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# IMAGINE

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Friends, in this particularly divisive time in our society, it is important to find things about which we agree and have in common, in order to repair our social fabric. If I may be so bold as to offer something towards this goal, I think it is safe to say that everyone likes the Beatles. To what degree we like the Beatles is personal. I'm sure everyone has their own favorite song or album.

Personally, I can't choose one, but I do have a few favorites. Depending on the day, my favorite album is either Revolver or Abbey Road, which was released 50 years ago last week. My favorite songs are "Paperback Writer" with its harmonies and gritty guitar riff, George Harrison's "While My Guitar Gently Weeps," and "Yellow Submarine," just because it is silly and fun.

One of the many reasons why the Beatles stand so far and above most other bands and rock musicians is that each member was a virtuoso in his own right. Well, maybe not Ringo, but he could hold a steady

backbeat. After the Beatles broke up, each of the Fab Four had their own successful music career. Despite their post-Beatles' successes, they were really best as team players. Each member's talents were enhanced and flaws were moderated by the other three. As solo acts, Ringo Starr did a lot of covers of older rock songs and leaned into his goofiness. George exhibited the most talent, with his complex compositions and high-brow musicality, as well as his collaborations with other rock musicians. Paul McCartney became the most successful, starting his own band "Wings," and writing smash hits still popular today. John Lennon's most well-known music focused on his activism.

His most famous solo song is the visionary anthem "Imagine," released in 1971, inspired by some of Yoko Ono's poetry. Its melody is serene and calming, and its lyrics are about Lennon's ideal world:

Imagine there's no heaven

It's easy if you try

No hell below us

Above us only sky

Imagine all the people

Living for today

Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion, too

Imagine all the people

Living life in peace

You may say that I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us

And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions

I wonder if you can

No need for greed or hunger

A brotherhood of man

Imagine all the people

Sharing all the world

You may say that I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us

And the world will live as one.

By now, I'm sure you are probably humming the elegiac piano ballad to yourself. The words are so beautiful and encompassing that we instinctively want to agree with Lennon's simple poetry. They strike our deepest, primal cords and resonate with our longing for a better world. And yet, if we really consider these words, and understand their implication for us as Jews, something very different reveals itself.

In a previous High Holy Day sermon, I hinted that I do not like "Imagine." Actually, I hate it. Every hope and dream communicated in these few words is un-Jewish, and the overall message is a recipe for a life devoid of any Jewishness or Jewish distinctiveness. Despite my revulsion to this classic of modern music, its message is one that we should grapple with, because it represents the most important dilemma facing modern Jews today, as we decide just how much of our lives we give to being Jewish.

Modern liberal Jews are caught between the modern, progressive, cosmopolitan nature of American society on the one hand, and connection to their unique Jewish tradition on the other. How much of

these two can be possibly reconciled? John Lennon gives us one answer. As we begin a New Year and wrestle with these questions again, as we contemplate what kind of people we want to be in the year ahead, I hope to provide you with another.

Let's start at the beginning. Lennon wants us to imagine that there is no heaven or hell, presenting the world in concrete, scientific terms. No hell below, and only sky above. He is rejecting the predominant Christian conception of the afterlife, based on nearly two-thousand years of thought and belief about what happens after a person dies. Jewish thought does not have this heaven-and-hell dichotomy. In fact, the Rabbis tell us, "All Israel has a place in the World to Come." They also add, "The righteous of the nations of the world have a place in the World to Come."

(Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Teshuvah 3:5) Great! We're in, and so are all of the non-Jews who live by proper ethics and morals.

However, that's not the reason we should have a problem with this verse. Ultimately, no heaven or hell implies that there is no expectation to live by ethical standards, because there are no consequences for not

doing so. In Lennon's world, there is nothing calling us to account for how we treat others. Ethical living is at the heart of Jewish tradition, and so is *Teshuvah*, the process of repentance for when we fail to act in ethical ways towards others. Jews across the world pack into synagogues on the two days a year when we hear messages about accountability and judgment more frequently than any other days in our calendar. These days are called *Yamim Nora'im*, the Days of Reverence, and today is called *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgment. Today is the Super Bowl of telling us that there are consequences for our actions. In the liturgy, we find that God calls us to account for our deeds, a sentiment that goes all the way back to Abraham, when God singled out our ancestor to "instruct his children and his household to keep the way of Adonai by doing what is just and right." (Genesis 18:19) In the metaphysical sense, if there is only sky above and no hell below us, then there are no consequences for our actions and no reason to be good.

