

Change the Discourse – Rosh Hashanah
September 14, 2015 – 1 Tishrei 5776
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
Rabbi Howard J. Goldsmith

Picture it: the year 70 of the Common Era in Jerusalem. The Romans would lay siege the next day but the many factions of Jerusalem's Jews threatened to kill one another before the Romans even arrived. Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, and Sicarii had moved beyond their differences of philosophy, class, theology, calendar and authority. The differences between the factions started with honest philosophical differences. But instead of civil discourse, they yelled, they called each other names, they refused to talk, they denigrated one another, they hurled insults and then rocks and then knives. They fought battles that led to Jewish bloodshed, battles rooted in *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred. The ancient rabbis teach that The Temple in Jerusalem fell because of no sin other than that of baseless hatred.¹ And mean-spirited argument, un-civil discourse lay as a root of that hatred that destroyed our holy, ancient Temple, that led our people to nearly 2000 years of exile.

Have we arrived at another moment when we – we Jews, we Americans, we citizens of this world – live under the cloud of baseless hatred? When we read the newspaper we see that the tenor of our society has developed into a toxic sludge of xenophobia, anti-Semitism, homophobia, misogyny and general un-civility. If we don't put a stop to this, if each of us fail to insist on a civil, respectful discourse, we cannot hope to approach the biblical ideal from Leviticus 19 that we'll read on Yom Kippur: Love your neighbor as yourself. This does not mean tolerate our neighbors, put up with our neighbors, deal with our neighbors' existence with furtive glances and whispered words. No! Love your neighbor as yourself means that we have a religious obligation with the power of 3000 years of history telling us that we need to work with every fiber of our being to LOVE our neighbor. Is it a tall order? Absolutely. But we have no choice. We must strive for love. Why? Because any path besides striving for love leads, ultimately to violence – spiritual, intellectual, emotional and even physical violence.

In Boston just a few weeks ago two brothers beat up a homeless Hispanic man and left him for dead on the sidewalk. They didn't just leave him with broken ribs, a broken nose and bruised all over. That wasn't enough for them. They also urinated on his face.² Why did they carry out this horrendous attack? Because they claimed that Hispanics are ruining America. Historically speaking we cannot forget who else has been beaten in this country. We cannot forget who else the dominant culture has declared the harbinger of all things bad and evil and destructive. Every ethnic group! Every one: Italian, Irish, Jew, whenever any new group comes with their native language or accented English and different look and large families and ethnic foods, whenever they've come nativists crawl out of the woodwork. The nativists claim that these groups are different than the ones before. These groups take away jobs and take advantage of the government and spell nothing short of the Armageddon for this Great Nation of ours.

¹ Talmud Bavli, Yoma 9b

² Walker, Adrian (2015, August 21). 'Passionate' Trump fans behind homeless man's beating?. *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved from www.bostonglobe.com

And every time, in every generation those nativists have underestimated the capacity of our nation to welcome the stranger, to gain strength from The Other. In each generation of immigrants we have found our best and brightest. We've found people willing to do the work that no one else would do. America has benefitted from a work ethic passed on to generation number two that catapults them to the highest echelons of American society allowing them to make us even greater in every field of endeavor. The people who come to these shores are the very cause of American greatness.

We Jews have been history's unwanted strangers for most of our existence. Over 1,878 years in exile, we were a people with no land, a people only grudgingly tolerated by our host nations, never citizens. In the best of times they still did not let us into their country clubs or neighborhoods, we couldn't date their young people or join their law firms. In the worst of times – we were massacred: The Crusades, The Chmelnitsky Massacres, the Pogroms, the Holocaust. And if all of that is not enough to inspire a sense of compassion for the stranger, it says it over and over again the Torah: welcome the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Thirty-five times! More than any other commandment.

A new group of Semitic refugees now wanders from the deserts of the Middle East, expelled, as we were, by war, tyranny, ethnic cleansing and baseless hatred. We know what it is to wander. We know what it is to be shut out by the civilized world. We know what it is to live in displaced persons camps. Will the world hide behind fear and prejudice? Or, will the world – not only Europe, but the US and other nations – will the world rise to this challenge? Will we recognize and live up to the truth stated recently by Britain's Chief Rabbi: "It is the sacrifices we make for the sake of higher ideals that make us great. And this applies to nations as well as individuals." That is the voice of our tradition. Relevant, timely, humane. Our tradition seeks harmony, respect and moderation for society.

