

The Blessing of America

Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman

Tonight, I want to explore with you what it means to be a Jewish American through the lens of the various names for the time we have just entered. I would bet that everyone here this evening, if asked, would say that the Hebrew name for the New Year is – Rosh Hashanah, right? It's true, Rosh Hashanah, literally "The Head of the Year," is one of the names of the Jewish New Year. However, like most things Jewish, our New Year has many layers of meaning, and thus, many names. There are at least three other names for the New Year that have special relevance when considering what it means to be a American Jew.

The first place the celebration of the New Year is mentioned is in the Torah. You would think that such an important holy day would have an elaborate write-up in the core text of the Jewish people. In fact, the opposite is the case. Of all our holy days, the New Year is mentioned the least. However, what does the Torah say about the New Year? In the Torah, our Rosh Hashanah is called by two names: Yom Hazikaron, Day of Remembrance, and Yom Teruah, The Day of the Shofar Blast. Very little else is set down in the Torah about this important time of year. The silence of the Torah on this subject makes it nearly impossible to know what these days meant to the ancient Israelites. However, both names, Yom Hazikaron, and Yom Teruah, are packed with meaning for us today, especially if we use them as lenses through which to view our shared past, and our hopes for the future. Let's start with Yom Hazikaron, The Day of Remembrance.

What a history we have. Jews have been in this country for as long as this country has been in existence. We've shared in its trials and tribulations. We arrived with the first settlers in New Amsterdam, and later we participated in the great migration west. We've plowed her fields, fought in her wars, and in general, participated in most every aspect of her short but great history.

We've been here from the beginning, but for most of us, our Jewish American experience started with our parents or grandparents who came to this country as a part of the mass immigration from East to West that began in the late 19th century and ended in the early 20th century. When I think of America and the blessings of this country for the Jews, I think of the story of my grandparents, immigrants to this country and part of that mass of humanity that fled Europe for the hope of a new life on the promising shores of America.

My grandparents like many of yours, fled a Europe aflame with unbridled Nationalism and Anti-Semitism. There was nothing new about this. Poverty, insecurity and persecution were the almost daily story of the Jews of Europe for centuries. Still, the upheaval of the early 20th century was exceptionally brutal.

I don't know much about the story of my paternal grandfather, but I do know a bit about my maternal grandfather. His family was in the lumber business, and after their mill was set ablaze under questionable circumstances, they saw the writing on the wall and decided to head for America. They couldn't all get out at once, so he was sent first to make his way, and then to help

bring the rest of the family over. His story is no different than many. In fact, hundreds of thousands and later millions of Jews fled Europe, joining the mixed multitude of non-Jewish European immigrants: Russians, Poles, Italians, Germans, the Irish and others, all making their way to America. The numbers are staggering; between 1880 and 1920, over 3,000,000 Jews made their way from all over Europe to the teeming shores of the free world.

Sometimes I try to imagine their conversations as they made their momentous trip from the Old World to the New:

“What shall we do? Where can we go?”

“America! We shall go to America!”

“Yes, and in America they have freedom! In America you can be a Jew and not live in fear!”

They fled and they came merging with millions of other people with equally compelling stories. They brought with them little but their yearning for safety, prosperity and peace. Though they carried few bags, their shoulders were bent with the weight of centuries of tzurus: persecution, insult, rape, murder and constant fear.

“ Oh to live in America — to be free, to not be afraid!”

I imagine them on the boat coming in to Ellis Island:

- the first sighting of land
- the rising flame of the Statue of Liberty

“Keep ancient lands your storied pomp,” wrote the Jewish poet Emma Lazarus. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to be free, the wretched refuse of your teaming shore. Send these, the homeless, Tempest tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the Golden Door.

They were “the tired”, “the poor”, “the tempest tossed”, and America was their “Golden Door” in so many ways.

My maternal grandfather was 12 when he arrived, one of seven, the head of the household. He arrived in this country with barely the clothes on his back, and like many a new immigrant, began his life here pedaling on the streets of New York City. He eventually moved from New York to Omaha, Nebraska, and traveled from there to the wide-open spaces of the Dakotas selling eyeglasses from farm to farm under the name “Dr. Van Wolf.”

