

“...for in its peace shall you have peace”
a Jewish prescription for America

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This past summer I was driving along Pleasant Valley Way when I noticed that the car next to me had their emergency flashers on. Being the good and considerate driver that I am, I accelerated slightly in order to gently honk and let them politely know that their flashers were on when, as I looked through the window I noticed that the driver — as she was passing in front of "Our Lady of the Lake," a Roman Catholic church — was crossing herself. And then it occurred to me that maybe it was better not to honk, not to stop her flashers. Part of this was out of respect for her moment of religious devotion. But there was another part of me that wondered, maybe her flashers were a sign? (Did I tell you that I believe in signs?) Maybe those emergency flashers were a symbol that there is something wrong and we all need to take heed?

When she crossed herself, when she made this genuine act of religious piety, I immediately thought of the text from the prophet Jeremiah to pray for the peace of the city in which you live, "for in its peace you will have peace" (Jeremiah 29:7). Some two and a half millennia later, those words still resonate; indeed, they are the inspiration of those prayers we customarily offer at the end of the service (especially on these High Holy Days), the rather obvious text where we pray for our national leaders. Although there are many different incarnations of this liturgical formula (I particularly like how they pray for the Queen in British *siddurim*), the sentiment over the centuries and across the globe has invariably reflected on the same themes. Here is a particularly poignant rendition from the Reconstructionist movement's *Siddur Kol Haneshamah*:

Sovereign of the Universe, mercifully receive our prayer for our land and its government. Let Your blessing pour out on this land and on all officials of this country who are occupied, in good faith, with the public needs. Instruct them from Your Torah's laws, enable them to understand Your principles of justice, so that peace and tranquility, happiness and freedom, might never turn away from our land. Please, Wise One, God of the lifebreath of all flesh, waken Your spirit within all inhabitants of our land, and plant among the peoples of different nationalities and faiths who dwell here, love and brotherhood, peace and friendship. Uproot from their hearts all hatred and enmity, all jealousy and vying for supremacy. Fulfill the yearning of all the people of our country to speak proudly in its honor. Fulfill their desire to see it become a light to all nations.

I think on this we can all pretty much agree: No matter on which side of the aisle we might be more comfortable, this coming November feels to be the most important election of our lifetimes. Never before have the stakes seemed so high. Please know that I am not here to suggest for whom I think you should vote. (And I'm smart enough to know that, even if I did, it wouldn't make a difference.) I do this not because I fear my comments will endanger our standing with the IRS, but because I honor and respect you. We each come into this sacred

space with our own vision for America, with our own sense of what is right and who is wrong. And I celebrate that I live in a land that gives me the right, accords me the absolute privilege — in common cause with you — of choosing our town councils, our mayors, our governors, our state and national representatives and senators, and our President.

But by the same token, I feel — as your rabbi — that I must at least try to put all of this into a Jewish context.

I believe that this election and the critical issues which confront our nation today are not simply about who gets to be President come November. In the short view, yes, it's about who you want making decisions in the Oval Office. But I sense that below the surface this election is really a contest about (and maybe between) two very different understandings of America. It is a chasm that is wide and deep. And I fear it is growing. This is more than the split of a color-coded map between red and blue, conservative and liberal, Republican and Democrat. This is more than an election. It is a referendum on America. More than a contest of ideas about economic and social policy, about domestic security and international relations, I believe this election is a referendum on what — and who — we think America is.

Here's the truth: We got what we wished for. Ours is a land that we created as a refuge for tired and huddled masses "yearning to breathe free." From pilgrims to potato farmers to boat people and migrant farm workers, America is easily the most diverse nation on earth. And from where I stand, it is this very diversity that has the potential to be our greatest source of strength. But this same diversity is also at the core of our greatest challenge. Because we all want to think that *my* version of America is the *real* America.

Now there is nothing new in this. Contentious diversity has been our constant companion, a centuries-old mistrust and fear of the Other. First it was the Indians. Then the Germans. Then the Irish. And the Italians. Which meant the Catholics. Then the Jews. Now the Muslims and the Arabs. And the Mexicans. And it's always been about the Blacks. We have discriminated against each other. We've forced one another to live "not in my backyard." We've set fire to our cities. We've gone to war against each other (albeit in those days the color-code was Blue and Gray). America is not nor has it ever been easy. To live the American dream requires untiring effort and serious sacrifice.

But I'm not talking about the kind of sacrifice that happens on the battlefield or at income tax time. The sacrifice that comes with American citizenship is not about pride or flag waving. The sacrifice that makes America great is rooted in humility, in a vision of a land that offers "justice for *all*." The dream our founders embraced was centered around ideals. It was to be a place "...which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance [and] requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens..." So wrote George Washington in his "Letter to the Jews of Newport" in 1790. I particularly love his choice of words "should demean themselves." To be an American, at least in the eyes of our first president, requires no small amount of ego suppression. Humility. It's not about me. It's supposed to be about us.

