

Kol Nidre 5780

Months ago, I had a conversation with a member of our congregation who believed that this country is headed toward a civil war. I thought it was a far-fetched idea then, but in the past couple weeks there have been serious scholars discussing the possibility. Liberals and Conservatives come to me to share their belief that the other side is truly evil. Someone called my office one day wanting to convert to Judaism so she could make Aliyah if the democrats ever took over this country. I had a conversion student actually move to Canada because Trump was elected.

There was a time when I imagined myself going into politics. Mr. Overstreet, was *that* teacher for me. When I was his student at Walton High School, I learned the great history of our country's political system. Through his eyes, I believed in the ideals of a nation built on the principles of freedom and equality, where every person had a voice in pursuing life, liberty, justice, and happiness. I became a political science major at the University of Florida. I didn't know my path, but it very well could have ended up in DC, working on the hill or for an organization like AIPAC. I would never have imagined what the world of politics would become, a moment where hate and fear are rising, and even scholars speak of the possibility of political violence in this great country.

There are two major fasts in our tradition. The 9th of Av, and Yom Kippur. The fasting on the 9th of Av is to bring us as low as possible. The day commemorates the tragedy of the destruction of the 1st and 2nd Temples, and many other tragedies that have impacted our community over the arc of time. In the Talmud, we learn the the only reason the Temple was destroyed was because *sinat Chinam* - baseless hatred was present in the land. The quote continues and says that baseless hatred is equivalent shedding blood, idol worship and sexual immorality, the three sins that a person should be killed before committing. Baseless hatred means that the divisions in Israel became so great, that they stopped seeing one another as part of the same community despite those differences.

Tisha B'Av is the saddest day of the Jewish year. Yom Kippur is exactly the opposite.

On Yom Kippur, we fast to draw us closer to God, like angels. This is a fast to elevate our spirits. We refrain from work and create the sense that this is the holiest day of the year. At the conclusion of this fast we celebrate, having spent the day in the holy work of Teshuvah and beginning the New Year with a clean slate. Yom Kippur is a day God's love is greater than God's judgement.

When the State of Israel was being established. Rav Kook, one of the giants of the modern age, reflected on the fast of Tisha B'av and said "If we were destroyed, and the world with us, due to baseless hatred - *sinat chinam*, then we shall rebuild ourselves, and the world with us, with baseless love — *ahavat chinam*."¹ Baseless love is commitment to work for the benefit of the other, even when there is no obvious reason or benefit to the self.

There was a time where I thought my life might lead me to politics, But, I am grateful that I was called to this profession. Not because I want to shy away from the important and hard work that our politicians must do. I'm grateful God called me to this work, because I believe it's the responsibility of our community to wield the power of *ahavat chinam* baseless love. *Ahavat Chinam* can unite us in a way that can overcome the political divisions we face.

On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke of Yirat Shamayim - fear of heaven driving our action, which we defined as fear of not living up to the values that God sets before us.

It's Jewish values that helped us achieve a National Home in the Land of Israel. It is Jewish values that motivates so many Jews contribute innumerable advances to our world. It is these values that drive us to make the world a better place for everyone, not only ourselves.

Here at Shearith Israel, we work to apply those Jewish values, but the connections aren't always clear. We're a very old religion, with lots of ideas. Our values can't be contained in a political party. Judaism transcends politics. But Judaism is a part of the world and our world includes our government. Every week we ask "God's blessings for our country - for its government, for its leaders and advisors, and for all who exercise just and rightful authority. Teach them insights from Your Torah, that may administer all affairs of state fairly, that peace and security, happiness and prosperity, justice and freedom may forever abide in our midst. Creator of all flesh, bless all the inhabitants of our country with Your spirit. May citizens of all races and creeds forge a common bond in true harmony, to banish hatred and bigotry, and safeguard the ideals and free institutions that are the pride and glory of our country."²

¹ (*Orot HaKodesh* vol. III, p. 324)

² Siddur Sim Shalom

Baseless hatred once brought our people to the brink of destruction, and baseless hatred is rising again. That's why we're reaching out as a congregation with Ahavat Chinam, baseless love.

