

Rosh Hashanah 5781 – Fort Tryon Jewish Center – Rabbi Guy Austrian

“May They Bind Themselves Together as One”

When this terrible pandemic began, we New Yorkers rushed to pull together. There was a great upsurge in feelings of social solidarity as the wave crashed over the city, affecting every single person here. We rediscovered the many ways in which our fates, our lives, our livelihoods, are intertwined. We became newly conscious of how developments in other countries affect us here. The whole world was battling a common enemy. The unity of all humankind, so long appealed to by political idealists and spiritual mystics, finally seemed obvious to everyone. We often heard the saying, “We’re all in the same boat.”

But quickly enough, that metaphor was strongly contested: “We are certainly not in the same boat! Some of us are clinging to the flimsiest of life rafts, and some of us have escaped to our private yachts!” This retort is a political observation. But it also presents a profound challenge to our spiritual worldview. If we’re all deeply interconnected as creations of the ultimate Source of Oneness, the Holy Blessed One, then what do we make of the atomization, isolation, and segregation that this pandemic has not just caused, but has exposed? Are we, or are we not, “in the same boat?”

*

The great Jewish teacher Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, taught two parables about boats. Let’s start with this one (Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 4:6):

“A group of people were sitting in a boat on the water. Suddenly, one of them picked up a drill and started drilling beneath his seat! Alarmed, the others said to him: What are you doing?! He replied: What do you care? Aren’t I drilling underneath myself? They protested back to him: But the waters will rise and flood the boat for all of us!”

The story sounds familiar, and the moral is plain. We’re all in the same boat, whether we know it or not. Although each of us might consider our own seat in it to be ours, to do what we will, our private domain is really part of a larger public commons, which we too are part of. When we disregard and damage the common good, we end up hurting everyone, including ourselves.

The pandemic laid this truth bare for all to see. We depend on each other for a network of goods and services that is almost too complex to imagine. Our individual choices have a cumulative effect on the health and well-being of everyone around us. We are deeply interconnected and interdependent. (See also BT Bava Kama 50b.)

*

Rosh Hashanah is a holiday devoted to this interdependence. It marks the anniversary of the Creation of Universe. And while we do spend some time thinking and praying about the role of the Jewish People in the human story, our prayers emphasize that God is sovereign over *all* of humanity, and that the Oneness of God is the source of the unity of humans.

The problem, which our liturgy recognizes, is that we just don't get it. In every single Amidah of the High Holidays, the middle section begins with this plea:

וּבְכֵן תֵּן פְּחָדְךָ ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ עַל כָּל מַעֲשֵׂיךָ וְאִימַתְךָ עַל כָּל מָה שִׁבְרָאָתָּ. וְיִירָאוּךָ כָּל הַמַּעֲשִׂים וְיִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לְפָנֶיךָ כָּל הַבְּרִואִים. וְיַעֲשׂוּ כְלֵם אֶגְדָּה אַחַת לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹנְךָ בְּלִבָּב שְׁלָם.

“And so place the fear of You, Hashem our God, over all that You have made, and the terror of You over all You have created, so that all who were made will stand in awe of You, and all of creation will worship You, and they will bind themselves together as one (*agudah echat*) to carry out Your will with a whole heart (*belevav shalem*)...”

It's a poignant, almost desperate prayer. It's based on knowing the reality, that we humans are bitterly divided from one another, in defiance of our own created nature, in defiance of our Creator. And that that division is not just ignorance. It's a kind of idolatry.

The point is made sharply by Rabbi David Abudarham, the great medieval commentator on the liturgy (Spanish, mid-1300's). On this passage, he writes:

כִּי יֵשׁ בְּנֵי אָדָם שֶׁהֵם עוֹבְדִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת הַתְּנִינִים שְׂבִים. וְגַם יֵשׁ בְּנֵי אָדָם שֶׁעוֹשִׂין עֲצָמָם אֱלוֹהוֹת, וְעַל כֵּן אָמַר 'תֵּן אִימַתְךָ עַל הַנְּבִרָאִים' הָאֵלֶּה שֶׁהֵם טוֹעִים וּמִתְגַּאִים בְּעֲצָמָם וְיִחְזְרוּ כֹלָם לַעֲבֹדְךָ בְּלִבָּב שְׁלָם.

“There are people who worship the sky and the earth and the sea monsters in the ocean. But there are also people who make themselves into deities, and about them it says, ‘place the terror of You over all You have created,’ on those who err and pride themselves, may they all return to worship You with a whole heart.”

