

Rosh Hashanah 5778

Unity and Division in our Nation

In the Fall of 1998, I wrote my rabbinic thesis on Sheol, also known, more famously, as "hell." At the time, I knew almost nothing about the subject, but I figured that, all things being equal, it might be a good idea to know something about it. You just never know.

As it turns out though, at least according to our rabbis, we're all going to Sheol. We go - or at least our souls go - for the first twelve months of eternity. Our purpose there - apropos to this season - is to repent - to do the *teshuvah* that we did not accomplish during our earthly existence. The rabbis weren't interested in punishment, eternal damnation, or bizarre fire-based rituals; instead, they explored the

impact of a year of soul searching and repentance before moving on to the next phase of the journey.

Although the rabbis posit that everyone descends into Sheol, there is a hopeful caveat; everyone will also **re-ascend after one year**, except for those who commit three types of sins, sins that warrant a permanent stay. Naturally, you would presume that these sins would be the ones considered unforgivable, the ones with the most significant consequences; sins like murder, rape, and robbery. But the rabbis never mention those sins. Instead, the Talmud teaches that the three sins requiring a permanent stay in hell are adultery with a married woman, publicly shaming your neighbor, and giving your neighbor a disparaging nickname.

Rabbi, didn't you just say that our ancestral rabbis weren't interested in punishment and eternal damnation? That all they wanted was for us to do a year of *teshuvah* before moving on to the World to Come? And now you tell us that shaming a neighbor or giving an unwanted nickname sentences us to hell for eternity, while the murderer and the rapist still have a place in the next world. How is that a just result? How could anyone consider a hurtful nickname worse than murder?

The rabbis' sin selection suggests a very different objective than describing alternative soul travel destinations. The penalties - in this life - for murder or rape were severe, and in theory, would act as a deterrent against such conduct, much the way our criminal justice system

operates today. But what about transgressions whose consequences couldn't easily be measured? What about the sins that erode a society's sense of trust, its sense of social cohesion, the behavior that tears at the fabric of the community? The rabbis' emphasis on the words we use suggest that they cared little about the afterlife, but cared deeply about how we actually lived together.

What happens when we give our neighbor a hurtful nickname? The harm is not in the damage - or lack of damage - that is caused. Rather, the rabbis teach that it is the **intention** of seeking to demean someone in a deliberately cruel and public way that must be punished. Likewise, the person who publicly shames his neighbor also has no place in the World to Come. The rabbis

understood the destructive consequences of words and their power to untie the fragile knots that bind us together.

And so we must ask, after nearly 2,000 years, why do the rabbis' teachings feel so foreign to us? Why is it that Judaism's emphasis on "*derech eretz*," roughly translated as, "treat people the way you'd want to be treated" feels so obsolete, so outmoded in this day and age? After all, I'm not standing here calling for a return to eternal damnation. But it wasn't so long ago that our society disapproved of public shaming, disapproved of intentionally hurtful speech, disapproved of giving someone a disparaging nickname. Today, not only do we not disapprove of these deeds, we are rewarding those who do them with fame, fortune, and most disturbingly, power.

How did we get here? When did such behavior - behavior so antithetical to Jewish ethics and ideals - become acceptable? In contrast to the rabbis' world of close ties and connections, where the welfare of your neighbor had a direct impact on your life, today we barely know our neighbors at all. In our congregant, Marc Dunkelman's terrific book, "The Vanishing Neighbor," he persuasively asserts that we spend the lion's share of our leisure time with family and close friends, and with the little time we have left, we spend virtually, with on-line acquaintances who share a common interest. We ask ourselves, "Do I have time to meet my neighbors?" Is my neighbor's proximity to me worth an investment of my precious energy?" And the answer, all too often, is no. We mistakenly believe that

since we don't know our neighbors, their lives are no longer meaningful to us, and that their welfare no longer matters to us.

A few months ago, I thought I knew my neighbors. I was at the State House waiting to testify in support of a bill to prohibit concealed weapons in our public schools. In the hearing room, advocates for both sides of the issue sat near each other - each side wearing shirts and buttons supporting their cause. A few of the men who opposed the bill were talking - and in angry tones - declared that those of us who disagreed with them were only testifying because Michael Bloomberg was paying us, that we had no scruples or principles, and that limiting guns in schools was a sham because the Sandy Hook massacre in Connecticut

never even happened - it was a fabrication to turn people against gun rights.

It was...a moment of clarity. There will always be conflicting opinions about every issue - that's the nature of a democracy. But this was no longer a political debate. In our polarized world, my neighbor's not just wrong: my neighbor is corrupt, my neighbor is controlled by a New York Jewish billionaire, my neighbor watches CNN, my neighbor wants to take away my rights. And the worst part is, I had become the other side of the same coin, with angry thoughts ricocheting inside my head. "What is the matter with these people, why don't they care about children, or safety, or decency, or even the barest remnants of the truth." Our common ground - the terra firma of our democracy -

was crumbling beneath our feet. Suddenly, in the Rhode Island State House, our state's most elegant symbol of democratic ideals, my neighbor was no longer my neighbor. He was my adversary.

And when that happens, when those feelings become normative, when those divisions we cling to harden and calcify, when the teams that we play for define who we are, we no longer have to worry about the impact our words may have. We no longer have to worry about humiliating the opposition, the groups whose very existence offends our moral certainty. And who are these groups? Usually the ones without status or authority. The ones who live on the margins. The ones with darker skin; the ones from other lands; the ones who are poor, uneducated, or

disabled; the ones who are vulnerable to prejudice and bigotry. These are the groups the rabbis were worried about, the ones who are given unwanted, pejorative nicknames...today.

