



HIGH HOLY DAY SERMONS

Lance J. Sussman Ph.D., Senior Rabbi

Rabbi Stacy Eskovitz Rigler,
Religious School Director

2019 - 5780

8339 Old York Road
Elkins Park, PA 19027

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"Tikkun Olam: Foundations"

Erev Rosh HaShanah ~ 2019/5780

Sunday, September 29, 2019

Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, Ph.D.

Sometimes late in the 1950s, American Jews began to use the phrase “Tikkun Olam” instead of “Social Justice” to describe their broader engagement with American society, particularly in connection to the Civil Rights movement. The Hebrew words “Tikkun Olam” originally were found in the Talmud and in traditions of 16th century Jewish mysticism and they originally referred to a metaphysical, pre-Creation process of cosmic redemption, entirely mythic and beyond the bounds of modern science.

In the American Jewish experience, however, Tikkun Olam came to mean “repairing society through participation in progressive social causes.” It became a buzz term for the part of the American Jewish life that made a cultural shift from Woodstock to what I call “Voodstock” in the 1960's and 70's. By the end of the 20th century, main stream Liberal Jews, including the American Reform movement in Judaism, took up the mystical phrase and essentially secularized its meaning.

Interestingly, Israelis today do not use, or like, the phrase “Tikkun Olam” and instead stick with a direct Hebrew translation of Social Justice. To a large extent, this reflects the cultural distance between secular and religious Israelis and the blurring of the line between secular and religious views of Judaism among American Jews, who often invoke Judaism in grounding their political views in the rich soil of Jewish, Biblical and prophetic traditions.

How did I learn about Social Justice? How did I become a bona fide Tikkun Olam-nik? The story is woven into the broader narrative of my childhood. I grew just outside the deeply segregated city of Baltimore which was cultural more southern than its location just below the Mason-Dixon line suggested. My family was solidly

democratic and attached to the New Deal policies of FDR. We were also deeply rooted in the Reform movement of the 1950s and 1960s. We were not that different from most of our neighbors in Pikesville or, for that matter, the majority of Jews in Elkins Park, PA, 125 miles to our north.

It is a story filled with tender moments and glaring contradictions. Let's begin at the beginning. In my childhood home, a modest two story Cape Cod, we had a black woman who cleaned and sometimes helped cook breakfast and lunch. Her name was Eleanor Central. She came from the Richmond, VA area and was the descendants of slaves. She had vivid memories of growing up poor but happy and of a communal like, rural existence. She had a strong personality and openly shared her opinions with us, especially me. She and my mother were the same age and had an almost sister like relationship, except for the color barrier and the required social hierarchy of the time which both women respected.

Miss Eleanor came to work on the Number 5 Bus which came up out of Baltimore City to the end of its line just over the Baltimore City-County border. At the final stop on the line, hundreds of black women, in white uniforms, descended from city buses to be picked up in cars by hundreds of Jewish women in colored dresses. Race, class and gender were all in perfect order. It ran like a clock, every week, from Monday to Friday.

One day, Miss Eleanor was angry. She was banging pots and pans as she went about her business of making me my regular breakfast -- real scrambled eggs made with real butter and salt. As usual, I would stand right next to her at the stove, just about eye level with the frying pan. "What's wrong," I asked her, "you are so angry today?" "Well Mr. Lanny," she sighed, yes my official house name was Mr. Lanny, "no one likes me and no one likes you!" "What?" I exclaimed, "What does that mean, I like you!" "You see, " she explained and I will give the actual quote because it is important NOT to be PC here, "no one likes you because you are a Jew and no one likes me because I am a nigger!"

I was stunned. No one had ever called me a Jew before, everyone I knew except Miss Eleanor was Jewish, and I certainly had never heard the Southern term of disparagement, Nigger, said out loud in real life. I had heard it on TV but not in real life. The fact is we, Jewish suburbanites, used a different word which everyone thought was less hurtful and almost ok to use inside the Jewish community. You know the word, its's "shwatze."

