

ROSH HASHANAH I

5779

The president of the synagogue is meeting with the Senior Rabbi and tells him that Goldie Schwartz loves his sermons. A big smile of contentment comes over the rabbi's face at which point the president says: "Goldie also loves the Gong Show, Beavis and Butthead, and the Texas Chain Saw Massacre." There are more jokes told about clergy especially jokes criticizing our sermons.

Mel Fisher shared a poem with me, "the Man in the Glass." We discussed how difficult it is to look into the glass, to see ourselves in the mirror. This is what taking an account of our souls, *cheshbon hanefesh*, is all about; this is what Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur are all about. Rabbi Yosi ben Haninah taught that love without criticism is not love at all and Rabbi Shmuel HaNagid reminds us that only a fool runs away from criticism. There seems to be a lot of fools in the world but thankfully, there is a lot of love. The most common word in Hebrew for fear is "yirah," sharing the same letters with the Hebrew verb "to see." It can be fearful to see ourselves honestly. Psalm 27 that we pray twice every day for a month to prepare us for what we must do during the High Holy Days concludes by telling us to be strong and have courage. We are not required to observe a mitzvah if we are not able to. If we are obligated to do a *cheshbon nefesh*, to look in the mirror, we are able to. If we are obligated to do *teshuvah*, evaluate our lives and heal our relationships, we are able to. Self-recognition of what is broken in our lives and self-criticism are strengths available to every one of us. Rabbi Nachman tells us that if we have the power to break something, we have the power to fix it—provided we desire to do so.

Often the Jewish people are described as a stiff-necked people, "*am k'sheh oref*." Rabbi Yitzchak Abravanel observes that a stiff-necked person cannot turn his head and see the consequences of his or her behavior and therefore, cannot see what requires forgiveness and repair. How stiff-necked are we and what don't we see? Before the First Temple was destroyed, Isaiah admonished our ancestors for not using their free will to criticize themselves, correct their ways and accept responsibility for the consequences of their behavior. Rosh HaShanah reminds us that we, just like our ancestors, have free will to see ourselves in the mirror or to turn away.

There is a rabbinic principle requiring us to acknowledge the good in our lives, "*hakarat hatov*." Our rabbis knew that if we are to work on ourselves, we need to see what is good in our lives to have the strength and confidence to do so. There are many positive things here at Adath Israel to be acknowledged: the generosity and devotion of our congregants, our extraordinary leadership, dedicated staff and many volunteers; our family and youth programming, creative religious services including outdoor experiences, our bereavement group, trips to Israel and our bar/bat mitzvah program; our religious school, affinity groups, our growing social action program, the BBQ and more. However, in the spirit of the day, and in the spirit of the man in the glass, we need to see what needs our attention, care and repair. I share with you on this Rosh HaShanah with concern, faith, hope, faith in our future and with much rabbinic love.

Given the size of our congregation, why do we have difficulty filling the volunteer slots every time we host homeless families for the Interfaith Hospitality Network? Why do so many of us feel uncomfortable around poor people? Why given the size of our congregation and how much discretionary time we have do so few study in adult education classes here or elsewhere? Why given the size of our congregation are we having difficulty maintaining our daily minyan? Why do so few of us say *kaddish* for our loved ones when they die and observe their *yartzheits* once a year? Why are fewer American Jews belonging to synagogues and more of those who do belong, regard it as a transaction expecting customer, not congregant but, customer service? Even though we have more and more Shabbat service experiences—Friday Night Live, Shabbat in the Park, Shabbat Neshamah, Family Service, Mini Minyan and Kiddush Club—is participation what it is? Is it our synagogues or is it possibly something else that has nothing to do with synagogues or Shabbat services or adult studies or homeless people or *kaddish* and *yartzheit*, but it has to do with us; it has to do with the man and the woman in the mirror? Rabbi Shai Held reminds us that religion at its foundation is about softening our hearts and learning to care. He says that the heart of our Torah is love and kindness, “*chesed*.” We cover our *challot* at Shabbat dinner to not hurt their feelings when we sanctify Shabbat over the wine and not the *challot*. If we worry, as many of us do, about a scratch on our car and a stain on our shirt, how much the more so should we worry about the scratches and stains we put on people—very often those closest to us—by how we talk to them and treat them? Rabbi Jonathan Cohen reminds us that from our very beginnings the conception of Israel as a people is a people devoted to ethical living. It is our right as Americans not to care about the suffering and pain of others; it is not our right as Jews not to care. Racism is a malignant sickness in our country that causes immeasurable suffering and pain every day. If we look in the mirror we will see our own racist attitudes and stereotypes about people of color. How many non-Jews have such attitudes and stereotypes about us but would never consider themselves anti-Semitic as we do not consider ourselves racist?

G-d does not care about politics; G-d only cares about justice, peace and kindness. We are told that the shoes we have in our closets that we do not need belong to the poor and if we do not give them to the poor we are stealing from them. Is it a blessing or a burden to be part of a religious tradition that requires this of us? Every one of us has the capacity to be compassionate. We are told twice in the Torah to love our fellow human being and only once to love G-d. If we are commanded to love G-d whom we cannot see how much more so should we love another human being whom we do see?

