

## The Upside Down World

The Talmud tells a story of Joseph, the son of the sage Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, who became deathly ill and was thought to have died. Then he suddenly regained consciousness. It was as if he had returned from some far-away place. As he regained consciousness, his father said to him: ‘What did you see?’ Joseph said: ‘I saw an *Olam Hafuch* (a world turned upside down). What is above was below and what is below was above....’ His father said to him: ‘My son, You have seen an *Olam Barur* (a clear world), you have seen the world clearly....’” [Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 50a]

Many commentators understand Joseph’s vision to have been a glimpse of the World to Come, where those who have suffered in this life will be honored in the world to come and vice versa. But it is also possible to read his vision as a clearer, more unadulterated vision of **this** world. Perhaps the world we live in is the *Olam Hafukh*, the upside-down world, where, despite the advances of technology and a world of abundance, we are living at a time of greater polarization and disarray that at any other time in recent memory. When the level of vitriol has risen to a fever pitch and we cannot even speak to each other across our differences; when the number of mass shootings threatens to numb us into disbelief; when the health of the planet is increasingly imperiled; when parents and children are separated at the border; and when the institutions of civil society seem increasingly ineffective. Perhaps that is what Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was telling his son – now you see *Olam Hazeq*, this world of ours for what it truly is—a place that is so distant from its potential—as to begin to feel unrecognizable.

And for the American Jewish community, as we begin this New Year, many of us feel as though we are living in an *Olam Hafukh*, a world turned upside-down. What is the world that we live in? Is it the world of hate and violence and mass murder, anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia? Is it a world in which Jews—after all we have been through—after the countless times we have been scapegoated, targeted and murdered—here, now, we Jews are still the world’s Eternal Other? After 250 years of American Democracy, is this the best we can achieve? Security guards outside our synagogues; locking our doors; anti-Semitism on the rise; dog whistles and blood libels from elected officials. Jews murdered in synagogue. Is this really the America—and the world—of 2019?

It would appear so. Eleven Jewish souls, who gave their lives, *al Kiddush HaShem*—literally for—and in the midst of—sanctifying God’s name on a Shabbat morning at the Tree of Life Synagogue in

Pittsburgh—are evidence of that. So, too, the woman who was murdered and the three who were injured in the synagogue shooting outside of San Diego. The world may be upside down, but after Pittsburgh and Poway, there is no denying what we see, and we see it clearly: *Olam Barur*.

Pittsburgh and Poway mark only the most violent examples of the anti-Semitism that is rising in this country. In the last week of August, there were three assaults on ultra-Orthodox Jewish men in Brooklyn—attacks largely not covered by the press perhaps because, as in a majority of anti-Semitic instances in New York, the perpetrators were not white supremacists. In New York City last year, there were four times as many hate crimes against Jews as against blacks. These physical horrors—beaten with a brick; whipped with a belt—are the tips of anti-Semitic icebergs found on both the Left and the Right that have moved definitively and rapidly into mainstream waters.

Elie Wiesel was once asked what his greatest disappointment was in life. Wiesel answered: “I was convinced in 1945 that what happened must never be forgotten. One thing appeared to me then: that anti-Semitism had died in Auschwitz. But now I realize that only its victims perished. Anti-Semitism is still alive and well.”

*Olam Hafuch*—an upside-down world. When the certainties of society collapse, when people are looking for some reason to explain their misfortune, when people are scared, history shows us that they blame the Jews, the world’s historic scapegoats. Now we are the recipients of anti-Semitism from the Left **and** from the Right in this country. We are .2% of the world’s population and just 2% of the population of the United States, but to the anti-Semites past and present, we are 100% the cause of all the world’s problems.

Let me quote you from someone—see if you can guess when it might have been said: “In all of human history, the anti-Semites have always been the war-makers, never the peace makers; the foes, never the friends of religion; the apostles of tyranny; never the champions of liberty; the spokesmen of reaction; never the leaders of progress; the voices of tribalism, never the teachers of fellowship; the destroyers and never the creators. Name an anti-Semite of any land, of any age, and you will name not merely a foe of the Jew, but a foe of the finest values in civilization—the noblest standards of human life. The enemy of the Jew has always been the enemy of humanity. What history teaches the present verifies.”