Next, Lennon tells us, "Imagine all the people, Living for today." He continues in the next verse, "Imagine there's no countries; It isn't hard to

do. Nothing to kill or die for; And no religion, too. Imagine all the people; Living life in peace.” Let’s start with the second verse and make our way back to the end of the first verse.

(Many of the following thoughts are inspired by *John Lennon and the Jews*, Ze’ev Maghen, 2014.)

What if I were to say to you: “My wife Jena is the best woman in the entire world!” Sorry, mom. Am I relying on some set of facts, evaluating her by a series of categories and checklists? Is there some institute that has conducted studies and empirically ranked women, with Jena at the top of the list? Of course not. It’s not a verifiable fact. I just happen to love Jena more than I love any other woman. Imagine if I said to her, “Jena, I love you so much, just as much as I love every other woman in the world.” That would not go over so well. What if I said that I love my children more than I love your children? Would you think any less of me? I hope not. And, I hope you love your kids more than I love your kids.

Love is inherently preferential. We know this instinctively but we rarely articulate it. We will always prefer to be in the company of some people rather than others. We will always form special groups to which we feel a stronger connection, a sense of belonging. We will always love

the nearer things more than the farther things. And we want to perpetuate that love as long as we can.

This is not because we are selfish or chauvinistic, or without the ability to appreciate the universal wonders of the world. Rather, it is because we are motivated by preferential love, and special communities are the most beautiful expression of that love. This kind of love is the essence of human happiness. If we did not love preferentially, we would have nothing to live for.

Rabbi Akiva taught that the most important principle in the Torah was “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Lev. 19:18; Sifra Kedoshim 2:4; Genesis Rabbah 24:7) In the Talmud (Bava Metzia 62a), he and another scholar were presented with an ethical dilemma: You are traveling with another person in the desert together, and you have only one bottle of water that will last till you get to civilization. The other scholar basically said, “share the water and die together.” Akiva said, “keep the water for yourself and make it to the next town.”



It sounds harsh, but it connects to Akiva's interpretation of the statement "Love your neighbor as yourself." He understands it to mean, "Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself." In order to love, we must start with the smallest and most intimate concentric circle, one's self and one's family. "Love your neighbor as yourself" comes from Leviticus 19, the Torah portion named *Kedoshim*, "The Holiness Code," an ethical program for living a holy life. The word *kadosh* means holy, or special, or set apart. Living by this ethic, we set ourselves apart and distinguish ourselves from other peoples.

The word *kadosh* appears in all sorts of important places having to do with love. When two Jews get married, it is called Kiddushin, because they set one another apart from the rest of humanity, acknowledging that they love one another more than they love anyone else. As Shabbat comes in on Friday night, the blessing over the wine is called Kiddush, because that day is more beloved than the other days by God and Israel, and we set it apart from the rest of the week. In prayer, when we imitate the angels and say that God is *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh*, "Holy, Holy, Holy,"

we are saying that God is more separate than anything else we could possibly imagine.

This is especially true for the Jewish People. Just like we love our spouse, children, and parents more than any other individuals, every name we have for the Jewish People makes the same claim about family uniqueness: *Am Yisrael* (the People of Israel); *Klal Yisrael* (the Collective of Israel); *B'nai Yisrael* (the children of Israel); *Beit Yisrael* (the House of Israel). All of these are images of family, ethnicity, and peoplehood. The Torah is the Constitution of the Jewish People. It is our special guide, not intended for use by other nations, and in the Torah, we find a God who also distinguishes, chooses, and loves preferentially. All people are created in the image of God, and so all people are created equal, objectively speaking. However, we should never become equal in each other's feelings. Inequality in our hearts is the foundation for all personal connection.

Many other religions and political systems do the opposite, espousing universal love. However, the actual practice of universal love

has proven to be detrimental to personal relationships and individual identity. Moreover, if you are an individual or small group that does not want to buy into that kind of love, opting for the preferential kind as we Jews have, bad things tend to happen to you for rejecting what is assumed to be “Universal Truth.”

When God called to Abraham, God said that Abraham would become a great nation, and all the families of the Earth would be blessed through him. And even though God is sovereign over the whole world, the patriarchs are not offered a vast empire, only a tiny speck of land: the Land of Israel, beyond which they were not to invade other peoples. Israel was told to be proud of their distinction and adhere to their covenant with God, which included respecting the land and cultures of other ethnic and tribal groups. Throughout the Bible, the prophets hope for the day when the other nations will one day recognize God and God’s teachings in their own time and according to their own understanding. Each nation judges in accordance with its own perspective.

