

### Oy! - Rosh Hashanah Day 1 5779

Two older Jewish men were sitting together on a park bench, friends for many years. One looked at the other and said, "Oy." The other looked back at his buddy and replied, "Oy." The first gentleman repeated again, "Oy," to which his friend acknowledged in return, "Oy." Back and forth they went, running through this exchange several more times, until Max finally turned to Irving. "Hey," he said, "I thought we had agreed not to talk about Israel."

We laugh at this exchange because it's sort of funny and we laugh at this exchange because it's sadly true and we recognize, through this exchange, that there are so many different ways, unfortunately, that this joke's punch-line could have been completed – all of which would have been equally apt.

"Hey," said Max. "I thought we had agreed not to talk about politics." "Hey," said Irving. "I thought we had agreed not to talk about anti-Semitism." "Hey," said Max. "I thought we had agreed not to talk about #MeToo." "Hey," said Irving. "I thought we had agreed not to talk about gun violence or immigration or police brutality or hunger." There is so much good and love and beauty in this world but there is so much despair too these days, so many ways in which society looks far different from what we would hope for, filled with so many problems which seem impossible to solve. As we gather together for Rosh Hashanah, many of us feel like religion is not living up to its highest purpose if it does not speak to issues of the day offering guidance, wisdom, or spiritual resources with which to confront the bleak state of our world. Judaism should be a prophetic voice, rousing our spirits and calling us to justice! It should also be a source of comfort and strength in troubled times.

There is a famous *midrash* (rabbinic story) which imagines God standing on High about to create Adam, the first human being, when two groups of ministering angels approach. Love and Righteousness enthusiastically endorse the Divine plan; they believe that people will perform many acts of goodness and relate to one another with deep care and compassion. Truth and Peace, however, are opposed to the idea of creating civilization. They fear that human beings will fight with one another and spread falsehood, that both honesty and unity will be diluted upon their arrival. Needing to break the tie, what did God do? The Divine took Truth and cast it to the ground, thus ending the stale-mate. Then God went on and created humanity.<sup>1</sup>

This issue of “truth,” of course, has been very much in the news over the last many months. And while the *midrash* just quoted certainly places this virtue as least important when compared with Love, Righteousness, and Peace – the actual treatment of other human beings being more important than the ideas that these humans espouse – elsewhere in Jewish tradition truth is listed as one of the three things upon which the world endures.<sup>2</sup> How to resolve this contradiction that Truth is so vital and yet was sacrificed by God in the creation of the world? Our *midrash* goes on to conclude that when the ministering angels asked almost precisely this question, the Divine responded with a verse from Psalms: “Let truth spring up from the earth.”<sup>3</sup> Part of our role as members of the Jewish people is to mine tradition for the lessons contained within - to look for the Truth our faith asserts, help to bring it to light, and share it with others. As we turn to the texts and themes of this sacred season, let us look for some of the values that the High Holiday season calls us to bring forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis Rabbah 8:5

<sup>2</sup> Pirkei Avot 1:2

<sup>3</sup> Psalms 85:12

## 1. The Inviolability of Family

Most of the Torah and Haftarah readings for Yom Kippur focus on moral and ritual behavior, but the Scriptural readings for Rosh Hashanah have a different unifying premise: they all deal in their own way with the sanctity of family. Whether it is Abraham and Sarah who are overjoyed at having son Isaac at such an advanced age or Hannah, whose prayers for a child are so emotionally raw that they cause her to appear drunk, we see the yearning that parents have to create new life and pass on their values to the next generation. And whether it is Hagar desperate in the desert as she looks on while son Ishmael starves to death, or Abraham tortured over having to sacrifice his beloved Isaac, or Rachel weeping for her children in Ramah refusing comfort, we see the devastating pain that occurs when parents are separated from their children – or even when the mere threat exists that they will be so.

In many ways, the Torah and Haftarah readings for Yom Kippur – about the scape-goat rite and fasting, taking care of the vulnerable and staying away from sexual indiscretion – seem like more appropriate selections for the High Holiday season than these family narratives – they deal with law and ritual and how we are to behave, they give us concrete guidance for living as good and responsible human beings. And yet, just like a recent television commercial which proclaims, “Every great why needs a great how,” the stories of Rosh Hashanah provide the basis for it all, the grand reason behind our actions and efforts. Because there are people who depend upon us, because we want to leave this earth a better place for the next generation, because we care about modeling good behavior and raising good citizens, because there are people we love who love us in return – for all these reasons we look to improve our behavior and better our world. Family is our best motivation for right and our deepest wellspring of support.

Over the past year, we have seen this notion of family threatened in a myriad of ways – through innocent lives lost to school shootings and opioid overdose and deaths by suicide, through Israel’s new surrogacy law which discriminates against LGBTQ individuals becoming parents by denying them state-supported funding open to heterosexual couples and single women, through parents and children being separated at the border of our country. This last example is particularly painful for many of us, ourselves from families of immigrants once faced with the impossible choice between staying in a hostile and often dangerous homeland versus risking safety to seek refuge somewhere new. When I hear the story of the *Akedah* this year, the chilling Binding of Isaac which we will read tomorrow, I think of our patriarch’s dilemma - forced to choose between obedience to God and the safety of his child - and how many of us vigorously disagree with his decision to put compliance with the Divine Word over protection of his own son. Refugee families reverse Abraham’s choice, deciding that the safety of their children is primary. For this they are often punished and judged.