That man was a rabbi named Fred Isserman. He spoke these words to his congregation in St. Louis in May of 1941. For so long we had thought that it would not happen here. But sociologists who have studied anti-Semitism for generations have concluded that the measure of a society can be taken by how they treat their Jews. “The treatment of the Jew,” writes Dennis Prager and Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, “has historically served as one of society’s great moral barometers. Watch how a nation, religion or political movement treats Jews, and you have an early and deadly accurate picture of that groups’ intentions, not only toward Jews—but toward all groups they consider to be other.” The hate that begins with Jews never ends with Jews.

So what is the answer? To turn inward and hunker down more deeply and make sure the doors are locked tight? Or perhaps to turn to our Jewish tradition and look for guidance.

Indeed, the start of a New Year might offer us some fresh perspective. We might think that Rosh Hashanah would mark the start of a look **inward**—and yet so many of its themes ask us to focus **outward**. The themes of the Days of Awe relate to the whole of humanity. We proclaim that this is the anniversary of the entirety of God’s creation.

We see this shift in a subtle change in the *Amidah* prayer for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—a shift that we do not find on other festivals. On other festivals the key section of the *Amidah* begins, *Atah bechartanu mikol ha-amim*, “You chose us from among all the nations.” The emphasis is on Jewish *particularity*. On the Days of Awe, however, the parallel prayer begins: “And so place the awe of the Lord our God, over **all** that You have made... so that **all** of creation will worship You.” The emphasis is on *human solidarity*. And *human solidarity* is what the world needs right now.

Another theme of these days points us in the direction of how we can respond to an *olam hafuch*—a world that appears to be upside down. One message resonates through these days: **life**: “Remember us for **life**, the One who delights in life, and write us in the book of **life** for your sake, God of life.” We sometimes forget how radical this was when Judaism first entered the world. The Egypt of the Pharaohs was obsessed with death. Life is full of suffering and pain. Death is where we join the gods. The great pyramids and temples were homages to death.

Anthropologists and social psychologists still argue today that the reason religion exists is because of people’s fear of death. So it is all the more remarkable that as Jews—despite our total and profound belief in *Olam Ha’Ba*—the World to Come—there is almost nothing of this concept in most of

the books of the Bible. Instead, we emphasize the obligations we have in *Olam Ha'Zeh*—in this world—rather than the Word to Come. Which is why we say daily in the Psalms: “What gain would there be if I died and went down to the grave? Can dust thank you? Can it declare your truth?” Which is why Moses, as he approaches the end of his life, turns to the next generation and says to them: “Choose life, so that you and your children may live.”

Why so? Why, if we believe the soul is immortal, that there is life after death and that this world is not all there is, why do we **not** say so more often and more loudly? Because since civilization began, heaven has too often been used as an excuse for injustice and violence down here on earth. What evil can you **not** commit if you believe you will be rewarded for it in the world to come?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains it in this way: “Against this horrific mindset the whole of Judaism is a protest. Justice and compassion have to be fought for in **this life**—not the next. Judaism is not directed to *fear of death*. It is directed to a far more dangerous fear: *fear of life* with all its pain and disappointment and unpredictability. It is fear of life, not fear of death, that have led people to create totalitarian states and fundamentalist religions. Fear of life is ultimately fear of freedom. That is why fear of life takes the form of an assault against freedom.”

Against that fear we say from the beginning of Elul—the last month on the Jewish calendar—through Sukkot—Psalm 27 over and over: “The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom then shall I be afraid?” On Rosh Hashanah we blow the shofar, the one mitzvah we fulfill by the breath of life itself without needing any words. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, the “anniversary of creation,” we read in the Torah and haftarah not about the birth of the universe but about the birth of Isaac to Sarah and Samuel to Hannah as if to say, one life is like a universe. One child is enough to show how vulnerable life is—a miracle to be protected and cherished.

That is why we American Jews have to do two things at once: both be more vigilant against those who would seek us harm only because we are Jews—and at the same time affirm that we stand in solidarity with all those who would be deemed to be Other. As dark a day as the murders at Tree of Life were for the American Jewish community, those murders were not just another pogrom in the long history of Jewish oppression. Because unlike the countless pogroms in which the surrounding community stood by or abetted the attack, in Pittsburgh, there was solidarity. As Wasi Mohamed, then

the head of the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh, pointed out: “Negative rhetoric against the Jewish community is poison. You know, it’s poison for our democracy, it’s poison for our country, and it’s negative to everybody, not just that community.” Those words were backed up by many in the Muslim community with deeds as well: Over \$200,000 was donated by Muslims in this country to the Jewish Federation of Pittsburgh to support the Tree of Life victims.