Of course, he was not a doctor! His story is the classic story of first-generation success, for by the time my mother was born, he was a successful commodity broker, among other things, living in Chicago. In his lifetime, besides supporting a large extended family, he built two synagogues, and left a legacy of prosperity and a thriving Jewish community, which he could say he had a hand in building. Like many of our forefathers and mothers, for him in many ways the American dream was.

My paternal grandfather was also a boy when he arrived in this country. The son of a rabbi, he came, I am sure, dressed in traditional garb: a long black coat, a keipa covering his head, tzitzit dangling from his waist, and payus twirling down from the sides of his face. I can only imagine his astonishment when he got off the boat at Ellis Island. He was the son of a rabbi from a long line of rabbis that stretched back at least eight or nine generations. He fulfilled the expectations of his family and his yichus, his lineage, but in a very American way. He quickly shed his payus, went to public school then on to Rabbinical School, not in the yeshiva, but to JTS, the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. He received his ordination there, became a Conservative rabbi, a far cry from the shtetle rabbi, and took his first and only pulpit in Louisville Kentucky. There was a vast difference between Louisville, Kentucky and Pinsk, Poland!

He prospered there. He married, raised a family, and built a synagogue. He was their rabbi for over 50 years and when he died, the streets were lined with mourners as the funeral procession made its way from the synagogue to the cemetery. He was yet another Jewish American success story.

That's just a taste of my family's story. All things considered, there's nothing unusual about it. In fact, it's not even particularly Jewish, for America has been and still is "The Golden Door" for so many people.

It would be tempting to stop here, feeling warm and nostalgic about our past, but that would not be true to what really happened, nor would it be true to this holy of holy days. For as much as this day is a day of remembrance, it is also Yom Teruah, a Day of The Shofar Blast. For the ancient Israelites, the shofar was a kind of early warning system. "Shall the shofar be blown in the city and the people not tremble?" asked the prophet Amos. Maimonides, the great medieval rabbi, philosopher and physician wrote this about the shofar, "Awake, all you who sleep, arouse yourself, all you who slumber, search your deeds and repent, remember your Creator while you still have time."

Yom Teruah, The Day of The Shofar Blast, demands that we move beyond nostalgia and good feelings to the truth of our existence then and now.

As much as this country has been a blessing for the Jews, she is far from perfect. First, we must acknowledge that much of what we have fought for. The forefathers of this country had a great vision of justice and liberty for all, but from the very beginning, there was a gap between their vision and reality.

Many of you have lived through the changes in this country. You remember when housing deeds had clauses that forbade the sale to a Jew. You remember when schools, hospitals, whole professions were closed to Jews. I can't say I have experienced much prejudice. I can relate, however, part of my father's experience. I think one story will do:

When he was a child, every winter they would take a trip to Florida. It was something he always looked forward to. But as much as he looked forward to the trips, the shock of seeing signs along the road that read, "No Niggers, Dogs or Jews," never left him. Times have changed;

nevertheless, let's not forget that what we have, we fought for. We had to fight, and for the most part, we have succeeded.

Nevertheless, we must remain vigilant, even today. For example, one of the major concerns in the design and construction of our new synagogue is security, and security has become an ongoing issue for the daily running of our Jewish Community. We've gone from greeting people at the door to requiring them to sign-in and wear a nametag. We used to encourage parents to help with religious school, now we require them to take part in our shomrim program. Shomrim means "Guardians" in Hebrew, and it is the program that we have developed to safeguard our kids while they study with us.

Even with our need for heightened security, America is an almost prejudice free environment for us. This, however, is not the case for many. America is far from colorblind; to this day people of color fight a daily battle against discrimination. This struggle is equally as intense for the gay and lesbian community. The brewing battle over the rights for gay and lesbian couples to marry is just one of many examples of their daily struggle.

The gifts of America: freedom, justice, prosperity, are not universal. The issue is not just prejudice. The mainstay of the American dream, economic freedom and prosperity for all is increasingly a question today. In fact, the gap between rich and poor has never been greater. This is especially true in California, and it is all the more evident in Sonoma County where the medium cost of a home is now over \$400,000. California ranks 49th out of 50 states in the size of its middle class. According to a recent article in the PD, currently 38% of California workers make less than \$12.50/hour, the minimum amount for two parents working full time to support two children. (The Press Democrat, Mary Bennet, Labor Day, 03')

New luxury homes are being constructed all over the county, yet we can't find the way to fund our schools, keep vital social services going or cope with the growing homeless population in the county.

