if instead we choose the path of our two sages in Sidon, we will understand that with our differences and despite our opposing views, we are all brothers and sisters.

We are proud members of this precious and awesome tribe called the Jewish People, called to the sacred task of bringing a new and brighter light, an Or Hadash, to our darkened world.

L'Shanah Tovah Tikatevu v'Tichatemu.