

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Sermon - 5781

Rabbi Ari Kaiman

Who are we in a Pandemic?

Four years ago, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, I shared an idea that has served as a foundation for much of my work here. It's the idea that we ought to love rebuke, we ought to love those who see the wrong within us, and hope, because we have a strong love relationship, that we can better one another. This idea is the foundation of our bridge-building work across differences in the platform of *Ahavat Chinam*. This idea is the foundation of the relationship between me and the community; namely that there are communities where everyone with agrees with the Rabbi or you're not in the right community, and there are community where there are disagreements, but they are never spoken of, and then there is the community we are always building - the one where we love enough that our differences don't cause us to reject one another, but rather bring us to love the diversity contained within all the more.

There is one quality, one character trait, a *middah*, above all others that we are able to cultivate within ourselves that leads to this ideal community. It is the *middah* of *anavah*, humility. It is a quality that is increasingly difficult to find in the world, and therefore increasingly difficult to cultivate. That is exactly why it is of critical importance that we at Shearith commit today to cultivate this quality within ourselves and our community.

When we have humility, the challenging work of building bridges across differences for mutual benefit becomes possible. But humility is really difficult, because humility asks us to nullify the self before the other. Humility asks us to be open to the possibility, even the likelihood, that I am the one that is wrong, I am the one that needs improvement.

In a brief moment, I want to share a personal story, one that is difficult for me to share, and then offer an invitation to stick around after the service today for discussion in breakout rooms around texts of humility.

I once had a position where a colleague and friend offered to sit down with me around the same time as I was transitioning out. She shared with me that, while everyone knew I had only good intentions and a desire for what was best, there are times that I came off as arrogant and dismissive. It hurt to hear this, but it came from a place of love. She gave me the gift of the potential to grow and improve.

It is entirely possible that this character trait is still within me, and if anyone here has been on the receiving end of arrogant dismissal, I take this opportunity to publicly rebuke myself and ask for forgiveness.

As I say the words, I'm acutely aware of the danger of the *chasid* who boasts, "look how humble I am." Humility isn't supposed to be a show, but rather a way of life. Reb Elimelech of Lizensk would regularly demonstrate to his *chasidim* the practice of self-rebuke for the sake of humility. It is really hard to stand before another and not only say, but deeply believe, I am the one that might be wrong.

I believe our world desperately needs humility right now. Arrogance is very much on the rise, and this pandemic has exposed more how arrogant we all were.

When this pandemic began in February, Emily and I bought cheap airline tickets to Paris in June, thinking it would be over by then. How naive we were, how arrogant this world was to think that we weren't vulnerable to the Tohu Va'vohu - the primordial chaos that bubbles up from time to time. The world knew that a pandemic was not only possible, but eventually probable, but how many of us grasped what this meant in December, when we all knew what China was facing? How many of us grasped what this meant in January, when the virus was confirmed to be spreading through the United States. How many of us grasped how long this would be when the shutdown began in March?

We've all been humbled, but we are still presented with arrogant leaders who don't listen to one another, who define opposing views in their most extreme terms creating false parodies. We are still presented with an arrogant culture that isn't willing to face its own flaws. We are still presented with an arrogant world, so many thinking their way is the only right way, and the beauty of God's oneness is diminished, the age of redemption delayed.

At the end of services today, we'll learn some text, and we'll have the opportunity to discuss in small groups the potential for humility, which I believe is the first step on the road to redemption. In between now and then, we will pray.

Shanah Tovah.