

Rabbi Michael S. Beals

Rosh Hashana 5780 Day One

Good Yontif...

During the High Holy Days we ask the big questions. We often don't come away with complete answers, but we MUST ASK THE QUESTIONS...

The sentiments I hear most often from congregants, from colleagues, and even family members are: Why can't people get along better? How can we turn the tide on hate? How can I listen to and understand the point of view of someone who hates me, or worse yet, wants to destroy me? Have you thought about those questions in some way this year? [pause]

Our congregation, this new year, is focusing on the theme Tikkun Olam--- Repairing the World. Is that goal even possible? Isn't that just too big a job? What can one person do? The world is too big and too broken. Those are important BIG QUESTIONS.

As a rabbi I will attempt to answer those questions the way rabbis do...with a story. And, as rabbis do, I will apply this story and its take home message to both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the United States political divide. This story comes from Arthur Brook's book, *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt*.

*On September 16, 2017, Hawk Newsome and a group of protesters from the Black Lives Matter of Greater New York arrived on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Meanwhile, a group of Trump supporters gathered for what they called the “Mother of All Rallies.”*

This clash had all the characteristics of the Charlottesville protest which led to a White Nationalist plowing his car into a group of counter-protestors, killing a 32-year old woman and injuring many others. In fact Hawk Newsome had been injured in that earlier protest when he had been hit in the face by a rock.

Meanwhile...back at the rally on the National Mall...

*Just as insults seemed ready to give way to blows, something wholly unexpected happened. Tommy Hodges, the organizer of the pro-Trump rally, invited Hawk Newsome onto his stage. “We’re giving you two minutes of our platform to put your message out,” Tommy told Hawk. And then he added:*

*“Whether they disagree or agree with you your message is irrelevant. It’s the fact that you have the right to have the message.”*

What happens next is worth focusing on when thinking about *tikkun olam* in a broken world. Hawk took Tommy up on his offer and THIS is what he said:

*“My name is Hawk Newsome. I am the president of Black Lives Matter New York. I am an American. And the beauty of America is that when you see something broken in your country, you can mobilize to fix it.”*

*To his utter surprise, he heard applause. Emboldened, he said, “So you ask why there’s a Black Lives Matter? Because you can watch a black man die and be choked to death on television and nothing happened. We need to address that.”*

Now... the skeptical crowd, didn’t transform that quickly.

*“That was a criminal,” someone yelled, as boos started emanating from the crowd.*

*Hawk pressed on. “We’re not anti-cop.”*

*“Yes you are!” someone yelled*

*“We’re anti-bad cop,” Hawk countered. “We say if a cop is bad he needs to get fired, like a bad plumber, like a bad lawyer, like a bad ... politician.”*

*At this, the crowd began cheering again. [pause] These days, there’s nothing that unites ralliers more than the mention of “bad politicians.”*

*“I am an American. Secondly, I am a Christian,” Hawk said, once again connecting with his audience.*

*“We don’t want handouts. We don’t want anything that’s yours. We want our God-given right to freedom, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”*

*He heard cheers.*

*Then someone shouted, “All lives matter!”*

*“You’re right, my brother, you’re right. You’re so right,” Hawk said. “All lives matter, right? But when a black life is lost, we get no justice. That is why we say black lives matter.”*

*His two minutes up, he concluded his remarks by saying, “Listen, I want to leave you with this, and I’m gone. If we really want to make America great, we do it together!”*

*The crowd roared. They started chanting “USA! USA! A lady standing in the front row reached up and handed Hawk an American flag. He held it up and waved it. More cheers. As he stepped off the stage, to his shock and amazement, many of the ralliers who perhaps viewed him as an enemy came up and embraced him.*

After Rosh Hashana is over, you might want to watch the video of this interaction yourself on Youtube. You will find it at “Interview with Mother of all Rallies Organizer Tommy Hodges.”