There is no human being, and no nation, that can claim to have captured the entire truth for all others.

The Jews are a family. A family does not need to impose its will on others. There is no Schevitz-ism because my family doesn't have an ideology that keeps us together other than love of ourselves. Your family doesn't either. Writ large, neither do the Jews. We have been a nation since God spoke to Abraham, and our sense of family and peoplehood has grown stronger with the joys and sorrows that we have endured together. Zionism came to be a modern movement because we loved and longed for an absent Zion for nearly two thousand years.

Furthermore, love is the antidote to becoming chauvinistic or supremacist or supercessionist. When Rabbi Akiva says "Love your neighbor as yourself," he means love others in the same manner as you love yourself. The love for the ones who are close to us is a guide for how we should love others. This is called empathy, and it is the basis for the Torah's commandment to help the stranger, which appears 36 times in the Torah, more than any other: "Care for the stranger, for you were

strangers in the land of Egypt.” The Jewish ethic to help others comes from our own experience.

A few months ago, I was sitting on a panel hosted by our local state delegate Schuyler Van Valkenburg. A Christian colleague sitting next to me, in an effort to show that we must appreciate the humanity in each of us, said, “We have to remember that there is no Other.” I could not disagree more. Unfortunately, I did not have time to address her comments directly, but I would have said something like this: Of course, there is an “Other.” We are all “Other.” But like Rabbi Akiva said, we must love the Other as we love ourselves and the ones closest to us. We cannot and should not eliminate Otherness, but we must add empathy to our experience with the Other.

One of the predominant ideas that has been circulating for decades is the concept of universal oneness, so much so that we now take for granted that achieving unity is good or even the best goal. It is one of the reasons why the state of Israel receives so much criticism.

As Jews have always stood out with our distinctive practices, Israel goes against the trend of universalism as a nation with an unabashed particularistic identity. And Jewish empathy is why Israel is one of the first countries to help other nations in times of need or crisis.

Love of family and identity makes us do all sorts of things that might seem irrational to others outside of our families. Jews call these practices “mitzvot,” those acts of love that show that we belong to a people and adhere to the covenant with God. Where John Lennon wants us to abandon religion because he sees it as a force that divides us, doing mitzvot is what makes us distinct and unique as Jews, and provides our lives with meaning, good things in my mind. Hearing the sounding of the shofar today on Rosh Hashanah; fasting on Yom Kippur; waving a lulav on Sukkot; dancing around with Torah scrolls on Simchat Torah; lighting Hanukkah candles; wearing the fringes on our Tallit, singing songs on Shabbat; wearing costumes on Purim; eating foods that remind us of our experience of Egyptian slavery on Passover; observing the dietary laws.

All of these rituals are seemingly impractical, irrational, and admittedly, a little strange, but they make our lives more meaningful and loving.

Observances provide us with deep connection to our tradition, and they link us to other Jews who do them today and have done them for a hundred generations before. These practices are meant to awaken our hearts to love being Jewish ever so much more than we already do. If you love being Jewish, then you do mitzvot. Love is not some abstract emotion. Rather, we show love through action, like the little things we do every day that let others know that we love them.

Instead of Lennon's hope that there is nothing to kill or die for, I hope that you do have things in your life that are dear enough to you that you would be willing to die for and even possibly kill for, if, God forbid, the need ever arose. On Yom Kippur, we commemorate those Jews of ages past who gave their lives because they preferred to love the Jewish People and the covenant with God, rather than submit to tyranny, oppression, or forced conversion.

And for the past 71 years, the State of Israel has existed, where millions of our brothers and sisters have served and protected, putting their lives on the line to defend the Jewish State. If there is nothing to kill or die for, then there really is nothing to live for.

“Living for today,” as Lennon encourages us, is antithetical to the Jewish experience. It separates us from the ties that bind us to what came before us and what will come after us. It relieves us of the burdens of the past and the responsibilities to the future, and it disconnects us from those who would otherwise have shared the same experience. Our tradition is filled with literature, legends, symbols, sufferings, and achievements which connect us to the past and future.