Abudarham is saying that rejecting God's sovereignty is not just about refusing to submit to some divine tyrant. It's about refusing to acknowledge that there's anything greater, that anything or anyone matters, except for me the individual. It's the refusal to accept any kind of obligation or claim or limitation on me, even for the common good. It's the worship of the ego, and the idolatry of the self. And it emerges, ironically, from an entire culture of idolatry: widespread failures of compassion and empathy, a collapse of social solidarity. It's not just disheartening. It threatens the entire project of religion.

*

So we have to acknowledge that people have a point when they say, “We are obviously not in the same boat.” While it may be true that in a global pandemic, “we're all in this together,” it's also clear that we're in it unequally. Some of us have savings to weather the loss of a job or income, and some don't. Some of us can work from home, and others can't. Some of us can rent or buy a second home in a rural area with a lower infection rate, and some of us are stuck in overcrowded apartments in dense urban neighborhoods.

The virus, it's been said, doesn't discriminate, and that is true. But we do. We discriminate by race, income, immigration status, geography, ability, and much more, in ways that affect our

underlying health, our access to health care, and the quality of that health care. All of these make some of us more vulnerable to the virus, more likely to suffer, to suffer longer and more severely, and to die.

It can feel like we're each of us alone, drifting in our own vessel.

*

And yet ... Rosh Hashanah insists that there is indeed something that unites us. Paradoxically, it is always already true, and yet we need to do our part to make it true.

That something is what our passage from the liturgy alludes to: that central theme of Rosh Hashanah, which is *Malchut* – God's sovereignty. *Malchut* is not so much a top-down imposition as a cosmic reality that we can recognize or ignore. What's more, we can either strengthen or undermine it right here on earth through our own actions.

In the 10 verses of the Malchuyot section of the Rosh Hashanah Musaf service, the first nine all include a form of the word *melech* (sovereign). But the tenth verse doesn't. It's the Shema: "*shema yisrael adonai eloheinu adonai echad*," "Hashem is One."

That's because God's sovereignty is the same as God's Oneness. And that Oneness is the source and the ground for human beings coming together.

*

This brings us to the second teaching from Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai about boats. If we're casting about for the right boat metaphor, I think that even more than the first, this is the one we need.

It begins with a verse from Deuteronomy: וְיִהְיֶה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל מֶלֶךְ בְּהִתְאַסֵּף רֹאשֵׁי עַם יִחַד שְׂבָטַי יִשְׂרָאֵל – "There shall be a Sovereign (*melech*) among Yeshurun [Israel], when the heads of the people are gathered, when the tribes of Israel are united" (Deut. 33:5).

A midrash explains, this means that *Malchut* can exist only when we are united: כְּשֶׁהֵם עֲשׂוּיִם אַחַת, אֲגוּדָה אַחַת, וְלֹא כְּשֶׁהֵם עֲשׂוּיִם אֲגוּדוֹת אֲגוּדוֹת, "when they are made as one whole (*agudah achat*), and not into many factions (*agudot agudot*)".

Rabbi Shimon b. Yochai then teaches: "This is analogous to bringing two boats, connecting them with braces and bars, and building palaces upon them. So long as the boats are bound, the palaces endure; once the boats separate, the palaces no longer endure" (Sifrei Devarim 346:2).

That, I think, is an authentic—even achievable—Jewish social vision. We may not always be in the same boat. Our boats might not always be the same. But we can find ways to bind them together. We *must*. And when we do, it's a foundation strong enough for a palace. The palace is this world, the one we are trying to build together, the one in which God's presence can live,

and God's sovereignty can endure. It's not just that recognition of God's sovereignty should bring us all together. It's that our own unity makes God, as it were, more sovereign.

To be a Jew in this world—in this pandemic, and every day of our lives—is to bind the boats together. We need to reach out to one another, and to all our fellow sailors on these turbulent seas, to all of humanity. Of course we have a special responsibility to ourselves and those close to us. But that doesn't mean abandoning others or pretending that we can go it alone. Let's put equal energy into providing for others, and building structures that provide for us all. Let's make proactive choices to overcome our isolation and our segregation, and to reconnect the bonds of social solidarity, and to bind new ones together.

As the High Holiday prayers tell us, this unity is the opposite of idolatry. It is true service of God, בלבב שלם, *belevav shalem*, with a whole heart, a heart that is One.