

Rosh Hashanah Day One  
30 September 2019

## **Nationalism** **The Story of our People**

I want to begin this morning with the “N” word. It’s a word that as soon as I say it, three-quarters of this room will either take offense or tune out. The rest will quietly nod in approval and wonder what has taken me so long. I will admit, I am not the first person to utter the N word. More and more people are using it these days. When our leaders use it they fire up their base and elicit outrage from the opposition. Political theorists surmise that people have been using this word for years but only recently have they been given license to speak about it publically. Some of you are probably getting a little anxious – What is the rabbi going to say? Others are thinking: would he just say the “N” word already. I suspect that this will likely be a topic of conversation at lunch today or at your dinner table this evening – mostly because it is so controversial. The word that is causing so much angst, the word that is dividing people, the word that is likely misunderstood, the “N” word, is...Nationalism. And, my friends, I am a Nationalist. Before you tune out, or walk out, I ask you to hear me out, to understand why. After all, in one of the liturgical climaxes of this day we will stand before the open ark and praise God, *shelo sam helkeinu kahem v’goralenu k’khol hamona* – for not making us like the nations of the world nor including us with the other families of the earth. We are unique, we are particular, and we are a people destined to value nationalism.

Robert Frost once said: “Before I built a wall I'd ask to know, What I was walling in or walling out, And to whom I was like to give offense.” We always build walls. We build walls to separate for ourselves what's mine and what's yours; to separate my house from your house; my community from your community; my space from your space. These walls are essential. They define who we are as individuals and serve to promote self-preservation. We all know how awkward we feel when someone gets too close to our space. If I can figure out what toothpaste you are using...too close. We all stand in this world with our walls. The challenge we face today is that we are erecting these walls not between “us” and “them,” between clearly delineated outsiders. Like Hagar and Ishmael being sent away by Sarah, one of the great sociological challenges we face today in the Western world – including the United States and Israel – is that we are erecting walls between “us” and “us,” people who are within our society, and we are making them the vilified “other.”

There was a time when we imagined a world without borders, *vehaya Adonai lemelech al kol ha'aretz* – a day when God will rule over all the earth. We thought that the world was moving in that direction. Look at our world today...it is clear we are not moving closer together. Nationalism is back. Nationalism is strong. And nationalist discourse is shaping much of political life. I look around the world and many of the people promoting nationalism are people I disagree with, people whose values I deeply reject. Yet, I am a Nationalist...and I am proud of it. The United States is the national home for Americans. Israel is the home of the Jewish people. I love America. I love Israel. And I love the Jewish people. Do these loves mean that somehow I am beginning to embody a moral universe that is flawed at its core? Is nationalism inherently associated with fascism? Are all forms of nationalism the same? Ethnic nationalism? Civic

nationalism? Is globalism a better category, more suited for the moral universe we want to live in?

I am pretty confident that you didn't come to shul today, or most of you didn't come to shul today, for a political science seminar. But I do want to define two categories from the outset. When I speak about nationalism I am speaking about a position that advocates for loyalty, devotion, and identification with our country and support for its interest, including the prioritization of some of these interests over those of others. Nationalism demands prioritization. For example, one of the most hotly debated topics today is universal healthcare. The reality is there is no debate. There is not a single ideology in America, from the far Left to the far Right, which advocates for universal healthcare. Such a position does not exist anywhere in the world. When we speak about universal health care in the United States it is in the context of universal healthcare for...Americans. It is for the people living in our nation. No one is getting up and advocating for a plan that provides healthcare to every person on this planet. That may be a moral position and a moral responsibility, but it is not found in political discourse. Similarly, our federal government will likely spend more on highways than it will on foreign aid. Does this make us uncomfortable? Are you uncomfortable if Virginia prioritizes Virginians over residents of that other state across the Potomac? Nationalism speaks to the reality that we will prioritize.

Let me pause for a second and be very clear about what I am saying and what I am not saying. I am not saying that all nationalism is good. I also know enough to know that nationalism can be abused. What I am suggesting is that my understanding of nationalism imbues a sense of devotion and loyalty. It is looking out for the interests of fellow citizens. It is viewing the nation as the legitimate and ideal framework to pursue our aspirations, distribute goods, and protect and spread our identity, values, and culture. The extreme nightmare of this definition is when nationalism becomes fascism. Leaving the graduate seminar on fascism for another day, one danger of fascism is, and here I am choosing my words intentionally, the *exalting*, as distinct from prioritizing, of one's nation (and very often one's race) above others. Fascism legitimizes the support for its interests to the exclusion and discrimination of others. Perhaps the real debate is determining where we draw that line between prioritization and discrimination. What are our boundaries? Where do we put our walls? The questions are not easy but they demand a response.

I want to share with you two different stories. Two stories that shape the way I think and struggle with nationalism, loyalty, and my core identity. One story is the story I learned growing up within the Jewish tradition – the story of who we are and the way we are connected. It is a story that defines the Jew as an obligated being – a being who is fundamentally in relationship and responsible for others. The second story is a story with three competing chapters about the value and purpose of the Jewish people. It is a story that addresses this moment of personal and collective accounting. Together, these stories impact our understanding of nationalism, our competing loyalties, and our obligations as a people.

