

Convictions Without Certainty

Let me start off with some very familiar words from the High Holiday *Machzor: Unetaneh tokef k'dushat hayom ki hu nora v'ayom* – let us declare the sacred power of this day, for it is awesome and full of dread. **Especially for the rabbi.**

Yes, it is a tough time for rabbis to be addressing their congregations as this New Year of 5779 begins. Find Jewish sources that criticize policies of the current government and infuriate one group of worshipers. Use other texts of our Jewish tradition that defend the policies of the current Administration and infuriate a different group of congregants. Refrain from comment on the controversial issues of the day and infuriate the rest of the people who are here.

And so I ask you: **What is a rabbi to do?** Pick a side, and you lose. Pick no side, and you lose. This is the fractured United States of America in which we rabbis all across the country find ourselves in as we gather to greet the New Year—the toxic and divided America that we are living in and which seems to assault us at every turn.

Of course, the business of expressing our worldviews and the policies that we favor has always been a rough business. But over the past several years, our political discourse so quickly descends into hyperbole and name-calling—not only in American life, but in Jewish life—and how we speak about the State of Israel as well. If there is one thing I have heard consistently from you, the members of this congregation, during these past many months, it is that you are weary from living in this era of all-out-assault on American and Jewish life. And I am, too.....

So what is a rabbi to do as we start a New Year in the Divided States of America? With the many fractures in the American Jewish community? Here's the one-sentence version of my answer: **Let's figure out how we can move forward by living out our deepest principles while at the same time letting go of the certainty that we—exclusively—are right.** Which is exactly what Jewish tradition has been encouraging us to do for more than 2,000 years. Because a life without conviction is a life without values—and therefore, without meaning. But living as though we—and only we—have access to the entire truth—living with the certainty that our positions are the only conceivable way forward—leads to arrogance, polarization and the inability to compromise for the larger good.

That's the tension that we face as we begin a New Year. And one could argue that this very tension is at the heart of the Torah readings that we will read on these Rosh Hashanah days—the tension that is embodied in the life of our patriarch Abraham.

We all know that Abraham does a lot of good in his life. He leaves his ancestral pagan homeland to start a new, monotheistic religion. He establishes a Covenant with God that marks the beginning of God's relationship with the Jewish people. When three visitors appear at his tent, Abraham welcomes them in with open arms, teaching us about hospitality. When God wants to destroy Sodom, Abraham stands up to God, attempting to rescue what may be a few righteous individuals, showing us the infinite worth of each individual and the need to stand up for what is right. Abraham is portrayed as a loving husband and parent, by respectfully burying his beloved wife Sarah and by sending his servant Eliezer to find a wife for Isaac.

Abraham the warrior; Abraham the religious iconoclast; Abraham the courageous hero; Abraham the family-man. And yet, we do **not** read a single one of these stories on Rosh Hashanah.

Instead, our Sages chose two extremely challenging episodes in the life of our forefather. Circumstances in which Abraham had to act with absolute and complete conviction despite the collateral damage that would result from those actions. This morning we read of Abraham's decision to send his son Ishmael and his concubine Hagar out of his home with nothing more than a bottle of water and a loaf of bread. Surely, Abraham knew the dangers they would face—a woman and her son, alone, in the wilderness in the desert sun. But Sarah wanted it and God approved. So Abraham, the man of faith—the man of complete conviction—obliged.

Tomorrow morning we will read the *Akeidah*—the binding of Isaac—although this is not a story about Isaac, it is almost entirely Abraham who is the subject of the tale. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, and nowhere in the Torah do we learn about any doubts that Abraham may have had. Some of our Rabbis later read into the story a hesitation here or a delay there; while others see Abraham's actions, for instance, his early rising on the morning of his journey with Isaac, as an indication of Abraham's eagerness to please God, to do what he felt he had to do. But from a plain reading of the text, Abraham hears God's voice. Abraham follows the directions. Abraham has absolute certainty.

What we don't often stop to think about are the **consequences** that ensue from Abraham's certainty. The next time the Torah mentions Sarah we learn that she has died. The midrash suggests that Abraham never consulted her about God's command to offer their son as a sacrifice. When Sarah learned what her husband had set off to do, she begins to cry so deeply that three wails emerge from her being, corresponding to the *shevarim*, the three wails of the shofar that we still listen to on this day. Her grief is so great that her soul bursts forth from her body and she dies. Abraham comes back from his **journey of certainty** on Mount Moriah only to find that his beloved wife has died from heartbreak.

And what about Isaac? What was Isaac's relationship like with his father after he was bound on the altar by his father? The Torah records **no other** instance in which Abraham and Isaac actually speak to one another again. According to the Torah, the next time that Abraham and Isaac appear together is on the day that Isaac and Ishmael come to bury their father.

That is the double-edged sword that our Rabbis present us with as we start the New Year. Without Abraham's passion and conviction, his absolute certainty that this is what God has called him to do, there would be no Covenant, no monotheism, and no Jewish people as we know it. At the same time, the absolute certainty of his faith destroys human relationships in the process.

In a nutshell, that is both the beauty of having convictions and the problem with too much certainty. It strains relationships—sometimes to the breaking point. And my fear is that our many certainties are tearing the fabric of our relationships—both as Americans and as Jews. As New York Times columnist Bret Stephens recently argued: “We disagree about racial issues, bathroom policies, health care laws, and, of course, the 45th president. We express our disagreements in radio and cable TV rants in ways that are increasingly virulent; street and campus protests that are increasingly violent; and personal conversations that are increasingly embittering. This is yet another age in which we judge one another morally depending on where we stand politically.”

