

NEILAH 5780-2019 RABBI SHELDON LEWIS

BEING WHAT WE WISH THE WORLD TO BE

I remember a true story I heard from a teacher at the College of Jewish Studies in Chicago long ago. There was a man in Brooklyn who eked out a poor living for his family by delivering blocks of ice to his customers. He carried the ice in a very old, barely running, broken down red truck. Of course, it was the only vehicle he owned. Yet, emblazoned clearly on the sides of his truck were the words: "The Universal Ice Company". He was poor but very powerful.

Somehow, as he filled iceboxes along his route, he may have felt that he was a change-maker, that he had a not so insignificant role in a larger field of action.

After this intense, inward directed day, we will soon return to the world we inhabit. Is there any doubt that it is a very broken world awaiting us? So much need. So many in desperate straits, homeless, stateless, on the move, so much hatred, bigotry, violence, so much polarization. And the planet itself, the only home we have, changing dramatically to our peril. And who are we, ephemeral small specks in time and space to make a difference? Yet, our tradition never for a moment doubts the possible impact of every human life even to leave a global mark. Call it holy Chutzpah! A Talmudic teaching restated by Maimonides offers that each person at every moment should imagine that the entire world stands at an

exact balance point between goodness and sin, between merit and moral debits. It's a perpetual tipping point. The very act we are about to undertake, however humble, even delivering ice, can push the balance to one side or the other causing either destruction or salvation. I know it sounds fanciful, but the virtually unlimited potential and value in every human life has been a rock-solid belief since the first chapter of Genesis declared that the Divine image is implanted within every person. God created; we can create, too.

We cannot know what our impact can be, but surely there will be no impact if we do not try. We can go out into the world, and we can try hard to embody personally the kind of world of which we dream. We can be what we want the world to be.

Here's what I have in mind: I desperately want to live in a richly multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-faith, multi-racial society where we can be fully and fearlessly who we are and embrace the other with curiosity, with compassion, and with love. We can seed that vision right here and now. We can decide to open-up the circle in which we live, to draw closer to people different in color and faith, in country of origin and in language. Not simply to live alongside each other but to reach out in empathy and curiosity. We can cultivate those friendships in our homes around our tables, in our neighborhoods, in the workplace or at school. We can mindfully extend the circles in which we move to be warmly inclusive. And we will be enriched. We will surely find many shared values, and when we differ, we will be stretched and we will learn.

Secondly, we are not powerless in the face of a society and perhaps a planet that is more polarized than at any time in memory. It's frightening to look forthrightly at the yawning gaps between us that make it hard even to imagine opening a conversation with an adversary much less ascribing dignity to him or her. This situation is unhealthy, unsustainable, and potentially dangerous. I plan this year to seek out others with whom I know I passionately disagree. My goal will be to be respectful and to be curious. I will trust that my interlocutor has good reasons for holding his/her point of view, and I want to listen and to learn. Of course, I hope for reciprocity; and it will not be guaranteed. We probably will depart without changing our minds, but I hope we will have more understanding and more respect for one another.

This step is harder and can fail. Yet on the upside, we can model how to live and thrive with passionate differences. There will always be differences. There must be a gene in our genome that predisposes our species to form opposing arguments. How we engage with others across difference is in our hands. The rabbis two millennia ago harnessed the energy of passionate disagreements for good. They called this effort engaging in a "machloket l'Shem shamayim", an argument for the sake of Heaven, where we work for our own truth but are open to learn from the other, knowing that all wisdom never can reside in one perspective. No one has all of the truth, and everyone has some part of it. We can be agents of healing in our painfully divided nation. One by one, here at the grass roots, we can seed a new and better way.

We each develop familiar patterns of behavior in which we function and are at ease. Yet there are times of challenge that beckon us urgently to develop wings even within our warm cocoons, to venture outside our comfort zones. Caterpillars naturally turn into butterflies without a conscious decision. But we need our own resolve if we are to have wings or not. I am 78 years old, surely well into my senior years. Yet I was reminded by a man whom I deeply admire, Martin Buber, who said on reaching 80 years of age, that “Old age is a glorious thing when one has not unlearned what it means to begin anew.” We have prayed repeatedly over this day “Al tashlichenu l’et ziknah”, “Do not abandon us in old age.” These words have been reinterpreted in Chassidic thought to mean: “May we never at any age be cast into ‘old age’, meaning may we always have the capacity to grow, to aim higher. Reimagining ourselves at any age is what we are at times called upon to do. I’m convinced that there is a larger, more powerful self, residing deep within, awaiting liberation. Could there possibly be a more critical time as now to show that we can develop wings, soar, and act for justice and for compassion??