According to writer Arthur Brooks, we are suffering from a *culture of contempt*. The interaction between Tommy and Hawk shows, if anything, that some Americans are looking for another way, a way OTHER than contempt, to interact. It's not about being merely civil with people with opposing views, but loving them. In other words, when dealing with people with opposing views to your own, the idea is not to give up your ideas, but to engage the other with what the Dalai Lama calls *warm-heartedness*.

Back to one of the Big Questions; What can one person do for Tikkun Olam?: Potential answer: When you hear contempt, you answer with warm heartedness. The Black Lives Matter protester, Hawke, connected with those values and ideas he and the pro-Trump supporters shared in common. There are still MANY differences they have, BUT – he looked for a way to connect.

I was looking for a way to connect between Republicans and Democrats, between Palestinians and Israelis and I found it.

In a 2014 article in *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, researchers from Boston and Melbourne wrote about human conflict due to “motive attribution asymmetry.” Motive Attribution Asymmetry.

This phenomenon assumes your ideology is based in love, while your opponent's ideology is based in hate. The researchers found that a majority of Republicans and Democrats today suffer from a level of motive attribution asymmetry that is comparable to that of Palestinians and Israelis. In both cases, the two sides think they are driven by benevolence, while the other side is evil and motivated by hate. Therefore neither side is willing to negotiate or compromise.

As a result, the author found, "political conflict between American Democrats and Republicans and the ethno-religious conflict between Israelis and Palestinians seem intractable, despite the availability of reasonable compromise solutions in both cases."

Brooks concludes: "we are headed to the point where achieving bipartisan compromise, on issues from immigration to guns to confirming a Supreme Court justice, is as difficult to achieving Middle East peace...we can't make progress as a society when both sides believe that they are motivated by love, while the other side is motivated by hate."

But there certainly WAS a time when Democrats and Republicans were able to achieve all sorts of things in a bi-partisan manner. What changed?

There was a time when members of the House and Senate might have argued vociferously on the floor by day, but they would take their dinners together by night. And it was during those dinners, when they related to one another as human beings. Perhaps they need to hear more stories like the one I shared with you about Hawk and Tommy. Lawmakers can still disagree but maybe seeing one another as human beings can be first step towards Tikkun Olam in Washington.

One of the thinkers in Israel who has worked tirelessly to get Israelis and Palestinians to see each other as human beings, albeit with competing narratives, is Yossi Klein Halevi. His book, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, was written after he spent a very long time immersing himself in Palestinian culture, particularly in mosques in refugee camps in both Gaza and the West Bank. One of the themes he found in Palestinian culture was the constant de-legitimization of the Jewish connection to Israeli. Klein Halevi writes:

*I've often heard from Palestinians that, just as the Ottoman Turks came here and left, and the British came here and left, so, too, will the Zionists one day leave. That analogy ignores Zionism's singular achievement. None of those invaders founded a thriving society, let alone a sovereign state. They eventually went back to their homelands.*

*More than anything else, I need you to understand this: The Jews succeeded where the Crusaders and the Ottomans and the British failed because we didn't merely come here. We returned.*

In justifying the motivation of writing his book for an imagined Palestinian reader, Levi writes:

*We need to respect each other's right to tell our own stories. That's why I am writing to you, neighbor: to tell you my story, not yours. If you choose to write in response, as I hope you will, you'll tell me your understanding of your history. I **respect** your right to define yourself, and I insist on the same right. That is the way to peace."*

It is Klein Halevi's effort of "warm-heartedness," and a chance to break the cycle of Motive Attribution Asymmetry.

Halevi also has an American-Jewish audience in mind too. As I am sure you know, many American Jews desperately seek a path to peace in the middle east, but differ significantly on how to get there. I have talked about, and attended, annual conferences for both AICPAC (The American Israel Political Affairs Committee and J-Street. In case you are less familiar with these groups...I lifted the following descriptions from their published Mission Statements:

*AIPAC is a pro-Israel lobby that urges all members of Congress to support Israel through foreign aid, government partnerships, joint anti-terrorism efforts and the promotion of a negotiated two-state solution—a Jewish State of Israel and a demilitarized Palestinian state.*

*J Street organizes and mobilizes pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans who want Israel to be secure, democratic and the national home of the Jewish people. Working in American politics and the Jewish community, we advocate policies that advance shared US and Israeli interests as well as Jewish and democratic values, leading to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.*

While the ends seems similar, the means are in constant dispute.

