

One Universal Family

By Rabbi George Gittleman | Santa Rosa Press Democrat

This year, the Jewish High Holy Days fall in the midst of the first anniversary of the most heinous crime in modern American history: The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, began last night and is followed by Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, on Sept. 16. Almost exactly in the middle of this 10-day period is Sept. 11.

For both Jews and non-Jews the messages of the most holy days of the Jewish year have special poignancy, as we reflect on the first anniversary of 9/11.

Rosh Hashanah is the most universal of all Jewish holidays. It marks the creation of the universe, the birthday of the world and the creation of all life, including humanity.

The overriding message of Rosh Hashanah is that we all come from the same place. We are children of Adam (and Eve). We are all, regardless of our race, religion, gender, age, nationality or sexual orientation, created b'tzelem elohim, in God's image. In other words, we are ultimately one universal family sharing equally in God's blessings.

This is an important concept for those who, since 9/11, may be tempted to classify all Muslims or all people from the Middle East in the same category with the 19 terrorists.

Another important message of the High Holy Days — especially relevant this year — is gratitude. Gratitude, first for our lives. We could have been on one of those planes or in one of those buildings that was destroyed last Sept. 11.

Gratitude for the fact that we live in Sonoma County, one of the most beautiful places in the whole world. Gratitude also that we are all citizens of the United States, free people living in one of the most prosperous nations in the world.

A third message of Jewish High Holy Days is that the promise of the future is real — an important idea for Jews and non-Jews alike during these times of crisis. Jewish tradition teaches that no one is beyond the point of no return. Even in the darkest of dark nights there can be found rays of hope.

In fact, a major message of these High Holy Days is that there is no point of no return, no eternal damnation. The Gates of Heaven are always open.

Even Palestinians and Israelis can learn to live together in peace. Of course, the terror and bloodshed will have to end. We must believe that peace can, and will, come.

The Talmud (the central body of Jewish teachings and traditions) says, “No one’s blood is redder than anyone else’s.” No one — rich or poor, black or white, Arab, Israeli, Muslim, Christian or Jew, gay, lesbian or straight — has any more claim on life, on God’s blessings, than anyone else. Think about that.

Jewish tradition also teaches that our role as human beings is to work toward Tikun Olam, the “Repair of the World.” This is a universal ideal people everywhere can embrace. God is the lodestar of hope, of peace, of redemption. God is also our partner in the unfolding of reality. We, in affect, are the hands and feet of God, drawing God down to earth, making God’s reality ours as well.

It’s the Jewish New Year, but the message of unity, hope and redemption is a universal message the entire world can share in as we rise from the ashes on the first anniversary of Sept. 11.