Once I was told by an elderly Jewish woman not to say "shwatze." Waiting for her hair to be done, she told me, she had been reading Ebony magazine which had an article about the word shwatze. "They know what it means," she said, "so don't use it anymore, say 'dunkel' instead. Dunkel means darkie." Again, I was stunned and thereafter never again said either shwatze or dunkel , although I heard the term shwatze, constantly, especially in incredibly racist jokes which were standard fare in the world of my childhood.

Thirty years later, I gained a new, radical perspective on my childhood relationship with Miss Eleanor. It came at my student pulpit in Richmond, IN. Liz and I had been invited to a Shabbat lunch by an elderly couple in their garden apartment. They had moved to Indiana from NY to be with their children and grandchildren. Their son had found employment in local industry , a big metal corporation. The son and his family later left, but the grandparents stayed because they said they were too old to move again.

In any event, we sat down for a Shabbat lunch on one of our biweekly visits and, to my amazement, their cleaning lady/cook sat down with us at the dining room table and starting eating with us. My jaw dropped. Miss Eleanor almost never ate with us and absolutely never when there was company. We ate in the dining room. She ate alone in the kitchen. I didn't know it at the time but I was part of American segregation. I was shocked and ashamed.

Then something even worse happened. I read the 2009 novel Help by Kathryn Stockett. I read it in one sitting, glued to the story. It seemed to hold a mirror up to my own story.

Then I got to the part about segregated toilets! I thought I knew all about segregated public toilets in parks and separate water fountains for blacks and whites. . I had learned about Jim Crow and lunch counters and all that in school, but that was public culture. Then I read The Help and learned that toilets were segregated at home too. There was private segregation and the domestic help had their own toilets at work too.

OMG, I said to myself, we had a Jim Crow toilet in our house. It was in our basement. It was a semi-finished gray, wood stall, with a light bulb and chain, and no designated sink either, just a utility sink next to the washing machine. I used that toilet, standing up only, when I played in the basement. My friends used it too and nobody really cared if we were accurate. Little boys are not always accurate, especially when they wait a little too long. Anyway, it was the shwatze's toilet and you could aim or not aim, as little boys do. Who knew, me a Northern, liberal, Yankee Jew, had so much in common with George Wallace, who I despised.

However, I wasn't a very good segregationist. A man named Martin Luther King had caught my attention by the time I was ten years old. He was a spellbinder of a speaker. He was handsome and smart and spoke about truth, justice and love. I watched him on our Philco TV, 70% wood and 30% or less, black and white screen, with a tinge of green. We only had three channels in those days and watching the news only took place at certain times of the day. 6:30 was serious news time. We all watched together. Walter Cronkite was the second smartest man in America after Eric Sevaraid. They had straight white hair and their seats in their studios seemingly were like the seats of the angels in the Cosmic Broadcasting System, CBS, in television heaven.

Grandpa Walter and Uncle Eric said Dr. Martin was a good man and fought for justice. The bad guys were fat and ugly had water hoses and dogs. I cheered for Dr King and listened to his Dream Speech in total awe. But then things began to happen. The TV news shared images of other black men walking picket lines. One was holding a sign. It said, "I am a Man." There was a lot of family discussion about that. Yes, he was a man but whoever he was, he was also a trouble maker and somehow responsible for the increasing racial tension in America.

Then, Dr. King was murdered in front of our eyes. It was horrible. My hero of the moment, RFK, spoke to an angry crowd in Indianapolis about how his brother was killed but that he didn't hate anyone. I wept. My throat was hard. I loved his words but they weren't sufficient to subdue the growing rage in the Black community.

The tide of Black anger washed up to my little street just outside of Baltimore City. An army half track with real soldiers blocked our street. A curfew was imposed. Sale of gasoline was restricted. Reports of snipers from the projects in old East Baltimore where my Grandfather's deli used to operate, came pouring in on the radio and on TV.