*Hayom harat olam* – today is the birthday of the world. So let's start with the first story, the birth of humanity. The beginning of Genesis tells the story of a single individual created in the image of God. This individual was alone, an aloneness that is transcended only when Adam enters into a relationship with Eve. This is not about marriage, this is about relationships, to be obligated by, challenged by, and responsible to each other. The failure to understand this is precisely Cain's sin. "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain asks. The answer is: Of course you are!

When the earth became corrupt it was *only* Noah who found favor in the eyes of God. Yet, Noah doesn't enter the ark alone. Noah enters with...his family. The biblical narrative continues as God singles out one particular family, the family of Abraham. The result is the covenant, a mutual obligation, an obligation that not only creates core loyalties and relationships but places all of us in the context of a story. The book of Genesis is not a book of laws. It is a book which tells us the story of *our* family. And like all families, some of the chapters are good, most of the chapters are not, but it doesn't matter. The essential lesson of Genesis is not whether Jacob was really better than Esau. The essential lesson is: This is *your* family. And then God says to Abraham: I will make of you a great nation. The family expands. We go down to Egypt and suddenly we become a people.

All of us understand obligation in the context of family. It is instinctive. No one assumes that it is our responsibility to support every child just like we would support our own. It would be bizarre if my son asked me to help pay for college and my response was: "You know I would really love to, but your neighbor has to go to college too...and they're just not as comfortable as we are." The same is true of children towards their parents. If your parents need you, what do you do? Do you flip a coin to see if you should help your parents or help somebody else? Of course not! We understand family obligations. But what happens when we go beyond our family? When we speak about a larger group? Does the same level of obligation still apply?

Recall the two heroes from the Book of Exodus: the midwives and Moses. We know very little about the Israelites once they became enslaved. What we do know is that there were two midwives who ignored their own self-interest, defied Pharaoh, and let all the male babies live. And what's the first thing we learn about Moses other than floating in the river? *Vayetzei el echav* – and Moses went out of the palace to his brothers and sisters and became obligated by them. The story continues in the Book of Numbers when the tribes of Reuben and Gad declare: "We don't want to go into the Land of Israel. We're cattle people and this is a better place for grazing." Moses looks at them and the rest of the Israelites and says: "Are your brothers and sisters going to go to war while you stay here?" I am reminded of the story of a person sitting in a boat. He takes out a drill and starts drilling a hole. Everybody begins screaming: "What are you doing?" He replies: "What's your problem? I'm drilling under my seat." When one drills under his own seat it impacts everyone in the boat and *we* are a people who are in the boat together. I think about this every time I bring a potential convert to the mikvah and ask my final question: "Do you bind your destiny to the destiny of the Jewish people." That is to say, entering the Jewish community is not only about having a relationship with God, but first and foremost, it is to be obligated by a community. We are part of a people, we are part of a story, and we have moral obligations to each other.

Here lies the rub. To be obligated is to assume some level of preference. According to Jewish law, we show preference to our own people, to the poor, to members of our family, to the needy of our city. These prioritizations seem natural. Before you engage in *tikun olam* – making the world a better place – fix your neighborhood. But what happens when there are multiple peoples in your neighborhood? What happens when your neighbors aren't just Jews? Or Caucasian? Or American citizens? What happens when the lines between "us" and "them" begin to blur? Who is the "us" in our society? Do our obligations begin to create moral distinctions that are profoundly immoral? The Torah teaches: "You shall love the stranger *and* treat the stranger as one of your citizens for *you* were strangers in the land of Egypt." We are not only obligated by

those who are part of our family, we are obligated by our story, and that story expands the circle of our obligation.

Now I want to tell a different story. This story asks how we define the purpose of our lives. One of the surprising elements of Jewish tradition is that it is profoundly utilitarian. It is a tradition that strives to maximize happiness for the maximum number of people. With the exception of a few prophets, the Bible's fundamental definition of happiness is physical happiness – food, safety, comfort, and well-being. This physical happiness is personified by a certain place. That place is...the Garden of Eden. In the Garden of Eden, everything was beautiful – beautiful to look at and beautiful to taste. When God took us out of Egypt we began a journey to the Promised Land. This Promised Land would be a land of...milk and honey. It's beautiful. It's a land of bounty. The Garden of Eden also defines our messianic era. In the World to Come we will be back home, trees will produce loaves of bread and cakes, and we will live in safety under our own vine and fig tree. Redemption is not transcending our body to worship God. Quite the opposite. Our tradition *connects* God to this physical utilitarian vision. The first definition of our goal and purpose as a people is to create, or to live in a space where we will be able to create, either on our own or with the will of God, a Garden of Eden. It is in this garden that we can prosper physically with safety and happiness.