On the Eve of Tisha B'av, we launched four initiatives under the banner of *Ahavat Chinam*. We are part of a cluster of congregations affiliated with the New Sanctuary Movement of Atlanta, supporting asylum seekers in their journey. We are organizing a record restriction event as part of a broader movement to fix a broken criminal justice system. We are one of many chapters of backpack buddies, organizing food for children at Spark experiencing poverty. Finally, we're one of the first chapters of the OneAmerica Movement, combating polarization.

Each of these initiatives is grounded in the Jewish values that transcend politics.

Supporting Asylum Seekers

The world today has more displaced persons than at any point in history according to the United Nations.³ A displaced person has fled their home due to violence or persecution and thus, cannot return. There are more than 70 million people in this situation. A refugee is going through a process in a camp located in a country not their own, hoping to be admitted with status to another country that will welcome them. The United States used to be the world leader in welcoming refugees. An asylum seeker is also a displaced person, but seeking to be accepted into the country they have fled to. They are strangers by definition.

V'ahavtem et HaGer you shall love the stranger is a commandment repeated 36 times, more than any other in the Torah. We are commanded to love the stranger because we were all refugees, we were all strangers. The heart of our story is Arami Oved Avi- my father was a wandering Aramean⁴. When strangers entered the city of Sodom, if only 10 righteous souls had stood up for those strangers, the entire town would have been saved.⁵ The definition of an evil city is the one that rejects its strangers seeking refuge. We will never forget the nations and the countries that refused to welcome us when we were refugees, we must never forget the horrors that was in part, a result of the callousness of humanity.

³ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

⁴ Deut. 26:5

⁵ Gen. 18:22-19:27

Two years ago, I spoke on these High Holidays about the way we all experience what it is like to be an outsider, and we announced our intention to support a refugee family when they arrived to our city. The group of congregants who gave of themselves to welcome the Ahaw family through their refugee process fulfilled an important mitzvah, and it is with that intention that we are continuing to support the stranger within our community, but because of the historically low cap on welcoming new refugees to our country, the agencies that developed the infrastructure to integrate them into America well are shuttering and no longer able to give us the opportunity to welcome refugees.

So we've we've partnered with Glenn Memorial, Virginia Highland's UCC and the New Sanctuary Movement of Atlanta to support Asylum Seekers. Just two days ago over 35 people gathered and put together 105 hygiene kits to support the clients of the Tahirih Justice Center, led by our very own member, Shana Tabak. Tahirih Justice Center provides legal services and direct social support for women and girls fleeing gender based violence. Supporting Tahirih is the beginning of this work, we're going to do more.

Nobody is born hoping to become a displaced person. Nobody seeks to become a stranger in a strange land by definition, placing themselves in a precarious situation. The word "prayer" is a derivative of "precarious."⁶ Tefillah often emerges out of the place of not having direct control over your own fate. In a way, we place ourselves in the precarious state on this holy day, we elevate prayer in our hearts and recognize that while none of us know who will live and who will die, we have a reasonable assumption that we will live. In loving the stranger, we walk with them in their prayer.

We are all bound up in the criminal justice system

Just a few moments ago we all stood here before the heavenly court, *Yeshiva Shel Ma'alah*, and we invoked the earthy court *Yeshiva Shel Mata*, With Divine consent and with the consent of the congregation. *Anu Matirin L'hitpallel im avaryanim* - we declare it permissible to pray with criminals. In the eyes of heaven, we're all criminals on this day, hoping to be forgiven. We beat our chests *Ashamnu, Bagadnu*. We detail our transgressions, for the sin of disrespecting parents and teachers, for the sin of violence, for the sin of foul speech, idle gossip, betraying others. *V'al Kulam Eloha Slihot, S'lach Lanu, M'chal Lanu Kaper Lanu*. For all these crimes, God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement. We call the heavenly court and the earthy court to

⁶ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prayer>

open up a pathway for forgiveness, that we can correct our behavior and find ourselves on the right path again.

But in this country, we chose a path that made us the incarceration capital of the world. The United States is about 5% of the world's population, but we house almost a quarter of the prison population. We've begun to recognize the harm the bipartisan "tough on crime" initiatives of the 80s and 90s caused to our nation. But even with the prison population declining, the United States still has the highest incarceration rate in the world. We read in the Torah, *tzedek tzedek Tirdof* - justice justice you shall pursue. The context of that verse is that we are supposed to judge each person equally, giving no preference to poor or rich. But the reality of our system is that people with money are able to afford attorney fees, fines and favorable outcomes for their cases.

