

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel

Temple Micah, Washington, DC

Rosh Hashanah 2017\5778

5777\5778

Yesterday evening we stood slung between two years -- 5777 and 5778. There is annually no moment quite like last night. Erev Rosh Hashanah is a threshold moment with one foot in yesterday and another in tomorrow. We look back at the year now gone as we prepare to enter the one beckoning. Let us try the impossible and extend this moment.

One of the great and delightful mysteries of the Hebrew language is that strictly speaking there is no present tense. There is a functional present tense—the zman hoveh—but hoveh cannot mean present. Hebrew knows that the now is constantly becoming the “was.” Hebrew knows that in terms of time—there is the future and there is the past—but with each and every nano-second the future is becoming past. If time is not a constant of the universe, time is a constant of our lives here on Earth. To be a Jew, or better to be a serious Jew is to learn from the past in order to create a better future. That is why we are a people who does not stand still. Like Ben Bag Bag taught us-- We turn it over and over constantly. We are at our best and most serious when we are a restless people. When we seek to do nothing but preserve, we are stagnant and unworthy of the challenge implicit in our legacy.

This morning let us, at least ritually, seek to turn off the switch. Let us imagine that the Erev Rosh Hashanah candles still burn. We pause as we enter this New Year to reflect—to draw a breath before we crash ahead into the unknown that awaits. 5778 is upon us. How do we enter?

5777—what a year it was.

On the one hand, for so many of us, have we ever wanted to leave an old year behind as much as we wish to leave this year behind? Do we wish to put this year as deeply into the rearview mirror as we are able? How many of us feel almost daily to be battered and bruised by the morning’s tweets, the verbal rants, and the pep rallies’ raging screams that echo across the America we love but seem to resound and crash with a greater ferocity in this city we call home?

Have the newspapers and other media journalists ever been more important even as many of us so often tremble at what we read? Right now—here at Temple Micah on Rosh Hashanah I for one want to say thank you to all of you here who are journalists. I love that so many of you

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find a home in Temple Micah. You inspire me. I want Temple Micah to be a spiritual home worthy of your efforts, your dedication, your commitment.

And to the public servants--thank you for your meritorious contributions, your perseverance and strength.

For those of you who have ever doubted the potency of symbols to impact the human psyche and soul, this past year has been the most potent testimony to the enormous power of symbols in public life. I must confess that I still shudder when I just imagine the image of swastikas on parade in American streets and a national leader who seems to delight in the outrage and the havoc that is wrought. The symbol of the White House today represents a world turned upside down. The symbols of this great city all in beautiful white marble are darkened—somehow all gone grey. Is Lincoln bent over in tears in his great chair facing the National Mall? Is Jefferson standing still and erect over the Tidal Basin? Can King hew a stone of hope from a mountain of despair? We need these symbols and their capacity to renew more than ever.

Yes, in many ways this is a year we'd like to forget. But on the other hand, these days are a call for us to reflect in order to enter the new year re-charged.

A friend of mine—a wonderful member of this community—one of those people I learn from always-- sent me an e-mail note a few weeks ago upon receiving the post- Charlottesville e-mail I had sent to the congregation from Wyoming just days before the eclipse. After reading my email, he was reminded of something he had recently read,

He wrote me in return--

"I saw this ... and it really struck a nerve for me: If you've ever wondered what you would have done in 1930s Germany or during the civil rights movement, you're doing it now."

My friend then continues:

"I've tried to reflect on this daily, with humility and conviction. As JFK said, "One person can make a difference, and everyone should try." I now understand Thomas Paine's observation that "these are the times that try men's souls."

My friend has it right.

The Talmud puts it to us like this:

"Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of his own family and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of his family. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the people of his community and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of his community. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the entire world and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of the entire world." (Shabbat 54b)

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Again the Talmud—“In a place where no one behaves like a human being—you strive to be one.”

Dear friends,

Our souls are on trial.

What are we doing?

What should we be doing?

