

Erev Yom Kippur
5779

Can't We All Just Get Along?
Civility, Decency, & A Call to Conscience

“The human world today is, as never before, split into two camps, each of which understands the other as the embodiment of falsehood (or using the jargon of today, “fake news”), and itself as the embodiment of absolute truth... Each side has assumed a monopoly of the sunlight and has plunged its opponent into the night, and each side demands that we must decide between day and night...”

These words which sound like they could have been written just yesterday, were penned in 1967 by the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, and yet are as sadly relevant today as they were in Buber’s day over 50 years ago.

Indeed we are living in an age wherein one feels as if you must choose sides and that any talk that even hints of political undertones sends us reflexively into our chosen corners, ready to come out

swinging. As a result, in this past year, I have seen families split asunder, friendships torn apart, and workplace interactions poisoned by toxic rhetoric. Synagogues, churches, clubs, and associations have become either sterile environments in their avoidance of anything that could be construed as remotely “political” or have become battlegrounds in which one side is pitted against the other.

Our world today is dominated by social media that delivers “fake news”, fabricated data, and “alternative facts”. We all are guilty of finding comfort in our favorite cable news echo chamber and worst of all, we have begun to accept “uncivil indecent behavior” as the new normal. Ad hominem attacks which target a person’s identity rather than his or her ideas, demonization of our opponents, using coarse language, and “gotch-ya politics” which sees victory as a “zero sum” outcome rather than a quest for compromise, are all contributing to a very uncivil “civil war” which threatens our democratic institutions.

On this eve of the Day of Atonement, this day set apart for soulful introspection and serious reflection; let us consider how we stop a

runaway train from wrecking all that we hold dear as Americans and Jews, our democracy, indeed our way of life.

How can we put the train back on its tracks, consisting of civil discourse and healthy debate, genuine respect for those who oppose our ideas, all the while stating unapologetically our own views, standing up for those things we believe in?

I would like to propose a plan this evening that can begin to heal our nation and unite us as never before. By embracing paradox, by exhibiting moral courage, and by living out our calling as Jews, we can forge a path which will restore our democracy.

The first step is to embrace paradox and contradictions as a fact of our existence, and resist trying to make all things fit neatly into the narrow cubby holes we create for ourselves. As I often say, “I have an opinion, but I don’t agree with it!” In other words, none of us is completely consistent; all of us are subject to change. For example, you might be absolutely opposed to capital punishment, until it is your

daughter who is raped and you might be totally in favor of the death penalty, until it is your son who is the rapist.

Our people have always been one who embraced ambiguity and an inconsistent dualism. In fact, it might even be the secret to our survival. Almost a century ago, the great Hebrew poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik wrote...

When we understand that grand ideas are great, but that, as always, the devil is in the details, when we realize that nuance that leads to compromise can be the difference between getting something done or interminable gridlock, and when we accept the notion that the world is rarely black or white or red or blue, but is most often a little or a lot of both, then we will have begun to heal as a nation.

Erica Brown, an associate professor at George Washington University sums it up best in the following words:

“We all wrestle with the kinds of contradictions implied by the Jewish sensibility *elu v’elu* – sometimes both rather than one or the other can be valid positions, and even achieve holiness. Some of us, however,

waste a lot of psychic energy trying to eliminate these distinctions, which rarely works. Sometimes, it's best to lean into the discomfort of a paradox, taking time to reflect on what makes us uncomfortable with uncertainty, with the rough edges of contradiction. Can we learn to live with the fact that not everything can be made whole and contradiction-free – to live with the inner noise of a self that is inherently inconsistent? Yes. And when we do, we just might find that living with paradoxes makes us more compassionate, more interesting human beings.

Rousseau wrote that he would “rather be a man of paradoxes than a man of prejudices.” Prejudices make us overly certain. Paradoxes help us stay humble and attuned to the changes within.”

This Yom Kippur calls upon us to become more compassionate towards others with whom we may disagree, and less certain of our own “infallible” ideas. This Yom Kippur may we indeed choose humility over arrogance and remain attuned to the changes within.

A second necessary step to restore civility and decency to our public discourse is embodied in the words of the former British Prime

Minister Winston Churchill who said, “Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak – courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.”

Moral courage requires that we stand up and speak out against the injustices of our age and that we proclaim and defend those virtues and values we hold dear, but it also demands that we demonstrate the more difficult kind of courage which requires us to consider and evaluate the positions of those with whom we disagree.

So often we are so ready to make our next point, that we stop listening to the views of others. Indeed God gave us two ears and one mouth, so that we might listen twice as much as we speak. It is for sure one of the most difficult things to do, especially when we are passionate about a particular topic, but it is essential for enlightened dialogue to proceed.