Our corrections system isn't doesn't help those caught in it to correct their ways. Five out of six former prisoners will be arrested within 9 years of their release.⁷ On this day we stand before God as criminals, just like every imperfect human that has ever walked this earth. Our systems of justice are as imperfect as we are, but they should encourage self-improvement, *teshuva*. Instead, they lock those arrested and incarcerated into a permanent under-class that denies them access to meaningful employment opportunities. *Teshuva* begins with the assumption that person can change direction. The belief that God forgives our sins because we're changing for the better is the foundation of this entire High Holiday Season. Yet our system does not support pathways for changing direction for the better. Justice systems are supposed to be about all of us, if some of us are prevented from *Teshuva*, then we're all prevented from *Teshuva*.

That's why we are following in the footsteps of Ebenezer Baptist Church, and The Temple's efforts to end Mass Incarceration and organize a Record Restriction Event for Dekalb County. We're joined tonight by my dear friend and colleague, the associate pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Bronson Woods who brought a group of young adults from Ebenezer to be with us this evening. The problems of the criminal justice system disproportionately impact communities of color, and this is a problem for all of us. A whole team of congregants are leading this charge in partnership with the Georgia Justice Project. It's a small step of creating pathways for *teshuva* for those who are eligible under the current law for their criminal or arrest record to be hidden from potential employers so they can access meaningful employment. With this work, we're creating more opportunity to live the value of *Teshuva*.

⁷ <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/18upr9yfup0514.pdf>

A small measure of justice

If all this sounds like it's only a small step toward much greater challenges, or that we're overly idealistic in trying to live up to these ideals, just listen to the Torah's ideal society: *Efes ki lo yihyeh becha evyon* - There shall be no needy among you. When it comes to poverty, we're supposed to be unrealistically idealistic. Four verses later *ki yiyeh becha evyon* - if there is among your brothers someone poor - *lo ta'ametz levavcha l'vo tikpotz et yadecha*. Do not harden your heart and do not close your hand. *Ko lo yechdal evyon* - for poverty will never cease. ⁸We're not only doing bandaid work, we're doing the work of every generation to address the problems of real children who are suffering before us.

God's concern time and again in the Torah is for the vulnerable, and God's judgement of humanity begins with our response to the vulnerable. We're gathering regularly at Shearith Israel to pack bags of food for children who are on reduced or free lunch programs at Spark Elementary. The social worker at the school puts the food into a backpack so the child avoids any sense of indignity. Too many children and their families struggle to make ends meet, our care for the poor among us isn't a "good deed" *Tzedakkah* is an obligation to get closer to the radical vision that "there shall be no poor among you."

Together these opportunities to share our love broadly *ahavat chinam*, have the power to transcend the divisiveness of this moment in history and do the work that we are commanded to do. Why do I believe this with all my heart?

Because

Our work with Criminal Justice Reform represents the value of Teshuva

Our work with Asylum Seekers captures the value of Tefillah

Our work with Backpack Buddies engages the value of Tzedekkah

I believe the words we say when we pray

U'teshuva, U'Tefillah, U'tzedakah Ma'avir et Roah Ha-Gezeirah

Repentance, Prayer, and Justice avert the severity of the decree

⁸ Deut. 15:4-11

What is that severe decree if not the rising divisions in our society, our seeming inability to agree even about definitions of what world is better than the one we are living in. What is averting the severe decree if not bringing more unity, more love, more teshuva, tefillah, tzedakah in the world. Not only are we addressing the challenges with these projects, but we're working directly to avert the evil decree. In partnership with Intown Community Church, we have become the first chapter of the One America movement in Atlanta. This movement is a grassroots effort to bring together diverse faith communities to directly address the challenges of polarization in this country, not to deny differences, but to recognize that despite differences there are areas of common work to make this world a better place. The only way to really do *ahavat chinam* is to see the common purpose we have with our brothers and sisters who are different than we are.

At Shearith Israel, our mission is to connect people to meaningful living through Judaism. When we better this sacred and fragile world through living the values of Teshuva, Tefillah and Tzedakah, perhaps we don't only avert the evil decree, perhaps we may even bring about the world we presently only dream of.