What do we learn from our past in order to enter the future?

To what are we called?

Now, before I go any further, I want to be clear here in what I am saying this morning. Is this politics from the pulpit?

This is not politics. Our current national travail is deeper—more complicated—more elemental and basic—even primal

Truth has been mocked.

The norms of democracy have been trampled.

Learning —education—critical thinking, have been scorned.

Bigotry, racism, Anti-Semitism have been made acceptable.

This is a perilous moment of time and these are Days of Judgement. We each stand in judgement of ourselves.

God stands in judgement of us all,

and

as we all know—just as we stand in judgment on the past, the future will stand in judgement upon us.

These are times when we go where we once thought we would never go.

There is a challenging verse –Psalm 119:126

Et La-asot La-Adonai

Hay-pharu Tora-techa!

It is time to serve God,

They have desecrated the Torah.

The Torah of America is being desecrated—we must serve God.

I worry about American Constitutional Democracy and the society that is required to keep it strong. I worry about the soul of our nation. I worry for our moral integrity—the very substance of our greatness—the very light of our beacon.

There is a story, recorded in the diaries of Dr. James McHenry of Maryland who in 1787 was one of the youngest delegates in Philadelphia to the Constitutional Convention. Dr. McHenry wrote that upon leaving the closing gavel of the convention, with the brand new Constitution approved, Ben Franklin, the oldest delegate, was accosted on the street by a certain Mrs. Powell as he left Independence Hall. According to Dr. McHenry, Mrs. Powell approached Mr. Franklin and put a question to him: “Well, Dr. Franklin, what have we got? A republic or a monarchy?”

Franklin’s immortal reply—“A republic, madam, if you can keep it.”

Our worry today is about the strength of our republic and the norms required to keep it strong.

What then are we to do?

As a congregation, our social action efforts have been extraordinary-

Sukkat Shalom—our adoption and sponsoring of a refugee family gives life to the teaching that if we save one life, we have saved an entire world. The response to this effort has been breathtakingly generous and the leadership has been nothing less than inspirational. Thank you—

Our community’s attempts to heighten awareness and respond to gun violence have also been rather amazing. There is so much work to do in this regard but we have kept it on our own community agenda.

I could go on—we have marched and assembled and protested.

We have hung banners and written letters.

Our ongoing work with Micah House—the very cornerstone of our efforts to assist those in need in our community is an unceasing source of inspiration.

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Individually and communally—we have done much and we will continue.

I am thinking here however in another vein. Again, it is not specific policies about which I am most concerned. Our challenge at this time is to uphold and give voice to what I will call the American covenant -- the very ideas upon which we are rooted as a nation.

Archibald MacLeish in a great and inspiring essay published in the New York Times on July 3, 1976, our bi-centennial year-- recalls the days in early 1861 of Abraham Lincoln traveling from Springfield, IL to Washington to assume the presidency of our nation on the breaking point— about to be torn apart by Civil War.

“President-elect Lincoln... reached Philadelphia ... had gone to Independence Hall ...found a crowd waiting. He had spoken to them,

Mr. Lincoln had often asked himself what great principle or idea it was which had held the Union so long together.”

MacLeish quotes Lincoln’s words that day in Philadelphia:

“It was not the mere matter of the separation from the mother country. Something in the Declaration...Something giving liberty not alone to the people of this country but hope to the world....It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men.”

MacLeish goes on himself—

“Anyone else, any modern President certainly, would have said, as most of them regularly do, that his hope for the country was fixed in ... arms, in the possession of ...power. Not Mr. Lincoln. Not Mr. Lincoln even, at that desperate moment, his hope was fixed in a great affirmation of belief made almost a century before. It was fixed in the commitment of the American people, at the beginning of their history as a people, to “a great principle or idea”:. The principle or idea of human liberty—of human liberty not for themselves alone but for mankind.”

Archibald MacLeish has it right.

America’s greatness comes in the power of the ideas of our founding texts and their universal call. This is America.