The second chapter of this story links this physical redemption, this physical notion of happiness, to obeying the will of God. Our religious tradition doesn't change the definition of happiness, but it associates happiness with a religious life. We see this in many of the prophets who speak about the end of days not merely as physical but as filled with the knowledge of God. Happiness is not the reward for mitzvot, happiness *is* the mitzvot, the opportunity to go beyond the corporeal. It is a certain spirit. It is a system of values. The happy person is the virtuous person. The happy person is the person who has a life of meaning and purpose.

This brings us to the third chapter of the story. Our Sages taught that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Jewish people three precious gifts, and all of them were given through suffering: the Torah, the Land of Israel, and the World to Come. In other words, everything that has value, everything that our tradition wants us to be, was given with suffering and pain. Our Sages present what is essentially an ancient version of the utilitarian trolley problem. Suppose you are driving 30 people in a trolley. You're going along a track and all of a sudden you discover that your brakes are not working. If you continue along you're going to fall off the track and everybody is going to die. However, there is a second option. There is a juncture, and if you move the switch you will have enough track to slowdown and everybody will live. But there is just one little problem. There is a car stuck on that track and you are going to kill one person. Are you going to save 30 people and let one person die? What are you going to do? Utilitarianism says it's very simple. Our task is to maximize happiness for the maximum number of people. I know, life sucks, but what can you do. Sometimes you have to make tough decisions, you have to make priorities, you have to maximize happiness. Our tradition takes a different approach: If a gang approaches a group of people and says: "Give us one of you and we will harm him, if not we will harm you all," they must all allow themselves to be harmed rather than hand over one soul (MT Foundations of the Torah 5:5). To be a Jew is to recognize that life is not *just* about maximizing happiness. The Jewish people have to be a people who stand for values. Sometimes that means struggling and hardship will be part of our destiny.

I would suggest that this three-pronged story challenges us to not make an either-or decision. Part of the story tells us that the Jewish people are a people who embrace the physical. We are a people who care about happiness, well-being, long life, and security. That's legitimate. That's healthy. Part of the rise of nationalism is a result of individuals getting up and asking: does my country care about *me*? What about *my* happiness? I want to feel safe, earn a living, afford healthcare. To be an American is to be...endowed by [our] Creator with certain unalienable rights – life, liberty, and the pursuit of *happiness*. As Jews, we don't yearn to be a dying noble people. We are here, we are strong, we have a body, and we are going to care for this body. To be a religious being is to care for the physical, *physical happiness counts*.

But we also have to understand that happiness is not only physical happiness. We have to ask ourselves: What are the values of our story? We have to define happiness in ways in which we can maximize our culture *and* our values, ways in which we can live a Jewish life *and* feel the joys of Judaism. Our national aspiration is not merely to obtain more. Unlike the old Game of Life, this life not about who has more money or a bigger house. Happiness is to live a life of value and to stand for those values. We must recognize this as a people, especially when we look at our concentric circles of responsibility. We have to love the stranger, for we are obligated by our story – a story that values extending our circle of obligation.

The third feature of being a Jew is to understand that happiness is also, or can be, overrated when it is all that you have. To be a Jew is to be willing to struggle. If the preservation of physical happiness alone is all that inspires you, whether as an individual or collectively, we create a cancer in our society that will lead to discrimination. Maybe I don't want to be obligated by "them." I want more. Give me more. Why should I give to strangers, the impoverished, the people who look different than me? Why should I care about this group or that group? I want more. And maybe, the more you want more, the less you are.

So, what does my nationalism compel me to do? On the question of refugees, I am not advocating for a particular position. But to be Jewish and not seek to know the heart of the stranger, for you were once a stranger in a strange land – in Egypt, in 1938 – that is an abdication of what it means to be a Jew and that we cannot do. When faced, as we are today, with humanitarian crises – some manmade and some of nature's doing – as Jews we know from the opening chapters of the Bible that we dare not stand idly by, we dare not look away when life hangs in the balance – that is also an abdication of what it means to be a Jew, and that we cannot do. I could go on and on.

There is much to think about in the year ahead. This is our challenge for the New Year. This is our journey. I know I am a nationalist and I know it's a frame which gives expression to my being obligated. In my moral universe I *do* give preference. But there is a difference between preference and discrimination. I will give preference, but at times I won't. At times, to be a Jew, to be an American, to be part of a people, is to pick your values over happiness. How to do that, how to balance it, what's the exact measure...I don't have an answer for you. What I do know is that the journey of our people is a journey of obligation in search of meaning. Whether that search for meaning will be a gift, whether that search for meaning will be a force for good, will depend on how we balance these three chapters of our story. In many ways it will be about how we take our two stories and merge them together into a story of sacred obligation, a story of value, and a story of humanity striving for happiness but not *only* for happiness. How we tell our

story in the New Year, how we translate our story into policy – whether about refugees, immigration, healthcare, or anything else, *that's the story*. Telling that story and working it out is ultimately the challenge of nationalism, the challenge of being an American, and the challenge of our people.