Nor is this just an impression of the moment. Extensive survey data show that Republicans are much more right-leaning than they were twenty years ago, Democrats much more left-leaning, and both sides much more likely to see the other as a **mortal threat** to the nation's welfare. In fact, fully 50 percent of Republicans would not want their child to marry a Democrat, and nearly a

third of Democrats return the sentiment. Inter-party marriage has taken the place of inter-racial marriage as a family taboo.

Finally, the polarization is electronic and digital, as Americans increasingly inhabit the filter bubbles of news and social media that correspond to their ideological affinities. We no longer just have our own opinions. We also have our separate “facts,” often the result of what different media outlets consider newsworthy. And in case we had all forgotten, we are about to enter an election year.

As we start a New Year, what are our dinner table conversations going to consist of? Do we have room at our tables to talk about the fact that college campuses are increasingly places that shout down the opinions of conservatives **and** places that point out that structural discrimination still exists in this country? Do we have room at our tables to talk about the genuine love we have for the State of Israel along with the constant threats it faces to its survival **and** talk about the fact that the ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate is making Israel a place far less hospitable to non-Haredi Jews and alienating increasing numbers of Israelis in the process? Or that we **both** have to hold Palestinian leaders responsible for incitement of hatred against Israelis and Jews even as we acknowledge that life for many Palestinians in the territories is filled with daily humiliations?

Yes, even around our dinner tables, we will strain to have conversations that contain the competing values that exist among our families and our friends. And what happens when we move out of the safety of our homes? Can we have conversations with people with whom we disagree at our work places and the places we volunteer our time? Can we have conversations with people with whom we disagree passionately at Beth Shalom and in our houses of worship?

As the New Year begins, we must ask ourselves: How many times did we look at the decision someone made about a significant political issue and build a case around them, their motivations, and their moral commitments before we asked them any questions? Did we lift up curiosity? Were we able to **still** the small but potent judgmental voices inside our heads and inquire: What motivated you to make this decision? Why do you believe this is right and just?

And we don't have to do this on our own. The Penn Center for Civic Engagement has workshops to bring diverse groups of people into dialogue around controversial issues. This year, in fact, I happen to know from a high-ranking source in our Philadelphia Jewish Federation that we are going to bring in Chris Satullo to convene dialogues for the Jewish community around our differences with regard to policies related to the State of Israel. The format of the workshops will move away from people trying to convince someone else that their position is right and the other's position is wrong, but instead help participants to **listen** in order to **understand**, and to **speak** in order to be **understood**. To even be willing to acknowledge one's own misgivings and to ask genuinely curious questions. What would it be like if the goal were to focus on exploring a variety of perspectives rather than winning the debate? Because the only way in which we can develop trust—as a Jewish community—and as citizens of the United States of America—is if we are willing to look for new opportunities to solve problems together. Yes, I know this sounds “quaint” in the turbulence of these times; but the alternative of simply bashing the people who don't share the same convictions as we do will only continue to tear the fabric of what binds us together. And that should be a source of great concern to each and every one of us here—regardless of where we locate ourselves politically or how we show our support for the State of Israel.

So what is asked from you and from me on this Rosh Hashanah before Yom Kippur at a time of such turbulence? I believe it is this: Seize the sanctity of this moment. Break the impasse. Break down the anger. Break through the stubbornness. Open your heart, open your mouth. Initiate the first piercing of the wall of the partisan divide. This is the process of *Teshuvah*, the process of reconciliation, that we come here to begin in a New Year of divisions.

To live them well, these Days of Awe require personal courage that will lead to communal reconciliation. Who is a Jewish hero according to our Sages? The one who makes an enemy into a friend, and the one who is able to turn an adversary into an ally. You can find a hundred reasons for not reaching out. But outreach begins now, with **us**. So let's do something daring: Many of us are sitting in new places this year in our Main Sanctuary. If you are able to leave your seat, go over and introduce yourself to someone you may not know,

but someone with whom you are sharing this new beginning. Find someone new to you in this room and greet that person by extending your hand or by giving an embrace—provided that you first ask for permission! Make this truly a new beginning. **(People will take some time to introduce themselves).**

Let me conclude with this observation: the Jewish tradition that Abraham initiated had the **tenacity** to endure 2,000 years of Exile and many periods of excruciating persecution. Yet it had the **flexibility** to spawn a religious literature whose primary feature is the voices of Sages with wildly differing positions on Jewish law who could still have Shabbat dinner in each other's homes and encourage their children to marry the offspring of the rabbis with whom they disagreed. It created ways of identifying as Jews as diverse as Sephardic and Ashkenaz; as varied as Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, modern Orthodox, ultra-Orthodox, Hasidic, to Zionist, secular, and cultural Jews. To Jews by birth, Jews by choice, and non-Jews who support the raising of Jewish families; from ambivalent Jews to passionate Jews to philanthropic Jews to Jews who are foodies. It all started with Abraham. But it will only continue if we find the path that allows us **both** to stay true to our convictions **and** acknowledge that others may own some bit of the truth as well. That's the miracle of this messy Jewish people that Abraham initiated. And it is that same commitment to creating a sense of unity out of our differences that has been the founding principle of the United States of America—which is the true source of our greatness as a nation.

In the coming year, may our convictions be matched by our kindness; and may our passion be matched by our humility—so that true healing can begin—for ourselves, for the Jewish people—and for this country.—*Kein yi'he ratzon*. So may it be. *Shana tova tikateivu*—May we all merit to be inscribed in the Book of Life and Blessing in the coming year.