This is the symbol of the Statue in the harbor—that torch to the world.

We feel violated therefore not only because Nazis march in the street.

We feel violated because we are living in a time when the very covenant of America has been scorned---the ideals of Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln have been rejected in favor of willful ignorance, bigotry, and a cheap false populism—it is a violent repudiation of the values that birthed this country and for so long have struggled to more fully embrace.

White Supremacists, American Nazis, ultra-Nationalists are abhorrent because they reject the very idea of America.

For us-- the noblest ideas of the human spirit have always been those in our Jewish texts that reflect: tolerance, an open mind, a spirit of generosity, a belief that we are all created in God's image. That is it--we are all created in God's image.

There has always been something so confluent about our American ideals and our Jewish beliefs--they reinforce each other--they strengthen each other. They mirror each other. It is why we feel so at home here—it is why I said many months ago on Shabbat that in some strange way being a rabbi always felt to me like such a very American career choice. Without doubt—in a country where freedom of religion is enshrined in the Constitution. In a land where the very first president wrote those historic words to the first synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island guaranteeing “to bigotry no sanction...” How splendidly affirming of America to be a rabbi.

Lady Liberty's-- "Give me your tired your poor...."

is simply another way of setting the Shabbat table--opening the door to the Passover Seder and proclaiming--"--Kol Deechfeen yaytay v'yaychool-Let all who are hungry, come and eat."

American symbols and Jewish ritual life mirror each other and reinforce each other. We share a bond. And it is our mission as Jews to dedicate ourselves to restore our common beliefs and ideals – the American covenant of our past. In order to do this, we have to re-commit ourselves to our shared revolutionary nature.

Mr. MacLeish argues, "Mr. Jefferson's Declaration remains the most profoundly revolutionary document ever published by a responsible people—the only revolutionary declaration ever made on behalf, not of a class or a creed or special interest of one kind or another but of all mankind, all men, of every man.....that the nation brought into being by that great document was, and had no choice but be, a revolutionary nation."

To be an American is to be a revolutionary.

There is nothing more Jewish than that. We are descended from history's first recorded revolutionary—Abraham, the idol smasher.

Isaiah calls to us still---

"Listen to Me, you who pursue justice, You who seek Adonai: Look to the rock you were hewn from, To the quarry you were dug from. Look back to Abraham your father And to Sarah who brought you forth." (Isaiah 51:1-2)

This is the gift that we are challenged to restore to our nation.

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From the wells of history, we draw wisdom and strength and we draw hope from the gifts the Jewish past has bequeathed to us that will guide us through these troubled waters towards our future.

Earlier this year, I spoke of the sign above the Bratzlaver Shtibel-- "Jews Don't Despair." The sign was above the Bratslaver Shtibel -- in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Jews Don't Despair.

That is right.

In a shtibel at the Gates to Hell, our people had the audacity to hang a sign--Jews Don't Despair.

We can never allow ourselves to forget that to be a Jew is to be for the world a beacon of hope.

According to legend, when asked if he believed in miracles, Tolstoy responded—“the Jews.”

Our symbol is --a ner tamid--an Eternal Light.

If the great symbols of America seem dimmed, we know that we are holders of a light that is eternal—the bush that burns is burning within us still. Our light is reflected in the symbols of our Shabbat table that call to us now. They are special gifts. We will not let them dim.

1. Truth-the Shabbat table represents truth.

Just consider Genesis.

Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation story of Genesis.

The founding assumption of Genesis, the Torah, the Bible and all subsequent Jewish religious literature is that God is one. Everything springs forth from God. “In the beginning, God.....”

One God.

We take the defining principle of one God to mean many different things. One God but innumerable interpretations of what that conveys. One God means --a rational consistency to the way the world works. The system is a unified one. There are not competing systems at work in the world. It can all be traced back to a single principle--one God.

One God is the theological rendition of the elusive prize for which physicists search--the Grand Unifying Theory.

