Every couple of months or so, I gather with Pastor Quann of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Rev. Ron Lutz of the Ambler Church of the Brethren and Monsignor Steve McHenry of St. Anthony’s of Padua to have lunch at the William Penn Inn. We have been close friends for over 25 years. Usually we talk about the lives of our congregations, our own spiritual lives and our concerns about what’s happening in the world.

This past month, we met again, for a somber reason. You see, Rev Lutz’s daughter died at the age of 51 after years of paralysis and health struggles. We talked, listened and comforted as best as we could. It was so tough to see our friend cry and mourn. But we listened and we prayed.

Reverend Lutz spoke of his growing agnosticism. After his suffering, he shared that he wasn’t sure he could still believe in a caring and loving God with a purpose for us all. He honestly said that he was growing not in faith but rather in doubt. And most interesting of all. He didn’t like it. He yearned to believe, to know that God cared, but just couldn’t bring himself to believe. I commiserated with him.

Then we started talking about the issues of the day. Monsignor
McHenry expressed concern about the changing definition of family and how sinful he thought it was. He said that our society is heading toward increased licentiousness and he sees his role as speaking out against it, even if it makes him unpopular. While I didn’t agree with his position on same sex marriage, I heard him express tremendous angst and sadness.

Then it was Pastor Quann’s turn. He spoke of racism in America. He spoke with his usual passion and eloquence of police brutality against children and adults, white bigots and violence, by their own hands, which threatens the fabric of their community. We listened to his lament, and our hearts ached for him and his church.

I talked about Israel and Iran. You already know what I think about that.

Four men of faith. Four friends sharing their fears and their worries with each other. We are lucky to have each other and to trust each other enough to share our anxieties with each other.

My bread and butter as a Rabbi is anxiety. We wrestle with our individual pains and bring that struggle to my office. If you have a tax question you go to your accountant. If you have medical problem, you go to your doctor. If you’re depressed, anxious, afraid, you come to your Rabbi. Anxiety is my stock and trade.
Judaism encourages **productive anxiety**. There is an old joke about the Jewish telegram that reads, “Start worrying; details to follow.”

“Who shall live and who shall die…. Who by fire and who by water…” Who can have a good day after listening to this, all of your life?

The prayer, **Unetanetokeff** was designed to make us anxious and then, as a result of that tension to examine our lives and improve ourselves.

Our tradition is teaching us that we shouldn’t get too comfortable. A little tension leads to self-awareness and positive change. Too much comfort can lead to passivity and acceptance. Anxiety, disquietude can spur us to action. So many other faiths pray for peace of mind, and for quietude at the end of the day, and I admire that. But I respect more the words of Benjamin Franklin who wrote, “I respect faith, but doubt is what gets you an education.” Faith can quiet us. Anxiety can push us. That’s so much more Jewish.

Don’t get me wrong; I am not in favor of maladjustment. I only believe that neutrality, passivity and too much peace of mind can lead to inaction. Imagine the possibility of Shakespeare perfectly adjusted to bourgeois life in Stratford, contentedly living a quiet life of ease. Imagine George Washington going to London to receive a knighthood from King George III, or Abraham Lincoln prospering in Springfield with little concern
for the crumbling Union. Imagine our patriarch, Abraham quietly and peacefully living a life in Haran worshipping the multiple gods of his fathers. Or Moses, living comfortably in the palace of Pharaoh, turning away from the enslavement of his people, because it bothered him too much. Theodore Herzl was one of the most troubled souls in modern Jewish history. He was anxious about anti-Semitism rising in 19th century Europe. He was ill at ease because he saw no future for his people on the continent. Thank God for that. Were there no Zionist zeal, more would have perished at the hands of the Nazis.

Discontent is the first step in progress and growth.

So let me tell what makes me anxious. I am anxious about religious and racial hatred in this country and around the world. When we think of racism we think of the recent tragedies in South Carolina and Missouri. We can condemn those who wave the confederate flag or have it on their front license plate. But racism is not just a Southern problem, it’s a national crisis. Here in Philadelphia, we still live in segregated communities. Billions of dollars are spent so that our children can go to mostly white schools. Reverend Quann still tells me that the youth of his congregation are routinely pulled over if they are driving too nice of a car. And we all saw on the news what happened this year in Ferguson, New York, and many other
cities in this country. People marched through the streets protesting the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown and the racism that permeates all levels of our society, which contributes, in part, to the disproportionate number of African Americans who die at the hands of police. And this summer, when we marched with Bethlehem Baptist Church in support of their community, following the murders in Charleston, we were reminded again that the struggle against hate continues.

