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ON FRINGES AND CONNECTION:

THE TRIBES OF AMERICA, THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL, AND THE TRIBES OF BNAI TIKVAH

Shanah Tovah. Beruchim Habaim. We welcome everyone to our service this morning, those who are here with us in person and those who are joining us virtually. Our hope, not too long ago, was that would welcome 5782 all together in our sanctuary and our refurbished Social Hall, but these last years have taught us humility. We are learning, sometimes painfully, to carry even our most routine expectations lightly—even the generations-old expectation that of course we all come to synagogue on the holy days or visit regularly with our closest friends and family. The message of the High Holiday liturgy, that is about taking nothing for granted—because uncertainty is the human condition—has never been clearer in my lifetime.

That said, there have been blessings to count, even as we struggle and witness so much struggle around us, and one of the silver linings is that we have found the wherewithal to adapt, to put our heads together, and to figure out how to be in community in new ways. We have had some remarkable successes. But we have also faltered. And when we have faltered—when technology has defeated us; when we fell short of creativity or wisdom—I have noticed that, we have been patient and forgiving. We have been resilient, and when we have been less

than resilient, we have been compassionate. Alert to one another's vulnerability to illness and other kinds of precarity, often, we are simply kinder than when we spend hectic days relentlessly striving. To the extent that many of us come into these Days of Awe a little rawer and more fragile than usual, a little more dependent, a little more sensitive, we are also, ironically, readier to do the collective, communal work that brings us together. What I will talk about today are the challenges and value of coming together.

Coming together, frayed and from far corners, is dramatized in one of the few physical, carefully choreographed gestures in our regular prayers. I am referring to the moment before reciting the SHEMA, our declaration of faith in one God—in Divine unity—when we gather the four corners of the tallit, the tzitzit, and hold them together in our right hands. When the Shema affirms belief in one God, we symbolically affirm the unity of humanity. By accepting one God above us all, we flatten any hierarchies amongst ourselves. In Jewish belief, God—understood as creator, sustainer, and redeemer—is so far beyond our human capabilities that the differences among people dissolve by comparison. Differences of race and gender, wealth and influence, education and national origin, are elided when we realize that we all share mortality and that we all are connected by a single soul presence that animates us. And so, we gather our tzitzit, the frayed edges of our tallit, and hold together the four corners of the map. Four winds, four seasons, four questions, four children, the four species of the lulav and ethrog; these sets of four symbolically are the corners that demarcate something complete.

The metaphor of the tzitzit, and the gesture of gathering them, also refers to the far-flung Jewish Diaspora, the ingathering of exiles in the Land of Israel, and the aspiration of Jewish unity across our many divides. When we recite the words, "... m'arbah kanfot ha'aretz.."

BRING US TOGETHER FROM THE FOUR CORNERS OF THE EARTH, we often do so to the melody of Israel's national anthem, overlaying the prayer before the Shema with the contemporary political reality of Israel and the hope expressed in Hatikvah.

For the past year and a half our connections may have felt especially frayed. The tzitzit are a metaphor for our lives. For those of us who have only intermittently been able to embrace our beloveds over these long months, we are, like tzitzit, at loose ends. For those of us whose travel to people and places to which we are attached has been suspended indefinitely, staying in place can, paradoxically, unmoor us. Since 1968, I have made regular trips to Israel, and I miss seeing my family and friends, and the many benefits and joys of this regular pilgrimage.

The eeriness of this pandemic, and all of the consequent disruption of our routines and expectations, has regularly been interrupted by literal and figurative explosions of heartbreak and rage: last summer's rallies demanding respect for black lives, the violence in the Capitol after the election, yet another Gaza conflict, even violent weather events across the country and globe, traumatic actions on our borders, and most recently in the devastations in Afghanistan, and the flood water after Hurricane Ida, we witness from afar tragedy after tragedy. Fires and storms literalize our collective emotional distress—and most often, in some form or another—that distress is a function of how deeply divided we are from one another and our frustration over the deadly ideological divisions—here in America, in Israel, in our Jewish communities, and globally—that alienate us from one another.