And now, this moment in America, we need that compassionate voice of our tradition more than ever. Our shameful political discourse seems to be a sprint to the fringes on every issue imaginable. The candidates and their various supporters and pundits all seem to be trying to out-crazy one another, to state something more shocking, to be more unscripted, and to let their id run roughshod over what little super-ego cowers in their sub-conscious. In America today people cheer when others go off half-cocked. They say, "I'm so glad people are just saying what they think," and "Isn't it great that we don't have to be so politically correct anymore?!" Well we shouldn't be glad and we shouldn't think it's great.

Giving people permission to say in the public realm any hateful thing that comes into their minds is dangerous in a way that we of all people know too well. Words lead to action and when people say terrible things over and over again it actually changes the society. In the beginning of our Torah God spoke the world into being. Whether we believe this literally or as allegory, one thing crystalizes from our creation myth: Words create reality. So when people say hateful things about others, that hatefulness affects the world in very real ways, like the poor man who got beat up on the streets of Boston.

We have seen, too, the damage of uncivil, overblown, even hateful rhetoric in the Jewish community with the debate on the P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran. Terms like "idiot", "foolish", and

“naïve” were the more tame things that people on either side of the debate threw at one another. The toxic, hyperbolic, dangerous rhetoric led Israel to be framed as a partisan issue on the front page of the New York Times this summer with the headline “Fears of Lasting Rift as Obama Battles Pro-Israel Group on Iran”. Not good! People have asked my thoughts on the Iran deal. I know that I’m not well enough versed in nuclear physics to speak with authority on the topic – I read the same pundits you do. But I am an expert of sorts on intra-Jewish discourse and I feel that the Jewish community’s discussion on the Iran deal has caused real damage that threatens to tear us apart or make Israel a permanently partisan issue. The discourse must change or we face the same *sinat chinam*, the same baseless hatred that led to the destruction of Jerusalem all those years ago. Why? In this day and age much of Jerusalem’s protection comes from Israel’s powerful army combined with the diplomatic protection of the United States. Making Israel a partisan issue could damage her military capability through reduced arms sales and military cooperation and could threaten the diplomatic cover Israel relies on from the United States.

Let me be clear: argument is fine. We need to debate the issues that will shape the future. Those debates need to center around facts and the values that we each use to interpret those facts. When we debate like that, the ancient rabbis would say that we had a *machlochet l’shem shamayim*,³ an argument for the sake of heaven. That kind of argument brings light, goodness and holiness to our world. The rabbis so embraced this ideal that they recorded the minority opinions from their own debates in the Talmud. There are people actively working to bring that kind of respect to the tone of civil discourse in our nation. We did our part here over the last few weeks with addresses by David Harris of the AJC and Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President Emeritus of the Reform Movement. These two well respected – and very respectful – Jewish leaders spoke constructively about their different positions on the Iran deal. I would suggest on this holy day that all of us have a responsibility to promote that kind of civility and civil discourse in all areas of our lives, on all of the topics that deeply impact the people in our communities and the people in our world.

Why is it our responsibility? Listen to Pastor Martin Niemöller’s famous poem:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.⁴

We have been on the receiving end of this folks. Our people knows all too well what happens when we do not stand up for the rights of others. A society in which it is permissible to denigrate any minority will eventually denigrate its Jews. A society which denigrates eventually takes away rights and attacks. On the one hand, we are safe, we are nowhere near this point. On the other hand, voting rights of minorities are being undermined, people get away with misogynistic comments on TV, being un-PC is cheered even when it results in hateful rhetoric, and only three

³ Mishnah, Avot 5:17

⁴ Martin Niemöller: "First they came for the Socialists...". Holocaust Encyclopedia. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

days ago a Sikh man was beaten in the suburbs of Chicago in another race-based hate crime. With these ingredients in the pot, we need to turn down the heat of the discourse in our nation because we know, of all people, we know how powerful words can be. We need to change the discourse not only for our neighbors who we're supposed to love, but also for ourselves and our safety.

On Yom Kippur afternoon we'll read, "Love your neighbor as yourself". Perhaps it is simply a biblical ideal to strive for rather than actually achieve. The great Rabbi Hillel recognized the seeming impossibility of it and offered an alternative that seems much more achievable: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor."⁵ We can start there. We can start by not speaking about people in a way that we would not want them to speak about us. We can check our self-righteousness at the door and strive for humility instead. We can assume the best in people and make excuses for them in the same ways that we make excuses for ourselves, for our own shortcomings. Will this lead to loving one another as we love ourselves? Of course not. But perhaps it can lead to a society that is a bit more compassionate: a society where our better nature wins out, a society where we not only speak, but listen, too; a society where the stranger need not live in fear.

כן יהי רצון
Ken Yehi Ratzon

⁵ Talmud, Shabbat 31a