The Bible is not just a collection of stories and teachings that happened to some other people a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. The Bible is our family album. The most important line in the Haggadah from the Passover Seder, when we tell our foundational story of our journey from Egyptian slavery to freedom and nationhood, is “In every generation, a person is obligated to see him or herself as if he or she



personally went out of Egypt.” Jewish legend tells us that we were all at Sinai. Several times, the Torah commands us “to remember.” Today is *Yom HaZikaron*, the Day of Remembrance. This is put concisely by John Goodman’s character Walter Sobchak from the movie *The Big Lebowski*, a convert to Judaism, which I will paraphrase for the sake of decorum: “Three thousand years of beautiful tradition, from Moses to Sandy Koufax...you’re darn right I’m living in the past.” And we don’t just live in the past. We build for the future. Educating children in Jewish living is our most sacred task. In our most well-known prayer, we say “You shall teach your children diligently,” and our most important ritual, the Passover Seder, revolves around telling our foundational story to the next generation.

Lennon wants us to live life in peace. That is certainly an admirable goal, but we must first define what kind of peace we want, and how we get there. Former Soviet prisoner, Israeli diplomat, and public figure Natan Sharansky has argued for peace through respecting identity. Peace will not be achieved by giving up who we are, as Lennon would have us

do. Our identities give us purpose and resolve, and we should seek the same in those with whom we are trying to make peace.

Finally, Lennon wants us to imagine a world where we have no possessions, where there is no need for greed or hunger. We are a brotherhood of man who share the world. Not only is this naïve, it is counter to one of most important pillars of Jewish life: giving tzedakah. If we have nothing of our own, then we have nothing to give to others. The Torah tells us a harsh truth: there will always be poverty. (Deuteronomy 15:11) But in that same passage, it commands us to open our hand to the poor. The notion of tzedakah is based in the biblical laws of allowing the poor to take from the corners of the field, the forgotten sheaves, and the gleanings dropped during harvest. These laws are grounded in the notion of owning property. Giving is based on having wealth. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written, “The privilege of wealth lies not in what it allows us to do for ourselves, but what it enables us to do for others.” (*To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (2007), p. 39)

Every ancient rabbinic sage had a day job, the Talmud (Kiddushin 29a) states that parents must teach their children a marketable skill, and even the poor must give tzedakah. Every city in which there was a Jewish community for the last two thousand years anywhere in the world had a communal fund to help the poor. To be able to earn a living and build wealth creates personal dignity, and we share that dignity when we give to someone who has less than we do.

John Lennon's dream of one world can only be achieved by forcibly stopping people from loving preferentially through punishments and severing personal relationships. This is not the world we should hope for, and it is a dream that the Jewish People have always resisted. Especially today in our universalist, post-modern world, Jews are the salmon, swimming against the tide.

The guide to a meaningful Jewish life is the exact opposite of the imaginations of John Lennon. I'm no great poet, but here are my hopes and wishes. Imagine living like you will be called to account for the choices you make and the actions you take.

Imagine that you are part of a family, the Jewish People, that has a particular calling to live by a set of distinct practices and a code of morality. Imagine that you have inherited a four thousand-year-old glorious past and will build the foundations for a successful future. Imagine loving being Jewish so much that you participate in the rituals that give it meaning and make it unique among all other families. Imagine using the love you have for the Jewish People to empathize with those who are members of other families, and aiding them in their time of need. Imagine making a living to earn dignity for yourself, and giving to others less fortunate to help them maintain their own dignity. And imagine a world in which all families did the same.

You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. We Jews have had this dream for nearly four thousand years. We are the descendants of Abraham our father, who responded to the call of God with an enthusiastic *Hineni*, "Here I am." We are the students of Moses our teacher, whose Torah can be found in all aspects of life. We are the inheritors of the prophets and rabbis of Israel, who speak the words of

God through their messages and teachings. We aspire to be a holy people, and while we seek to perpetuate our holiness, we respect the differences of all other peoples. The prophet Micah hopes for the day that, “Each person will sit under his or her own vine and fig tree, with no one to disturb them...For all peoples will walk, each in the name of their gods, and we will walk in the name of Adonai our God, forever.” (4:4-5) As much as I like the Beatles, I’ll take that over John Lennon.

Among all of the Jewish holidays, Rosh Hashanah is the most universalist one. Most of our holidays celebrate or commemorate something that happened to the Jewish People in ages past. Today, however, we celebrate the birthday of the world, and God’s judgment of all humanity, but we do so in our own unique language, and with the sounding of the shofar. Natan Sharansky, commenting about the shape of the shofar, narrow at one end and wide at the other, once noted that the shofar represents our natural affinity to affirm our own identity first, and only then work to help others.

When you blow into the wide end, nothing happens. Only when you blow into the narrow end, the smallest circle, will the shofar ring loud and true. As we begin a new year, let us recommit to our identity and distinctiveness, love and celebrate what is unique about being Jewish, and through empathy, learn to appreciate and accept other cultures and peoples.

Shanah Tovah!