One God means that the universe is hospitable to human inquiry. There are not competing logics.

One God means that we can feel at home in creation. God saw that it was good. The world is open to our inquiry.

This makes truth for us--something to prize. One God beckons us to explore the universe and discover its secrets.

To be a Jew is to be an advocate for and a defender of TRUTH.

We proclaim TRUTH as a deep religious value. We are advocates for truth----now we are ferocious in that quest. It is a Jewish mandate. According to Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamilel--Truth is one of the three pillars upon which the world stands. (*along with justice and peace Avot 1:18*) In upholding truth, we uphold the world and its survival.

Truth as a symbolic value is something that is evident every week when we celebrate Shabbat.

Shabbat candles symbolize many things--they are the light of creation--God's first words-- Shabbat candles represent creation, enlightenment-- TRUTH. A gift from the past to guide us toward the future.

2. Hope

Our second gift that comes to us is a source of hope. It too is biblical. Theologically it goes by the name messiah--or messianism but in its simplest form, we believe and we commit ourselves to the ideal that the human story has a happy ending. The Promised Land is always before us. We may stand right now in what appears to be a wilderness but thru the brush, there is a Promised Land.

The present chapter is not the last word.

The Bible says this over and over in so many different ways.

Defeat is not the end.

Loss is not fatal.

Destruction is not forever.

Exile is not eternity.

This Jewish gift is the gift of the long term. We know history and we know that the road is long and never straight.

Exodus tells us that we were slaves in Egypt for 400 years.

The journey through the wilderness was forty years.

We know the long term and we are in it for the long haul. We are in it for our children, our grandchildren and our grandchildren's grandchildren. The present is always becoming the past—we keep our eye on the future—over there even beyond the horizon. Our commitment is that the end of the story is a bright one.

The messianic age will come. There is hope.

Genesis tells us that we are partners with God. The moral arc of the universe will bend towards justice--but we must put our back into the effort.

We are the shutfim-- God's partners in the ongoing work of creation--and the work is unrelenting. This is the very essence of covenant. It is eternal.

Again, our sages tell us—"We are not required to complete the work—but neither are we free to abstain from it."

I love the joke of the rabbi tending the garden outside the synagogue on sunny day. Someone walks by and says to the rabbi, "You and Adonai make a beautiful garden."

To which the rabbi replies-- "Yes, but you should have seen it when God was tending it by himself."

We are God's partner and the work never ceases.

And here I would like to add a word of challenge and caution. Archimedes is credited with having taught, "Give me a place to stand, and a lever long enough, and I will move the world."

Where do we stand and what is our lever?

Our lever is our Jewish faith, our history and the insights and wisdom that it brings which reaches back to the dawn of history. This story has changed the world more than once. Our Jewish lever can change history. Remember that.

Remember that every time we say the words God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Rachel and Leah.

We bring the strength and faith of all who came before us wherever we go. When we challenge the demagoguery of our time, we bring all of our ancestors into the room with us. There is a lot of power in that. With that lever we can move the world—we can bend that moral arc toward justice and freedom.

The Shabbat Kiddush cup is our symbol of hope—the fruit of the Vine—the harvest that has been gathered—the cup that overflows.

We are never alone when we drink from that cup. The words of the blessing tell us—the cup is a reminder of our Exodus from Egypt—zecher yetziat Mitzrayim. The cup carries the story of human freedom.

Our cup overflows with strength and wisdom and durability and inspiration. A gift from the past to sustain us towards our future.

And now, to add to God and the light of truth.

To add to Hope for the future and our overflowing cup of strength as God's partner. We have a third gift. This third gift is most complicated but also most necessary.

3. We call it pluralism- The rabbis call it --Davar Acher--Another word--Another opinion. Another point of view. This does not disturb us. It makes us wiser.

We know that there are many opinions--many thoughts--many ideas and each one potentially has something to contribute.