Our better angels know that speech that is intended to hurt others isn't "honesty." It's cruelty. We know that speech intended to disparage the vulnerable isn't "refreshing." It's bullying. And we know that those who march in the streets, shouting racist and anti-Semitic slogans, aren't "celebrating free speech." They are simply espousing an ideology of hate, fear, and intimidation. Indeed, its only purpose is to rob us of the very quality that defines what it means to be a human being: our sacred bond with one another.

In all honesty, and with all due respect, our lives feel qualitatively different than the last time we heard the Shofar sound. Our rhetoric is harsher, our patience is thinner, our anxiety is more acute. White supremacy, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism - ideologies that just two years ago were only whispered in the dark corners of the internet - are now regularly featured on television and in the New York Times. The Anti-Defamation League is actively fighting against bigotry that we were certain had all but disappeared.

And I have to admit it, right now, in this particular political and cultural moment, I'm struggling to connect with my neighbors. I'm struggling to find our common ground. I'm wondering if I can invite them into my house.

But frankly, talking about this struggle isn't nearly good enough. With so many people in our nation feeling abandoned, feeling frustrated, and lashing out at enemies real and imagined, we have to ask ourselves, how do we find some sense of unity? How do we build a feeling of trust? Or to put it another way, if we can't share the same nation, how can we possibly share the same table?

Perhaps I asked this question in the wrong order? Maybe we don't have to share the same nation, at least not yet. But maybe we **can** eat at the same table, family style, and learn how to share - not just the bread and the wine - but also our stories. We need only look to our models of hospitality, Abraham and Sarah, who, without interrogating them on the issues of the day, welcomed

strangers into their tent, washed their feet, and fed them a sumptuous meal.

Similarly, when we invite Muslim community leaders to our Temple, we don't ask them to defend Palestinian rights or to discuss Islam's struggles with modernity. And last year, when we invited an Orthodox settler to speak about peace in the West Bank, we didn't put him on the defensive by raising religious liberty issues at the Kotel. Instead, we employed *derech eretz*; graciousness, respect, and good form. We found the issues we have in common - raising children in a secular world, or coping with being a religious minority - to build a relationship based on the values we share, not the values we don't.

Maybe it begins with "derech erez." Maybe it begins with the assumption that our neighbors - even those we vehemently disagree with - want the same things we do: decent jobs with fair pay, safe and competent schools for our children, affordable health care when we're ill. Perhaps we'll exchange stories about our parents, the schools we went to, or growing up in Rhode Island. And maybe those moments will lead to a sense of trust, or mutual respect, before we travel down the bumpier road toward guns or Civil War monuments or climate change.

And in time, when we do raise the more difficult issues, maybe we'll have enough discretion, and enough civility, to respectfully, and without rancor, disagree.

The rabbis knew that unity would be a challenge, that reconciliation between disparate groups would require something more than just good will. And yet their explicit denunciation of shaming, of demonizing, and of marginalizing the vulnerable wasn't only based on their desire for social harmony. As the stories of our patriarchs teach us, reconciliation and empathy requires commitment and effort on both sides. Isaac and Ishmael, brothers in rivalry, joined together to bury their father Abraham. Jacob and Esau, brothers in hate and jealousy, found reconciliation and peace with each other. Even Joseph, whose brothers tossed him in a pit and sold him into slavery, found a way to forgive them. Indeed, in B'reisheet, the Torah's first portion, let us recall the very first question

ever asked by a human being: Cain, having killed his brother Abel, asks God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Thousands of years later, we are still trying to answer that question.

In this new age, we've been fortunate to have close ties with our interfaith partners. Whether we are sharing our tradition with our friends from St. Martin's, or welcoming the African-American community to remember Martin Luther King, Jr., we have extended our hands in friendship to those who embrace our liberal, pluralist perspective. Almost everyone I meet - at least among my colleagues in the clergy - shares my opinions. But over the summer, during a book club meeting, Marc Dunkelman told us about new programs, where people with diverse

backgrounds, occupations, and perspectives got together to share their lives. I felt challenged by his suggestion, and thought that it might be applicable to religious communities. We will need to meet - and break bread with - communities we've never encountered; those with religious, cultural, and political views that may be quite different from our own.

Judaism calls us to do the mitzvah of tikkun olam - a mitzvah that Reform Jews have taken on with vigor and commitment. Under the guise of repairing the world, we have fed the hungry, sheltered the homeless, and welcomed the stranger in our midst. But now our world is broken by more than poverty and injustice. It is being torn asunder by cynicism, callousness, intolerance, and

disconnection. It is being torn apart by careless and offensive speech, by rage and dislocation, and by the fear that cultural and economic changes are happening too rapidly to assimilate.

I do not know if other faith communities will be interested in meeting with us, nor do I know if such gatherings will have an impact. But I do know that the fissures in our state and our nation are opening wider, and that we have an obligation to try and heal them. I hope you'll contact the Temple and let us know that you would like to be a part of *Hachnasat Orchim* - our hospitality project. In the spirit of *derech erez*, let us open our doors so that we may welcome those whom we have not met. Let us open our minds so that we may hear the pleas of those we have

not heard. And let us open our hearts, so that we may listen with compassion, build trust, and discover new relationships that enrich our lives. Shanah tovah. May we be blessed with the possibility of hope, the potential of connection, and most of all, a healthy and peaceful new year.