BUT in the gap between J Street and AIPAC, there is a real, religious language of Judaism and its inherent connection to the Land of Israel which supersedes nuances between left-of-center and right-of-center politics.

We want a *tikkun*, a repair of torn American politics between Republicans and Democrats. And we certainly want a *tikkun*, a repair in the shredded relations between Palestinians and Israelis and between Israeli and Palestinian advocates. But what does ANY of this have to do with a *tikkun*, a repair, in our own, personal lives? So I will conclude today with another story...as rabbis do.

It is from Arthur Brooks' first commercial book, named, *Who Really Cares*. It was a book about people in American who give the most to charity, broken down by categories such as politics and religion.

Brooks thought no one would be interested in his book. But he was wrong. People were interested in his book. But not everyone liked it. One gentleman from Texas wrote an email to Brooks beginning with these words: "Dear Professor Brooks: You are a fraud." And it was downhill from there. In 5000 words the Texan criticized every chapter in the book informing him of numerous inadequacies as a researcher and as a person.

Have you ever been on the receiving end of withering criticism? Have you ever been criticized harshly as a professional and as a person? (Pause) So painful.

How do you respond? Should you respond?

At the time, Brooks thought of three possible options:

*"Option 1: Ignore him. He's just some random guy, right? Why waste time?"*

*Option 2: Insult him. Say, "Get a life, man. Don't you have something better to do than reach out and bother a stranger?"*

*[Subtle presentation of third option]*

*Option 3: Destroy him. Pick out three or four of his most glaring, idiotic errors and throw them in his face, adding, ‘Hey blockhead, if you don’t know economics, best not to embarrass yourself in front of a professional economist.’*

Let me have a show of hands...How many believe he chose option 1---

Ignore?

How about option 2---respond and insult?

Then there is option 3---respond and pick apart the argument----destroy? [evaluate responses]

I must tell you how Brooks responded, because it wasn’t any of the three options listed above.

*“As I read his e-mail, I was insulted and felt attacked. But I also kept thinking, He read my book? I was filled with gratitude.*

*As an academic, I was used to writing things that almost no one would read. I had put my whole heart into that project for two years, and this guy had taken the time to read the whole thing. That amazed me.”*

Brooks continues:

*“I wrote back and said I realized he really hated my book, but that it had taken me a lot of work to write, and I deeply appreciated his time and attention to every detail.”*

And guess what happened next?

Fifteen minutes later, a second message from that guy popped up in Brooks’ in-box. Brooks opened the email and braced himself. But instead of another salvo, the Texan said he was shocked that Brooks read his note and the next time he was in Dallas they should grab some dinner.

(Pause)

Were you expecting that?

Did the Texan suddenly like Brooks’ book? Of course not. He simply learned that he liked Brooks because he had taken the time to read the Texan’s email and responded.

*Brooks had written that there is something severely wrong in America. He calls it a “culture of contempt.” And in one email he broke the cycle with a few words of gratitude.*

On this first day of Rosh Hashana, join in praying for a great *tikkun*. Let us pray for a *tikkun*:

To break the culture of contempt in American politics;

To break the culture of contempt between Palestinian and Israelis; and

to break the culture of contempt between Jewish supporters of the State of Israel.

And let us not only pray for a tikkun in our own lives, but may we act on these prayers by bringing kindness, consideration and empathy into our disagreements with others – thus beginning the act of social repair, *tikkun olam* so needed in our country and throughout the world.

That repair must begin with each of us – *lo alecha hamlecha ligmor* – we are not responsible for finishing the task of repair, nor are we free to ignore it because the task seems so large. Let us begin the work of repair immediately.

– To a year of repair---L'shanah tovah