**KOL NIDRE 2020**

**Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley**

**Rabbi Niles Goldstein**

*Ashamnu—*I confess, I am guilty.//

On this Kol Nidre,

after the terrible year that we have all experienced—

that we are *still* going through—

I feel discouraged & pessimistic.//

It is hard to see light at the end of this tunnel,

to envision our community & our nation

acting in ways that are civil, sensitive, thoughtful,

equitable, & just.//

Finding a vaccine for Covid-19

will not remedy the ills that are a part of our country

and that have been for many, many years.//

\*\*\*\*\*

A lot of us are deeply frustrated with the status quo

in America, and some are angry.//

We see it in the protests on the street,

from Portland to Kenosha to Rochester;

we see it on cable television every day,

and on social media every few seconds.//

It feels as if our country is on the brink,

that centuries of systemic racism,

of oppression, brutality, & economic inequality

have finally caught up with the powers that be—

and with a President who couldn’t give a damn.//

How do we find *hope* in an environment like this?

How do we find meaning, even redemption?//

---

There is a place for anger, Judaism teaches us,

in the face of oppression & injustice.//

When ancient societies failed to care for

their most vulnerable members,

the biblical prophets stood up

and expressed *moral outrage*,

not only against their leaders,

but against their friends & neighbors.//

The prophet Isaiah, on Yom Kippur,

tells the Israelites that God doesn’t want

their meaningless fasts;

what God desires most of all

is for them to feed the hungry & clothe the naked.//

But there is a big difference between moral anger

and hateful rage.//

When protests against societal injustice

mutate into acts of looting, rioting,

and the destruction of local businesses,

that’s no longer prophetic behavior—

that’s *criminality*.//

And it does nothing to further the cause

it is supposedly trying to advance.//

All that the violence & mayhem actually helps

is the system that wants to shut down protest,

and the leader who calls for “law & order”

rather than healing & institutional transformation.//

\*\*\*\*\*

It is hard to feel hopeful at a time like this.//

But our religion teaches us that hope isn’t optional—

hope is a *mitzvah*.//

Over & over again,

Judaism offers us a vision of peace & justice,

a world of harmony & equality—a place of promise.//

In the book of Genesis,

the Torah describes the Garden of Eden,

a place of serenity where all of creation—

Adam, Eve, wildlife, ecosystems—

exist in a state of dignity with one another,

untroubled by violence, exploitation, or even death.//

This depiction of Eden is echoed later in the Bible,

in a vision from Isaiah, who I noted earlier.//

In messianic time, says the prophet,

“the wolf shall dwell with the lamb,

and the leopard lie down with the kid.”//

He says elsewhere that people

“shall beat their swords into plowshares

and their spears into pruning hooks:

nation shall not take up sword against nation;

they shall never again know war.”//

These hopeful, harmonious, & beautiful visions—

one of the past, one of the future—

may seem more romantic than realistic

to most of us who live during a time like our own.//

Trying to imagine a world that is just & peaceful,

when people are at each other’s throats

over politics, race, & culture,

when climate change is burning our wildlands

& melting our glaciers,

probably comes across as far-fetched & fanciful.//

But these visions are the heart & soul of Judaism.//

They are *aspirational*,

a messianic dream, a mission & a *mitzvah*

for us as Jews.//

Our task is to try to re-create the world

as it *ought* to be, not settle for the world as it is.//

This has been the Jewish mandate for millennia,

the holy work our people are charged with,

and it is more important now than ever before.//

\*\*\*\*\*

The Days of Awe call Jews to personal *teshuvah*,

to repentance & return.//

Today, we also need a *national* call to *teshuvah*,

a collective return to mutual respect,

peaceful coexistence, & sanity.//

As the rabbis say in *Pirke Avot*,

“The day is short, and the task is great.”//

How do we learn from, & move beyond,

these angry protests,

& occasional eruptions of criminality,

& act again toward one another with civility?//

How do we engage in respectful conversation

rather than hateful diatribes?//

How do we unite over shared values

instead of dividing ourselves

over polarizing politics & demographic tribalism?//

As we begin this new Jewish year, our task is clear:

we must acknowledge, confess,

& call out the ills that afflict our country

before we can try to remedy them.//

There can be no peace without justice;

we must confront, thoughtfully & compassionately,

the systemic racism, economic inequalities,

& abuses against our planet

that have plagued our world for many, many years,

and in some cases for centuries.//

\*\*\*\*\*

As I said at the outset,

on this Kol Nidre I feel discouraged & pessimistic.//

I’m entitled to my feelings,

but I can’t allow them to control me.//

As a Jew, I am *commanded* to have hope,

to believe in & envision a better world,

a world that is harmonious, just, & whole—

and then to dedicate my life to making it a reality.//

Hope is a journey—and it can also be a struggle.//

Like the Days of Awe themselves,

hope requires that we look within,

that we assess where we are

compared to where we ultimately want to be.//

It is not easy to change,

and it is certainly not easy to change society.//

But hope, once we embrace it,

will give us the vision, the strength, & the fortitude

to save us from despair,

give our lives meaning & purpose,

& begin the process of fixing our very broken world.//

*Ken Yehi Ratzon* – May it be God’s will