Our rabbis teach that we must never judge anyone until we stand in that person’s shoes, experience where that person is. How can any Jew not strongly support quality medical insurance, low-income housing, and a whole range of services for those in need? In the 12th century, Rambam observed that those who were blessed with good fortune often abandon their ethical considerations because, among other reasons, of their attitudes about poor people. We are no different than our ancestors living in Rambam’s time. How can any Jew walk by a needy person on the street or vote for a candidate who wants to cut Medicaid and food stamps? As Americans we are free to, as Jews we are not. So serious is our responsibility to those in need that our rabbis dictated that we must put everything aside to take care of them.

They legislated that before we do the mitzvah of tzedakah we do not say a blessing as we do before every other mitzvah. Why? Because we are not permitted to delay for a second meeting the needs of those in need.

We are all immigrants to this country? Many of our ancestors were refugees. How can a single Jew today not stand up against the government's repressive treatment of immigrants and refugees including the separation of children from their parents? How can a single one of us not be outraged that our government is doing this? Yet there are many of us who either support this behavior and/or support those elected and appointed officials responsible. The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Rabbinical Assembly, JCRC, HIAS, American Jewish Committee, ADL, Hadassah and many other Jewish organizations are aggressively confronting this desecration of G-d's name. Too many of us are turning aside just as we turn aside from looking in the mirror. This is a *grosse shanda* just like when all the non-Jews throughout our history turned away from us and our suffering.

As American Jews guided by Jewish values we need to be concerned with gun control, corruption in the electoral process, attacks on women's reproductive rights and discrimination against GLBTQ people. As American Jews we need to wrestle with why the United States has more people in prison per capita including tens of thousands for non-violent crimes than any other country in the world and we have more violent crime per capita. Why are we the only western country that still executes people? Why, as rich as we are, is our infant mortality rate as high as it is? Why as wealthy as our country is do we have so many of our citizens including children living in poverty? Why do we throw enough food away every day to feed the entire world including much of the food that we and our children put on our plates ourselves? If we are looking honestly into the mirror we will see how unhealthy we are as a society and how much healing we need; our society is fractured, divided and filled with fear and hate. To see ourselves as a country today requires great honesty and courage and it requires faith and hope. Our rabbis taught that without truth life and our world cannot endure. When, as Professor Lee McIntyre teaches, we hold on to skepticism past the point when facts should have convinced us that something is true, we have landed in the realm of willful ignorance and denial. Anyone who denies climate change and global warming is ignorant, in absolute denial or even worst selfish person who does not care about the future for those coming after us. Does a single one of us want to be on the wrong side of history on this one? Who cares about our politics and pocket books when literally the future of our planet is at stake? Literally!

As an opinion piece in the New York Times tells us, how we think about our indulgence and consumption, our will power to change and our delayed gratification carry enormous implications for our society and culture. Our being conditioned now to never wait for anything— call Alexa—is part of our unavoidable demise; changing our ways as to our consumption and relationship to natural resources is part of our survival. How can a single American Jew not support environmental protection efforts given that our Torah and rabbis command us to guard and protect this planet Earth? The man and the woman in the mirror are screaming at us to simply see what is right in front of us.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg wrote that she has advantages that her ancestors in Europe did not have, never dreamed of, including the social capital that she has, and we must fight every kind of bigotry with force. We have an obligation as American Jews living so well and secure to stand up for those more vulnerable and threatened. We must embody, Rabbi Ruttenberg says, the full tenacity and verve of the elderly Jew photographed last summer in Charlottesville, holding a sign that said, "I escaped the Nazis once. You will not defeat me now." How can any one of us as American Jews not stand with this elderly survivor against all bigotry, discrimination and hatred and be able to look in the mirror?

Journalists Scott and Paul Slovic wrote that one death is a tragedy, but a million deaths is a statistic. We have become so immune and desensitized to the deaths, horrors and suffering perpetrated by us, human beings. Be it mass shootings in schools, refugee children torn away from their parents, melting ice caps in the Arctic, suicide bombers and sexual abuse. As Jews we are commanded to feel the pain and suffering of others and as Jews we are commanded to do something about it. Studies show that we choose with whom to empathize and we choose those who look like us and think like us. What about those who don't?

When we look in the mirror we are to see that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves and we are responsible. As Americans we are free to do whatever we want, vote however we want, live however we want; as Jews we are not. As Jews we are responsible to live this way and not this way, to raise our children this way and not this way, to take care of others and our world this way and not this way. As Jews we are commanded to look in the mirror every day and see clearly who we are and what we must do. Rosh HaShanah is our annual reminder that we can and must do this. Rosh HaShanah is a gift, a blessing to help us not deny or run away from what we see. I share with you this Rosh HaShanah, yes, with concern but also, with faith and hope and with love.

SHANAH TOVAH, GOOD YOM TOV!