I am also anxious because it seems to be open season on police officers. Sadly, we see these public servants gunned down in their cars, at gas stations. In these tumultuous times, we need to remember that they too can be killed by racism and prejudice.

Speaking of hatred, I want to speak about anti-Semitism. For centuries those who hated Jews, hated us for economic, religious or racial reasons. Now that hatred, by sheer association, has expanded to include the land, people and mission of the State of Israel. Israel and those who support her, have become the target of vitriolic hatred. It takes so may forms, ranging from hateful comments by news commentators on Twitter, to BDS, which stands for Boycott, Divest and Sanction. Academic institutions, soda companies and now it seems airlines are turning their business and vital dollars away from Israel. Just this summer, Mattisyahu, the Reggie
Orthodox Jew, but not an Israeli citizen, was barred from singing in a Spanish festival, because he was Jewish. He was later re-invited after a barrage of criticism. A young girl running to be a student council officer, at the University of California was questioned by a fellow student, “Do you think you can be a fair arbiter of student policy given the fact that you are Jewish and pro-Israel?” Can you imagine? European Jews are unable to walk the streets of Paris, London or Berlin without fear of being accosted, mugged or even killed.

Britain, last year, recorded the highest incidents of anti-Semitic events since 1940, 1068. That’s 3 per day. In Austria, this past year, a man wearing a Star of David necklace was attacked at a shopping mall by a group of young men, who yelled obscenities. They beat him unconscious with their fists and feet. In Marseille, France, two 16 year-old Jewish boys, wearing visibly Jewish garb, were punched by two young men while walking home from a synagogue. The attackers reportedly said, “Dirty Jews, we’re going to exterminate you all.” In Copenhagen, a town, where Jews were saved during WWII, A gunman opened fire at the Great Synagogue, killing Dan Uzan, a 37 year old member of the Jewish community. Earlier in the day, the same gunman shot up a cafe hosting a free speech forum, killing filmmaker Finn Nørgaard. The gunman, later identified as Omar
El-Hussein, was killed by police. In Sweden, a recent poll, says that 60% of Jews are afraid of being identified on the street as a Jew.

Anti-Semitism is a virus. And it seems like the world, specifically the Muslim world is getting infected, but we are the ones who die from it.

Let me talk about a local event that reeked of anti-Semitism, here in Philadelphia. This past May, Drexel University gave an honorary doctorate to Noam Chomsky, who delivered the commencement speech. Chomsky called the Jewish State such a consistent and extreme violator of human rights “that you hardly have to argue about it.” He claims, U.S. military aid to Israel is in direct violation of U.S. Law. He contends that peace proposals made by Hamas have been more “forthcoming” and sound than any proposed by Israel.

Chomsky is so anti-Semitic that he refuses even to equate Israel with South Africa’s apartheid regime. “To call it apartheid is a gift to Israel, at least if by ‘apartheid’ you mean South African-style apartheid. What’s happening in the Occupied Territories is much worse.” In fact he said South Africa was better than Israel. “South African Nationalists needed the black population. That was their workforce. … The Israelis don’t want them. They want them out, or at least in prison.”

Chomsky not only is a prime supporter of BDS, he has denied there
was proof of Osama bin Laden’s involvement in the 9/11 attacks. After Bin Laden’s killing he said, the U.S. attack on bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan would justify a retaliation scenario in which “Iraqi commandos landed at George W. Bush’s compound, assassinated him, and dumped his body in the Atlantic.”

How could Drexel University honor such a misguided hateful man? It was a shanda.

We are anxious about radical Islam and its war on Israel, those they perceive to be infidels and all of the West. To see pictures of ten-year-old boys and girls holding bloody knives over severed heads scares me. And that is their goal. There are 1.25 billion Muslims in the world. By all accounts 10-15% are radicalized. That means there are approximately 200 million radical Muslims who see all that we hold dear as evil. We are seeing more and more Muslims travelling to Syria and returning to their homes to commit terrible crimes in the name of their faith. And governments are at a loss as to how to stop it.

There are some who say that the problem lies with those who misinterpret Islam and distort a peaceful faith it into a violent religion. I wish that were the case. I think that Islam is desperately in need of a reformation of its own, just as Christianity and Judaism underwent a
modernization. The Catholic Church today is nothing like the church of the 14th century and Judaism is not the faith that was practiced in the Bible. Both our faiths have adapted to modern sensibilities and it’s my hope that Islam will undergo a similar reformation to expunge the misogynistic, infidel contempt and intolerance that we see in much of the radical Muslim world.