Yet to these noble ideals we have always fallen short. Because America is a nation conceived in dreams. As such, America shall always be a work in progress. And this brings me back to the prayer in our liturgy and it's inspiration from the prophet Jeremiah who implores us, "Seek the peace of the city...and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace shall you have peace." And for me

the operative word (which we customarily translate as) "seek" is, in fact, *dirshu*, which also means "demand". We are to *demand* the peace of the city. As Americans it is our right. And as Jews it is our mandate.

Maybe the real issue at stake in this election is whether or not we have the ability to abide by each other, whether or not we actually believe *e pluribus unum*. This election — and its aftermath — will be a referendum on our ability, perhaps even more our desire to seek the peace of the city. To this end I come to you today to identify three essential values from Jewish tradition which I believe we Americans must embrace if we are to have any hope that this land will achieve its promise of being not merely a great nation but a good nation. And we do that by aspiring to be a nation of goodness.

It starts with *Derekh Eretz*. This is the mitzvah to act in a manner that is decent and civil. *Derekh Eretz* — the way of the land — is the way everyone should behave. It's a universal honor code. *Derekh Eretz* teaches us that you don't need to be Jewish or American to know how to act toward your neighbor. It's just the right thing to do. Common decency.

But well we know, *Derekh Eretz* is in short supply in America these days. I will not comment specifically on the rhetoric in today's political climate, other than to say — and let me be clear, my words should in no way be misconstrued as partisan — the tenor of subject matter and choice of language that permeates American politics today is simply stunning. Actually, the word for it is *disgraceful*. I keep on hoping that we will hear someone like Joseph Welch, the chief counsel for the United States Army who responded to Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1954 by saying, "Have you no sense of decency?"

And it's not just the politicians.

Not long ago a colleague of mine published an essay about her take on *Tisha b'Av*, the mid-summer commemoration of the many catastrophes that have fallen on the Jewish people on the ninth of the Hebrew month of *Av*. While, as a liberal rabbi, she did not expect her opinions to go unchallenged, the level of vitriol and hateful rhetoric — from fellow Jews — was beyond upsetting to her. It impacted her so deeply that she wrote how it has given her serious pause to ever publishing again.

But this is more than an illustration of "If you can't stand the heat then get out of the kitchen." After reading some of the comments her article elicited, it was clear that the responders were completely unconcerned with how their words would impact her. They were mean-spirited and hateful and arrogant. And this was a discussion of Torah. To my point, the language of those posts was no different than what we have seen this past summer at political rallies and protest demonstrations. The contempt for each other is unmistakable.

A central element of *Derekh Eretz* is the way you talk to others. We are directly forbidden to engage in *Lashon Ha-Ra* — evil speech. Usually it gets translated as slander (and that would not be incorrect in these instances), but at its essence *Lashon Ha-Ra* implies the destructive power of words. For Jews, the old adage "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me" is nonsense. Our entire tradition revolves around the holiness of the word. And yet the discourse in our land — and no doubt in our world — is increasingly violent, but the fact that it is becoming normative in American politics should be of grave concern to all of us,

no matter our political leanings. If America is to have any hope for becoming a land of goodness, it must begin with the way we treat and speak to each other.

Yet what confronts America is more basic than the way we behave. Judaism teaches us that it begins in our heart — which is, in fact, our mind. The Hebrew word for heart is *lev*, but when our ancestors used that word they actually meant the mind. The intellect. And it makes perfect sense, for how we *feel* about the Other begins with how we *think* about the Other. On this Torah is unequivocal. You think about them the way you think about yourself.

In Judaism we are taught not to do anything to an Other that we would not wish done to ourselves. We are commanded to love our neighbor as ourself. This is the holy grail of Judaism. This is the principle upon which the entire Torah is based. So it should not surprise us that the most frequently repeated sentiment in Torah is to embrace the stranger "because we were strangers in the land of Egypt." This is our *raison d'être* as Jews. And this, I believe, is why America was (and remains) so attractive to Jews. Because this is a nation which was founded by and for "the stranger." It is so mired in irony that so many who wave the American flag in a nativistic xenophobia are themselves descendants of immigrants whose ancestors came here for the same reasons as the people they oppose: To achieve the American dream.