One of the cornerstones of our success in America has been the promise of economic justice. Without economic justice, not only are our gains at risk, but also the moral foundation of our prosperity stands on shaky ground.

Not only are America's gifts not universal, the fundamental values of equality and freedom first envisioned by the great forefathers of this country and written into our Constitution are fragile at best. Liberties written in stone have been blown apart by War and fear. It happened during World War II with the internment of Japanese Americans, and it happened during the cold war as well when the label "Communist" often led to the loss of a job, public disgrace, and in some cases, incarceration and even death.

Perhaps you are thinking that we have learned our lessons, and those things like the Japanese American internment, or the McCarthy era blacklisting could never happen today. I'm not so sure. Since September 11, our country has steered a course perilously close to the dissolution of the rights and privileges that make this country so great for the others and us that live here. No doubt, security is a real issue, but is the Homeland Security Act, or the Patriot Act necessary or

helpful? Could it be that these new laws rather than making us more secure, threaten the rule of law and the basic rights of privacy fundamental to living in a free society?

We may be tempted to say that racial profiling, holding people in jail without charge and the liberal use of all kinds of surveillance with limited checks and balances are necessary. Perhaps they are necessary. We may also be tempted, if not with a little embarrassment to think, “Well these new laws won’t affect me. I’m not a terrorist, nor do I fit the profile of a terrorist.” However, surely we know from experience that the safe today can be the persecuted tomorrow.

Also, where in Judaism does it teach that justice only applies to us? Should we not be just as concerned about injustice to others as we are about the rule of law when it applies to us? I don’t have the answers, nor am I convinced that our government’s policies are wrong or without cause. Still, Yom Teruah, the Day of The Shofar Blast, calls me to question the direction we are headed, even while Yom Hazikaron calls me to appreciate the many ways the Jewish community has been blessed here as well.

There is one more thing I want to say about Yom Teruah. I fear that we, as a prosperous minority in this country, have fallen asleep. Fat from our success, happy in our relatively newfound freedom and prosperity we have fallen asleep to our responsibilities as Jews, the heirs to the prophets, the spokespeople of the oppressed. There was a time when we were at the head of every battle. Where are we now? Are we still on the forefront of the fight for justice and equality in this country? Are we still attuned to the cries of the oppressed now that we are relatively free from oppression? Yom Teruah, the Day of The Shofar Blast, calls me – really all of us, to ask this and many other tough questions.

It is one thing to be the spokespeople for the oppressed when you are oppressed; it is another when you are in power. Are we passing the test?

Finally, I have one last name for the New Year I want to share with you, and that is Yom Harat Olam – The Day of the World’s Conception! I love this name more than any other because it speaks so boldly of the promise of the future, at conception so little is determined and so much is possible. It is as if every year we begin at the beginning again – no set patterns, no old habits to break, a wide open playing field, a tabula rasa, a blank slate, on which we can write our story for the new year.

Now, the names all come together: Yom Hazikaron, the Day of Remembrance, gives us the opportunity to reflect on where we come from, to recognize our blessings and to assess what is missing in our lives. Yom Teruah, the Day of the Shofar Blast, keeps us honest in our reflection, jarring us from the tendency to be nostalgic about the past, and naive about the future. Moreover, Yom Harat Olam is the nehemta, the message of hope, the promise that nothing is truly fixed and in all of us is the possibility of teshuvah, return and renewal in the coming year.

America has been good to us, but it has not come easily, nor has our success been shared by all of its citizens. Therefore, as we remember our blessings, we must also hear the shrill call of the shofar. The call of the shofar demands a response, which seems overwhelming. Yet, in a world

conceived anew every year, the potential for positive change is almost infinite. We can make a change; we can make a difference in the year ahead!

God bless America for being that lamp of freedom and that “Golden Door” for so many people.

God help America to become a place where all, regardless of the color of their skin, their religion, their sexual orientation or their country of origin are truly free, and where prosperity is universal and sustainable for all.