One of the truths that we call forward this High Holidays is that families belong together. We are all too familiar with the terrible pain which results when it is otherwise.

## **2. The Power of Language**

“We have sinned against You through foul speech, and we have sinned against You through foolish talk.”

“We have sinned against You by scorning, and we have sinned against You by speaking ill of others.”

“We have sinned against You through empty promises, and we have sinned against You through baseless hatred.”

Indeed, in the entire *Al Chet* prayer from which these lines were taken, more than a quarter – 11 out of 43 – deal specifically with speech acts adding gossip, misusing our words, and speaking unkindly as amongst those sins for which we atone this High Holiday season. Here, too, we might be surprised at the offenses which we call out on this holiest of days – not religious failings but interpersonal ones; not highest order evils like rape or murder but quiet, more insidious wrongs that slowly chip away at human relationships and society as a whole; not only sins of deed but also those of thought and especially word. Dr. David Livingston Smith, author of *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others*, explains that the very first step in the road that leads to cruelty and genocide is dehumanization, speaking of others not as human beings but as dirty, dangerous, and opportunistic creatures that must be eradicated in order to prevent harm. "We all know, despite what we see in the movies," Smith tells NPR's Neal Conan, 'that it's very difficult, psychologically, to kill another human being up close and in cold blood, or to inflict atrocities on [him].'"<sup>4</sup> In order to overcome the natural inhibitions we have against treating other people poorly, we start to view them as vermin or parasites or dangerous predators. Hence the Germans calling the Jews *untersmenschen* (sub humans) and rats; the Hutus involved in the Rwandan genocide calling the Tutsis cockroaches.

Over this past year, we have seen the power of language firsthand whether it's misogynistic speech that has led to violations of the #MeToo movement; racial and xenophobic slurs that help to justify stingy immigration policies; anti-Semitic, Holocaust-denying rhetoric from self-described Nazis and white supremacists including some running for public office and even one – Arthur Jones – who is a candidate for Illinois' third congressional district. Israel has passed the Jewish Nation State Law which, in describing the basic nature of the country, fails to mention either equality or minority rights, relegating

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2011/03/29/134956180/criminals-see-their-victims-as-less-than-human>

some groups (including Diaspora Jews) to the status of second-class citizen. There have been assaults on the press and on individuals with disabilities. There has been vicious anti-Zionism used as a rallying cry for BDS and, far worse, as an excuse to shower fire kites and missiles down upon Israel.

One of the truths we call forward this Rosh Hashanah is that words have power, that hateful speech is not harmless but rather reflects an underlying ideology of bigotry that will ultimately lead to devastating acts. And, if we're being honest, most of us here are at least somewhat complicit in the creep of incivility and polarization sweeping our nation. Each of us points to the other side as being closed-minded, misguided, and discourteous; each of us sees our own words and actions as reasonable and necessary given the enormity of what's at stake. We must find a way to fight all the dangerous, damaging evils in our world, but we must do so without losing our ability to speak respectfully and listen carefully to one another. Our words have too much power not to.

### **3. The Essentialness of Hope**

Given the difficult state of our world, it can feel naïve or overly simplistic or Pollyannaish to maintain hope in better days, to truly believe they are to come. And yet, perhaps more than any other value or belief, hope is one that has maintained and sustained the Jewish people for millennia, allowing us to overcome overwhelming odds and endure in impossible circumstances. The writer and activist Rebecca Solnit explains that hope is not a passive security-blanket or amulet, not something we simply hold onto for comfort or to make ourselves feel better, but rather that hope is dynamic and urgent and pushes us towards action. She writes, "Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. It is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency. Hope should shove you out the door, because it

will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war... and the grinding down of the poor and marginal... To hope is to give yourself to the future - and that commitment to the future is what makes the present inhabitable.”<sup>5</sup>

The High Holiday season, too, is filled with so many reminders of hope. We surround the mournful, fragmented middle notes of the Shofar with the triumphant *tekiah* on either end to assert that brokenness will ultimately yield to whole. We dip apples in honey to represent the sweetness of new beginnings and clothe ourselves in white to affirm that it’s possible to start fresh with a clean slate. We end our services on Yom Kippur with “*L’shana ha’baah b’Yerushalayim* – Next year in Jerusalem,” not so much a prayer for a particular place but rather an affirmation that the future will be good and peaceful and lead us towards redemption. A vision of better days can help to make the present easier to withstand.

On Kol Nidre I will be speaking about a few of the efforts our congregation will be undertaking this year to alleviate, in some modest way, the difficulties of our world, to marshal our collective hope and bring it together towards action. As Rabbi Tarfon famously declares in Pirkei Avot: “*Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor* – You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.”<sup>6</sup> One of the truths we call forward this High Holidays is that we must never lose hope. Rather, we must use it to spur us towards action.

And so in closing...In many ways “Oy” seems but a paltry, insufficient response to the issues of our time; our feelings are not those of mild exasperation or dismay but rather those of deep anxiety, fear, and

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<sup>5</sup> From *Hope in the Dark* by Rebecca Solnit.

<sup>6</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:21

despair. And yet, if we shoulder our hope like an axe, if we lift up sacred values affirming that families belong together and that language has power, if we come together in action then perhaps 5779 might truly hold the promise of being a good and happy new year. Shana Tova!