In my reading over these last months, I noticed a series of parallel efforts to classify and explain those divisions. I was especially compelled by an analysis George Packer published a month ago in *The Atlantic*. Packer identifies, and bemoans, four “tribes” in today’s America, each with passionately held, competing beliefs in what America is and should be. This tribalism, Packer convincingly argues, is destroying a needed American unity. Similarly, before he left his post as President of Israel, Ruvy Rivlin gave a speech at the Herzliya policy conference, where he identified four current “tribes of Israel,” four different communities in one country that do not share a vision of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. As President, Rivlin worked tirelessly, and with some limited success, to bridge these divides.

Americans too are increasingly identified with their own “tribes” and less and less able to identify with an all-embracing vision of America. Allowing that schematic formulations are necessarily overly neat, I did recognize myself in some of Packer’s descriptions and recognized some of my prejudices about the kinds of people with whom I generally disagree.

And in learning about the divisions in America and Israel, I also felt renewed respect for our own B’nai Tikvah community, which has been forging a B’nai Tikvah identity after a complicated congregational merger. We have developed some wisdom about what is required of us to transcend difference for the sake of the institutions and people we love and upon whom we depend.

Let’s start with America. Packer characterizes each of America’s four tribes around a core commitment: **Free** America, **Smart** America, **Real** America, and **Just** America. “Free America” is conservative and traditionalist. Free America valorizes Western Civilization; prefers

individual and states' rights against a strong federal government. Glorifying the self-made individual, the policies of Free America led to a decline in trust in government, medical experts and expertise in general, media, schools, unions, religious communities and a long decline in public investment.

The second tribe is SMART America. The top 10% of the country (not the top 1%!) who make up the class of professionals and educators, believers in a meritocracy, and the governing principles that allows them to pass on their advantages to the next generation in their own families. SMART America is comfortable in and committed to a global world and is less compelled by patriotism. Smart America wants government to provide a social safety net and enforce diversity in the workplace and in schools and believes that if opportunities are fair then the results will be fair. Many of us here may identify with this philosophy, but Packer calls on us to notice that Smart America rationalizes self-interest and underappreciates the importance of national feelings.

The REAL AMERICA tribe believes in the native wisdom of the working class against the elites, insiders, globalists and the "undeserving" recipients of government support. REAL Americans have long valued white European Protestant immigration, dismissive of those whom they displaced and later immigrants, including people of color and Jews. They privilege the wisdom of the common person over the expertise of the professional educated class. SMART America and REAL America do not understand one another.

Finally, the JUST America tribe sees America as failing to live up to its promise. Opposing the self-satisfied meritocracy championed by SMART America, JUST America sees a

long list of unfinished business from gender and racial inequality to climate change and systemic unfairness. Emphasizing group identities and alert to racism and sexism, JUST America resists an embracing narrative of a unified America. I recognize myself in the contradictions between “smart” and “just” America.

Each tribe has an important insight to contribute. REE America celebrates the energy of the individual. SMART America is open to change and respects expertise. REAL America is committed to place and suspicious of grand plans. And JUST America demands that we face unpleasant facts about our society. But as these tribes have become pitted in a deadly struggle against one another, each has become more extreme and limited. Believing in winners and losers leaves us less able to find and make common cause.

Strikingly, President Rivlin, in analyzing Israel’s divisions, also identified four tribes -- the secular, the Zionist-Religious, the ultra-Orthodox, and the Arabs who make up over 20% of the citizens of Israel. They live in different neighborhoods, go to different schools, read different newspapers, and have almost no interactions with one another. Reflecting on the composition of the incoming first-grade class, Rivlin said that children from the different tribes are not only unlikely to meet each other, but that they are educated toward totally different outlooks regarding the basic values and desired character of the State of Israel. Two of the four tribes, the ultra-Orthodox and the Arab citizens of Israel, do not see themselves as Zionists or as supporters of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. In the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, the tribes fight over budget allocations, competing for resources for education, housing, and infrastructure for their own community. Two of the four tribes do not even serve in the Israeli military, once regarded as the great equalizer in Israeli society.

This May, under the pressures of another war with Gaza, and the drama of forming a new government, there were shocking riots in the so-called mixed cities in Israel, destabilizing what was revealed to be a co-existence more fragile than most of us imagined. Rivlin, like Packer, concluded that a new Israeli order requires everyone to abandon the accepted view of majorities and minorities and move to a new concept of partnership among the various populations. May his vision be fulfilled.