Having said that, I want to also mention that while me may fear radicalized and hateful practitioners of the Muslim faith, we must not let that apprehension turn into bigotry against all Muslim people. Let us not forget that Islamophobia, the fear and hatred towards Muslims, is as hateful and ignorant as anti-Semitism, the fear and hatred of Jews. There are Muslim people all over the world who want to live in peace with their neighbors, lead a happy life with their families, and make the world a safer place, just as we do. Let us be stronger and wiser than the scores of people who allow their ignorance and fear to corrupt their understanding of difference, becoming Islamophobic or Anti-Semitic.

Finally, I am anxious about Jewish continuity. The Pew survey tells us what we already know. Fewer Jewish young people are making Jewish choices. More are seeing their faith as something cultural with no substance and discipline to gird it. More and more are raising their children in multiple faiths or no faith at all and are choosing not even to give their kids a Jewish
education.

Sure, we thrill together at certain moments, like President Obama hosting a Seder, or certain iconic scenes like Abraham Joshua Heschel linking arms with Martin Luther King, but these images are brief and they belie a weakening community.

Here is the irony. While synagogues are struggling, America is embracing the trappings, but not the substance of Judaism. There is Kabbalah for everyone, Midwesterners comfortable talking about “schlepping” and “shvitzing,” and the very non-Jewish Cameron Diaz getting married under a chuppah. Comedians like Jon Stewart joke about their Jewishness, but see their faith primarily as a way to get a laugh. Stewart is not connected to a synagogue or raising his kids as Jews. Last year, apparently, on Erev Rosh Hashana, Stewart's guest, Meghan McCain greeted him with “Happy New Year.” Stewart looked uncharacteristically nonplussed for a nanosecond, before responding “What? Huh? See you in Times Square tonight.”

Comedian, Marc Maron tells a story about when he was a young boy and asked his mother if there was a God. “Just eat,” she told him. “And remember, you’re better than other people."

Maron’s punch line? “That’s American Judaism.” When the symbols
that define us become as commercialized and universal as Native American
dream catchers, up for grabs by anyone, this suggests to me a collective
identity that is compromised, not strong. Most American Jews feel proud
that Tom Brady has a menorah in his house, but that should only make us
anxious. When a symbol of Jewish faith and history becomes a trinket to
decorate the pheng sway of a room, then we have reached a new low.

As long as there are problems that beset us, we will be anxious. We
must be anxious. We just can’t be sanguine during these times. Anxiety is a
yash’chena, ve’dvar tov y’sham’chena.” “If there is anxiety in the our hearts,
let him talk it away. A good word will make it glad.” Ignoring these issues
will not make them go away. Silently worrying about them will get us
nowhere. But bringing them out in the open, will hopefully allow us to
marshal our resources and we in the stronghold of this synagogue will
address them one by one.

So, Rev Quann and Monsignor McHenry are mobilizing their
churches to address their concerns. Here at Beth Or, we feed the hungry,
house the homeless and stand up for racial and religious tolerance. We have
members who are willing to roll up their sleeves and do good work in our
name. We tutor children at risk, support our local hospitals, march with
Bethlehem Baptist for racial justice. We are building bridges with the North Penn Mosque. This past spring, our Sisterhood hosted our annual ecumenical luncheon where we hosted an interfaith panel of clergy. The imam from North Penn spoke from this bima. Later, I learned that it was the first time he ever met a Jew and entered a synagogue. It’s a small step but an important one. We fight anti-Semitism by supporting the ADL, the Federation and AIPAC. We buy Israel bonds and soon, we will be travelling to distant places to act justly in the name of the Jewish people. I am proud that our Social Action committee is investigating programs with whom we can partner to travel to Israel and Central America to do good. When we are anxious, we can find solace in the fact that we will not sit idly by. We can dream together. Work together. Build together.

And as for Jewish identity. That is a more complicated problem. But one thing is sure. Our faith can never be taught. It can only be caught. When a parent comes to shul for the High Holidays year after year, they model Jewish values and their children will catch on. Lighting Shabbat candles, reciting a blessing, taking a life long learning class, giving tzedakah, that is how we teach our children. On Rosh Hashanah, I thanked one of our ushers for serving. He said to me that he ushers because his father ushered at Beth Shalom years ago. By serving as an usher here, he
remembers and honors his memory. Living Jewishly is how we teach our children. Thank you for coming here. It does indeed matter.

I conclude with a prayer. May God bless us with an anxious discomfort…at easy answers, half-truths, bigotry and hatred. May God bless us with anger…at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people so that we may work for justice, freedom and peace. May God bless us with tears…. to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that we may reach out our hand to comfort them and turn their pain into joy. May God bless us with enough foolishness…to believe that we can make a difference in the world; so that we can look up toward the light and inspire our children to do likewise. Amen.