The third concept which can help us heal as a nation is to uphold quintessential Jewish values which regardless of one’s politics should be the bedrock upon which we conduct ourselves. Four bedrock Jewish values which ought to guide our difficult conversations on controversial

topics of the day include a commitment to seeking and telling the truth. It also means standing up to speak one's truth, while always having the decency to respect the dignity of our fellow citizens, and the humility to recognize that others may be right.

The word for truth in Hebrew is *emet*. Without a healthy respect for the truth, verifiable indisputable facts, society cannot function. In a free society, such as ours, it is the duty of the 3 branches of government, along with a free press, to hold each one accountable to tell the truth, so that we the people can form a more perfect union. The word *emet*, however, is spelled aleph, mem, tov, which happen to be the first, middle, and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, teaching us the interpretation of facts may differ as seen from various perspectives. It's like the story of the cowboy, the geologist, and the artist who all stood together gazing at the Grand Canyon. They all beheld the same spectacular view of this natural wonder, but each one saw it through a different lens. The artist waxed eloquent about the myriad colors, the geologist marveled at the rock formations, and the cowboy remarked

matter of factly, “Heck of a place to lose a cow.” The canyon was the same – two plus two was and always will be four, but the application and interpretation of these facts may vary.

The three letters that spell *emet*, remind us that while truth may be found in more than one place, one must always strive to tell the truth, at the beginning, middle, and end or as we say, “just the truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God.”

The second core Jewish value is expressed in the Hebrew phrase *lo ta-amod*, “you shall not stand idly by as your neighbor bleeds.” This conveys the long held Jewish commitment to speak one’s truth, passionately, and to actively engage in the world. From the time Abraham, the first Jew, challenged God to retract his plan to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gemorah, thereby committing the crime of killing the innocent along with the guilty, until modern times when Jews were at the forefront of the civil rights movement, women’s liberation, including the right to vote, gay rights, reproductive rights, workers’ rights, and so much more, the Jewish penchant to engage in the vexing

issues of our day has been monumental. The prophets of Israel, including Isaiah, Amos, Micah, and Hosea, among others, taught that in the words of Rabbi David Sapperstein, “that serious Jewish study inevitably must lead to the soup kitchen and that sincere Jewish prayer must prepare us to do battle with injustice...that the thread of social justice is so authentically and intricately woven into the many colored fabric we call Judaism, that if you seek to pull that thread out, the entire fabric unravels and that the Judaism that results will be distorted, neutered and rendered aimless.” Judaism and especially Reform Judaism, clearly demands that we fulfill the mandate of Deuteronomy, “Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdoff: Justice, Justice, Justice, you must pursue!”

The third principle which can enable respectful debate is “*derech eretz*”, or decency. Decency means simply treating your fellow as you yourself wish to be treated. Hillel summed it up best when he said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to others.” Decency reminds us of the Rabbinic maxim from *Pirke Avot* which teaches us that,

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We ought not to despise anything or anyone for there is no thing that does not have its place, no one that does not have his hour.”

Decency is reflected in the Talmudic custom of always retaining for posterity, the minority view of any given argument, recognizing that while it does not reflect the opinion of the majority, it may one day and therefore needs to be recorded and given its due. Arguments which are for the sake of Heaven, arguments and debates that are passionate but respectful of their opponents views, are worthy of God’s approval. Arguments which devolve into shouting matches which have more to do with one’s own ego than one’s reasoned analysis are not worthy.

Decency, *derech erez*, is a core Jewish time honored practice which is indispensable for society to function and is what is so sorely lacking today.

Finally the last quintessential Jewish virtue we must strive to embody is humility, *tzniut*.

Humility means making room for others, as in the Kabbalistic notion of *tzimtzum*. *Tzimtzum* means to contract oneself to allow others room to exist. The mystics taught that God is so great, that if God did not voluntarily contract God's all-consuming presence in this world, then man nor his ability to act as a free agent, could exist. When we allow others, especially with whom we disagree, to have their say, to state their case, and to stand their ground, then we exhibit the grace and forbearance which are the hallmarks of a humble person. In fact the reason it is customary to take 3 steps backward at the end of the *kaddish* when we say "*oseh shalom b'mromav...*" is to demonstrate that in order for peace to exist, we must make room for others to coexist.

Moses was able to know God we are told, face to face, not because he was great, but because he was _____, because he was the most humble of men.

The real question before us tonight however, is how does this all play out here at Kol Tikvah and in our own lives?

We are in fact, like many Reform congregations, made up of a wide array of individuals with varying degrees of political interest and identity. There are those who are political junkies and those who have little or no interest in the subject. There are those who identify left, right and center, conservative, republican, democrat or liberal. Some may be extreme in their politics and others moderate, but ultimately what we all fail to remember is that we are all Americans above all else. This of course is nothing new. In its day, Reform congregations grappled with issues like Civil Rights, the war in Vietnam, Watergate, the war in Iraq, and the Iran Nuclear Deal, just to name a few. While the UAHC and later the newly named URJ, takes positions on these issues after serious debate at their biennial conventions wherein 5,000 Reform Jews attend and their delegates vote on these issues, it is indeed a reflection of the democratic process in which these resolutions are brought forth and ultimately enacted. The difference is that all these issues are informed by the religious values and Jewish ethics which have helped shape our moral compass throughout our history as a people.