Packer's and Rivlin's calls for mutual recognition, respect, and unity move me. Acknowledging human diversity—with all of our flaws—is basic to the Jewish view of communal life. We speak of four children at the Passover Seder, each of whom must find their place, though one may be wise and another wicked. And just as we gather in our grasp the tzitzit as if from the four corners of the map, and passionately affirm the Oneness of God in containing our diversity, so, too, the primary rituals of sukkot, the culminating holiday of the season of repentance symbolize bringing together people who are necessarily diversely flawed. During Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we engage in introspection, forgiveness, humility, and atonement, precisely so that we may deserve the rain that is symbolic of well-being, that we pray for on Sukkot.

On Sukkot, we will carry what are called “the four species,” the Lulav and Etrog. The rabbis saw in the four parts of the Lulav and Etrog a metaphor for humanity. Each of the four species has a different balance of taste and smell. The Etrog has both a taste and smell. The willow has neither. The Palm has taste (from its dates) but no smell. The myrtle has smell but not taste. The rabbis used this observation to make a point about humanity. Some people both behave well and learn well; others are weak in BOTH deed and learning; and there are people

who excel at one or the other, but not both. But on Sukkot we hold them all together, and they are all required to be held together for our collectivity to deserve Divine blessing. We don't favor one over the other, despite disparities of abilities or even intentions. Unified in the ritual enactments of the festival, we decline to privilege anyone over anyone else.

We might apply the model of the four species on Sukkot to how we should appreciate the value of each of the denominations of Judaism. The Reconstructionists excel at outreach and welcome those on the margins with creative and flexible services. Reform Jews stress social justice, tikkun olam, and have built partnerships that help sustain the Jewish people in America. The Conservative movement preserves the connection to traditional practice while offering an approach that enables classical Judaism to respond to modernity. And Orthodoxy sustains a high level of commitment and study that invigorates our institutions.

I don't pretend to have an answer to how to reaffirm shared identities as Americans or Jews at this juncture, but my point is that it is important to move in the direction of a shared identity, to find unity in diversity. The success we have experienced at B'nai Tikvah makes me hopeful.

B'nai Tikvah, a microcosm in our own way, is an experiment. Can diverse communities, each with its own history and traditions, each with its own tribal identity, come together and become something new and greater? Clearly, we can.

New institutions require acts of remembering the past and acts of forgetting, forgiving mistakes and misjudgments, and appreciating what is special about the tribes with whom we are confederated. At Bnai Tikvah, we have begun a new round of fixing up our building,

repainting, decorating, upgrading our communications and systems. We have new staff. On this Rosh Hashanah, I ask that we continue to live into being a community that models and practices participation and openness.

I imagine B'nai Tikvah as a leadership congregation in the south area, known for its culture of welcome and atmosphere of generous appreciation. We have adapted and grown during the pandemic; we changed our services to work on ZOOM, and we are adapting them again now to the hybrid services we will need in the future. Our online services are creative adaptations designed for a new medium. We changed; our school, our minyan, and our classes have all grown. To return to the metaphor with which I started, we held tightly to our tzitzit. We preserved our connections; we called each other; we visited when we could; and we did so as a single congregation. We are developing a new, shared set of stories about our past, present, and future. Whatever lies ahead this year, as your rabbi, I am entering 5782 with confidence and hope.

That said, there are dark clouds on the horizon. America is far from desisting from, and healing the wounds of, tribal conflict. Climate change and COVID variants hang menacingly over our immediate future. There is a long way to go towards peace and stability in Israel. But many of us also celebrated miracles in the midst of this tumult. Lori and I welcomed a grandson this April, Reuben. My unmediated joy and the delight I have felt these months reminded me that while I do have a cynical and anxious side, I am essentially optimistic that Reuben and the children and grandchildren who follow will grow into a world that is better than ours.

Hope and optimism are basic to the work of Rosh Hashanah, when we passionately recommit ourselves to the future. One cannot repent without hope. One of the great teachings of Hasidism is that despair is the great sin. In these strange and changing times, we gather out tzitzit, and proclaim the unity of Adonai Echad, the Jewish ideal of unity.

Shanah Tovah umetukah. May the year ahead bring growing safety, health and unity to our community, our nation, Israel and throughout our world.