Akiba taught--shivim panim la-torah--there are seventy interpretations of Torah--each verse, each word, each passage or story could have 70 implications, 70 twists and turns. We are a tradition of commentary--one more word-davar acher--a differing voice.

We bring them all into the room.

This is pluralism--this is democracy--every voice adds something.

But with a caveat--and this is critical.

If you are out only for yourself—you are a sinner. That is evil. Every argument must hold a vision of heaven in its gaze. We always advocate for the WE—not simply for the I.

Again--our sources--

An argument that is for the sake of heaven will endure--such were the debates of Hillel and Shammai.

We can be reminded in this moment of the teaching of Pirke Avot, "One who says what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours--these are the values of Sodom and Gemorrah."

We are not afraid of complexity--We want to hear from every voice that is seeking to contribute to the common good.

This is what we call pluralism.

Our symbol for pluralism—or davar acher—a differing opinion --is of course the third item on our Shabbat table--for where else does discourse happen but over a meal. And the symbol for the meal is the challah.

Bread is the staff of life --it is also where C O M P A N I O N S sit to converse.

Challah is our symbol of table fellowship--conversation--complexity--discourse deep into the night. A gift from the past through which we create our future.

This is our weekly Shabbat table:

God-and the Light of Truth-Candles

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Messianism-and the Hope that it sustains-Kiddush-fruit of the vine

Davar Acher-Pluralism-- the complexity of democracy-and the tolerance that it supports--
challah-companionship-many opinions.

Our Shabbat table is a weekly reminder of who we are and how we will go forward.

Remember that—We re-energize and re-commit ourselves each week over the Shabbat table.
This is how we live.

Again MacLeish--

“When I was a young man.... sixty years ago, Americans thought of their country as young —
thought of the Republic as a nation still at the beginning of its history. A generation later.... we
had become an elderly society huddled over an old man's dream—the dream of “security.”

Mr. Jefferson knew, as those who honor him know still, that there is no such thing in human
life, no such thing in human history, as what we call “security.” He knew that what makes a
people great, a nation powerful, is purpose....

We are as great as our belief in human liberty—no greater. And our belief in human liberty is
only ours when it is larger than ourselves: liberty, as Mr. Lincoln put it, “not alone to the people
of this country but hope to the world.” We must become again his “last, best hope of earth” if
we wish to be the great Republic which his love once saved, we know that. We must say so
even now, even toward dark, without a voice to lead us, without a leader standing to come
forth. We must say it for ourselves. No one else will say it for us.”

That was MacLeish in 1976.

I say it to us this morning-- We are all here to say it.

We enter this year to re-claim our purpose as American Jews. We are voices for freedom, truth
and the messy democracy that pluralism requires.

There is a story in the Talmud in Avodh Zarah—that I have not reflected on for many years.
This morning seems right.

Living under Roman rule, the ancient rabbis debated the permissibility of going to the gladiator
games. These were beastly and murderous affairs. The crowd would vote at the end of each
match as to whether the defeated gladiator should be publicly executed by the victor. The
rabbis were unanimous in their abhorrence of this public barbarism and brutality. They were
nearly unanimous in forbidding Jewish attendance at these grotesque spectacles. One rabbi –
Rabbi Shimon demurred. He posed that it was a mitzvah for Jews to attend the games and
when the time came the Jew should stand up and vote for life. The Jew must go and vote to
spare the life of the defeated gladiator. This is saving a life.

He urged Jews go into the most hateful arena and be champions for life.

This is who we are.

We are the disciples of Rabbi Shimon—even when the crowds are hateful—even when the noise is despicable—we are God’s champions for life.

REMEMBER

Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the entire world and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of the entire world.” (Shabbat 54b)

This is the mandate we hold.

This is the Torah we celebrate.

5777 is behind us—Let us go forward into 5778-

Remember Rabbi Shimon-

We are champions for freedom

We are champions for justice

We are champions for life.

Voices for hope—voices for tomorrow.

Shanah Tovah!