Their support, in other words, wasn’t a favor bestowed on us. Our neighbors understood that an attack on the Jewish community was an attack on them, too. That the entire community recited the Mourner’s Kaddish—and that The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette ran the words in Hebrew letters on the front page—was further evidence that what was being protected by our fellow Americans, wasn’t simply our right to exist. It was our right to lead unashamed, full Jewish lives. Which meant that we would support all those who have come to this country with their different races, creeds and religions—that we Jews would affirm that this country has always been a haven in which others could do the same.

That is why after 51 Muslim worshipers were gunned down in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand this past spring, the Jewish community did not stand idly by. The Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh raised tens of thousands of dollars to support the Muslim families in New Zealand. As the chair of the Board of the Pittsburgh Federation, Meryl Ainsman, said last spring: “Unfortunately, we are all too familiar with the devastating effect a mass shooting has on a faith community. We are filled with grief over this senseless act of hate. May those who were injured heal quickly and fully, and may the memories of the victims forever be a blessing.”

And it is not simply that we Jews must respond when there is hatred and violence directed at others—which we must. But we must also offer our unique historical perspective in the form of resources to others who face marginalization. Throughout our history, we Jews have experienced what it is like to be outsiders in Diaspora communities; we have learned how to sustain ourselves through our devotion to sacred texts that ennoble our lives and give us purpose. Through these experiences, we Jews have something to teach the world about how to make it more free, more just, and more compassionate.

So that from our *Tanach* we have the stories of Shifra and Puah, the midwives who disobeyed Pharaoh’s genocidal decrees; Rahav the prostitute who resisted the Jericho secret police to hide

Hebrew spies; Natan the prophet who confronted King David over his adultery and murder; Abraham who argued with God to protect even the guilty citizens of Sodom and Gemorrah; Moses who consistently defended the people against God's outbursts, and more.

From Rabbinic Judaism, we learn the pro-social value concepts and practices of *brit*, joining with other citizens for sacred social purposes, *tzedakah*, mandated sharing of financial resources, *lifnei iveir*, refusing to take advantage of another person's ignorance or vulnerability, *ba'al tashchit*, avoiding destruction of natural resources, *hochei'ach to'chi'ach*, courageously and tenderly confronting even our loved ones and superiors over wrong conduct, and more.

In a century in which the citizens of this country are often starved for meaning and purpose, we Jews have much to bring to the table. We know, for example, ways in which different groups can debate and pursue robust but civil arguments. As we begin a New Year, let me invite you to be part of a new dialogue group that Rabbi Merow and I intend to inaugurate with a series of discussions in which members of our congregation with differing political points of view will lead respectful dialogues. The goal will be **not** to convince the person with whom you disagree why they are wrong, but to learn more about what brings that person to his or her understanding of the world. Our Talmudic tradition is based on a series of dialogues in which opposing points of view are preserved and disputants engage in an often-messy conversation that lead to more knowledge and progress. Such a process is the Jewish vision for how we create a more just and democratic society.

We can teach all this in—and to—America. It is not by accident that we have found a home here. We have always fared better in lands of tolerance and liberty than in autocracies. More than in any other country in our 3000-year-old Diaspora, we Jews have found security and opportunity in these United States of America. Let us not take it for granted; and let us work to make sure that other marginalized groups benefit from that security and opportunity as well.

*Olam Barur* – this too I see clearly: the world is **not** indifferent to the murder of Jews as they have been before. They say *Kaddish* with us, but more than that—together we pledge to redouble our efforts to make sure that we turn the world right side up, for all of us. That we bring an end to senseless hate and violence, that there is no place in this world as we see it for such things—or for the careless rhetoric—that leads to them.

The world may indeed be upside down, but you and I can change the world, we can turn it right-side up, *l'taken olam, b'malchut shadai*, we can repair the world to the way that God intended it to be. May each one of us be up to the task—*Kein yi'he ratzon—Shana Tova Tikateivu*—May we each merit a New Year of blessing in which the world that we see is a world of blessing and peace for the Jewish people—and for all the citizens of this country—Amen.