Our sacred texts are consulted and interpreted by great sages past and present in order to help us gain greater insight into the complex issues of our day. Ultimately of course, every one of us must reach our own conclusions and vote accordingly for the candidate who will reflect our position. But to be engaged, to be informed, to be guided by our tradition, and to be considerate of many points of view, is a long standing principle not only of Reform Judaism but of what it means to be a citizen in a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Is it possible in these turbulent times that CKT could be a model for the nation, a place where we can engage in respectful dialogue and informed conversation about the issues of our times, to learn about ballot initiatives and be educated about complicated issues, all the while listening to “experts” who present differing viewpoints?

Can we demonstrate how an effective democracy ought to function and do it mindful all the while of the bedrock principles of which I spoke about earlier? Our Social Action Committee, our Men’s Club,

ARZA, and our board are committed to allowing our congregants to engage in fair and balanced exploration of the important issues of our day. The commitment is based on Reform Judaism's long history of social engagement and to the principles of respectful debate.

Whether it be the many facets of immigration, voter registration, common sense gun legislation, climate change, hunger, homelessness, or issues related to Israel, we all have much to learn in order to make informed choices when we go to the polls and or form opinions that are based on facts and our values, rather than party allegiance or the latest poll numbers.

Now I know there are those who would argue that synagogue is not the place for such activity. They want the synagogue to be the one place where we can escape the polarizing rhetoric and all-consuming 24 hour news cycle and social media that constantly bombard us with the latest outrageous story. It should be a refuge and an oasis, to comfort the afflicted, a place of prayer and study, and communal gathering. And they are right. For in fact, 90% of all we do at CKT is exactly that.

But the synagogue, if it is to remain relevant, if it is to speak to the younger generations who are looking for a Judaism that is alive, vibrant, meaningful and involved in the world, a Judaism that respects the past only in as much as it informs the present and future and is relevant to their lives, must also be a safe place to grow and be challenged to think outside our comfort zones at least on occasion. The synagogue must also be the place where our values are tested and our ethical beliefs are realized.

It is not only possible for a synagogue such as ours to be both, but it is imperative! As I draw this homily to a close, I hearken back to a sermon I gave 6 years ago. On Yom Kippur Morning 5773, I declared unequivocally that I was in fact a radical after all. I came out of the political closet and declared my allegiance as a radical moderate. Looking back at what I said then, how I defined exactly what a radical moderate is, is exactly the message I wish to leave you with tonight. To quote myself, I said:

“A radical moderate is one who reserves the right to change his/her mind. A radical moderate is one who freely admits that his/her view of any subject may be erroneous if proven otherwise. A radical moderate is one who recognizes that almost all issues, topics or conflicts are always multi-layered, often riddled with complexity and contain shades of gray.

A radical moderate is one who is not only willing, but is eager to listen to opinions that differ from one’s own. A radical moderate is one who is tolerant and respectful of individuals, even if they espouse ideas that are radically opposed to what you believe in, as long as they adhere to the same principles of tolerance and respect. And finally, a radical moderate is one who will never demonize another person or group for their ideas or beliefs, no matter how vehemently one objects to their view.”

Is it possible that we as a congregation could all become “radical moderates”, recreating a political landscape which could possibly restore civility and decency in our interactions with one another? Can we imagine friendships repaired, families reunited and tensions eased in the

workplace and social gatherings? Can we reimagine a time that once was? Not that long ago on 9/11, just 17 years ago, we were Americans first, and everything else a distant second? Can this day, this eve of the Day of Atonement, be a day for a reckoning of the soul and a reconciliation of the heart, a day when we truly atone for the egregious, hurtful and damaging words that has coarsened our relationships and hardened our hearts?

Yom Kippur must be that day when we look into the mirror and ask what role must I play in healing our divided nation. Today must be a call to conscience!

Finally, can this Day of Atonement, or dare I say, this Day of Atonement, be truly a day when we can be at one with one another and our God? I am well aware that one sermon from the bimah will not succeed in realizing this lofty aspiration, at least not all at once, but this I do know: E pluribus unum – the official Latin motto of the United States and engraved since 1786 on the great seal of our country, reminds us that “out of many, there is unity”. The greatness of our country and our

religious outlook as Jews, as well, is forever grounded in our diversity, which ultimately when combined with respect, decency and civility, tolerance and grace, yields a unity which has held our nation together as one for over 250 years.

May we on this Yom Kippur Eve, begin to heal the divisions within ourselves, our families, and our nation. May the Holy One inspire us to hearken to the call of our “better angels” and therein hasten the day when *Adonai echad ushmo echad*, When God is one, and God’s name is one, and let us say