None of this is to say that their anger is unjustified or that their fears are without merit. There are many in this land for whom their well-being has felt less vital, less valued than those from other lands who want a piece of the pie. Their sense of being left-out is legitimate. Because it is real. And that should concern all of us. But their anger, their vilification of the stranger should trouble us even more. As Sebastian Junger, in his new book "Tribe" writes: "The ultimate betrayal of tribe isn't acting competitively — that should be encouraged — but [rather the betrayal of tribe is] predicating your power on the excommunication of others from the group." Indeed, what really threatens America is not from without but from within. And this brings me to the third and perhaps most important value Judaism has to offer at this season of decision.

Shalom Bayit means "peace of the home." I once shared on these High Holy Days an insight from a dear friend who is a therapist: "You can be right or you can be married." That is at the heart of *Shalom Bayit*. You do what you do, you make your choices for the good of the whole. Somehow I feel like this has been lost from the American discussion. When our leaders fall — or jump (as the case may be) — into political gridlock for the sake of party allegiance, it is the people who suffer. When one's individual agenda becomes concretized in ideological belligerence, it is the people who suffer. When Americans, to quote Aaron Sorkin from his film *An American President*, "...say they love America but clearly can't stand Americans," it is the people who suffer.

America is a great and powerful nation, but if we have learned anything from history it must be that no empire, no nation is indestructible. We should know this lesson from Babylon. From Rome. From Spain and France and our own parent nation, Great Britain, which no longer "rules the seas." No empire, no nation is impervious to decay and destruction. To my mind the greatest danger that this *Goldene Medina*, this "Golden Land" of America faces comes not from the threats most politicians invoke. What will be our undoing will not be at the hands of other nations or the diabolical schemes of terrorists. It will be self-inflicted.

One of the greatest catastrophes of Jewish history was the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70, and it came about — according to the rabbis — as a direct consequence of our own sins, our own inability to live with and respect each other. It wasn't the Romans. It was us. Internecine rivalry — Sadducees and Pharisees and ultra-nationalist Zealots, conservatives and liberals and radicals, each pitted against the other — that brought down the walls of our world. The rabbis blamed it on *Sinat Chinam* — "boundless contempt" — a hatred that is completely unfettered.

At that same time, however, those rabbis who witnessed how internal dissent could undo a civilization developed its antidote within the context of the very disputes that threatened to overwhelm them. They had their conflicting sides, communities of opinion which were often diametrically opposed to each other. But they would not allow those differences to be their undoing. Rather from such disputes would come their strength. The argument, the rabbis concluded, must be waged in the name of the common good. They called it *Leshem Shamayyim*. For the sake of heaven. And what that really means is for the sake of each other.

This I fear has been lost from the American discourse. It's a lot of people yelling at each other, pointing fingers and calling each other names. It's a lot of people who have lost their connection to each other as fellow Americans. It's a nation that is losing the forest for the trees.

Perhaps this is the real issue at stake in this year's election: Are we voting for ourselves or are we voting for each other?

It's a wonderful thing, this democracy of ours. Like Judaism, our strength as a nation, I dare say our greatness as a nation, lies in a document. It is the soul of this republic. Not our military prowess. Not our technological creativity. Not our wealth. Not the birthplaces of our citizenry. Rather, a document that begins "We, the people..." And our fears notwithstanding, if we hold to it then, like Torah does for the Jewish people, that document will sustain us. It will stand by us as long as we stand by it. But it all begins with the presumption that we will stand by and with each other.

I know that no matter what I say here today, no matter what you think I've said, you will still emerge from here with a focus on for whom you will cast your vote and a fear of whom you hope doesn't get elected. And maybe that is, when all is said and done, the most important part of sustaining our vision for what America could be. Such is the beauty of democracy. But for me it all starts with how we view and treat each other. It all centers on how we speak about and to each other. And above all, it all hinges on what we are willing to sacrifice for the common weal. Is our conflict for the sake of each other or for my own parochial view of what I think it means to be a real American. Because on Wednesday, November 9 — no matter who prevails the day before — we will still have each other. And that can be a good thing. I believe it is a good thing.

I believe in America. Because I believe in Americans. I believe Americans are, at heart, good. I believe Americans believe in fairness. And justice. I believe Americans want to live in harmony with their neighbors — regardless of their faith or the color of their skin or their ethnicity. But I also believe that we have fears. Real fears. And fears are easily exploitable. We need our leaders to help us see that we are stronger when we embrace each other for no other reason

than we share America in common. And that is a sacred heritage — whether you've been here for 400 years or four months.

Like the son of the Mayflower that I am, I very much believe God has blessed this land. America is truly a land of opportunity. But what we do with that opportunity is up to us. And, from where I stand, it must begin with the admonition of Abraham Lincoln: To have "malice toward none [and] charity towards all" (Second Inaugural Address, 1865). Therein lies the peace of *this* city.