It was a scary time. The trouble just wouldn't subside. My best friend's father was shot in his hardware store in the ghetto and barely survived. My neighbor's pharmacy, also in town, was robbed and the robbers shot and killed his German shepherd. My maternal uncle, also a pharmacist and my favorite person in the world who took me to ball games and bought the best Hanukkah gifts, was also robbed. The assailant actually stuck the barrel of his gun in my uncle's nose before leaving. He didn't shoot, but things were different after then, and my uncle was never the same.

It was a horrible time and despite the violence on the street, I remained convinced, somewhere around the age of 16, that the real culprit in our society was social injustice and racism, not the reaction to it by the disposed. It was all so strange.

I loved contemporary Black culture, the Temptations and the Four Tops but I would hardly ever ride the Number 5 bus back into Baltimore except to get to the train station to go to Washington and hang out in Georgetown and its hippy boutiques, cool places for middle class kids with Jewfro haircuts.

In the summer of 1970, the first serious Jewish component of this story presented itself. I was already seriously thinking about becoming a rabbi and debating with myself as whether to become a history major or a religious study major in college. Part of me was still saying I should become a lawyer or a professor. But the idea of rabbinic school was clearly in first place and I was open to serious Jewish learning. Fifty years later, not that much about me has changed.

At the time, I was in a CIT program at Camp Harlam and in those days we had required Jewish text courses. Our teacher was Rabbi Howie Bogot of Abington, PA. Today, he is retired and lives in Rydal Park. He was friends with our other primary Camp rabbi, Rabbi Weintrup, from Beth Am, in Abington. Rabbi Weintrup was always fun. Rabbi Bogot was fun but we also studied texts with him. Both of Rabbi Bogot's choices that summer changed my life. First, we read Ahad Ha-Am, the great late 19th century Russian Jewish theoretician of cultural Zionism. My family was pro-Israel but not strongly Zionist. We accepted Hebrew as part of the Jewish deal but did not make it a priority. Then I read Ahad Ha-Am and both Israel and Hebrew were no longer a casual thing for me.

Ahad Ha-Am was deeply intellectual and perhaps a strange choice for summer camp. For me at least, he presented a welcome intellectual challenge, a new pathway to a serious way of being Jewish, Zionist and pro-Israel. He remains central to my Judaism. I can remember to this day that class somehow lifting me from the sociology of Judaism, the life I was living, to the ideologies of Judaism and the tradition's classical, foundational literature.

The second class with Rabbi Bogot had an even deeper impact on me. It was a class on the prophet Amos or “ay-mis” in English. At the time, I knew there had been Israelite prophets. I had read a Haftarah for my Bar Mitzvah but neither remembered it, nor understood. It thereafter, every casual attempt I made reading the prophets, mostly looking at the Haftarah in the old Hertz Chumash, when I was in one of the Orthodox or Conservative synagogues my cousins belonged to, brought me to the same conclusion, that the Prophets were intellectually impenetrable in any language.

But then came Rabbi Bogot who introduced me to the prophet, Amos. Amos was the prophet of Justice in the Hebrew Bible. In this sanctuary, his window is in the middle, to my right, your left, with a roaring lion on the top. At the time, I didn't know it, but he was also one of the prophets regularly and powerfully quoted by Dr. King. Justice, prophets both ancient and modern, was like a mighty stream.

Amos was an 8th century BCE prophet. He was one of the first prophets who left a book with his own name. Earlier prophets, like Elijah, were simply reported in other historical works. Amos lived in the time of the divided Israelite monarchy. Amos was from the south, from the Kingdom of Judah, but preached in the north in the Kingdom of Israel. He was a sheep herder and harvested sycamore figs. He had no training as a prophet nor had disciples who followed him. His main message was very simple and he delivered it in a powerful way.

Rabbi Bogot introduced us to Amos' style by demonstrating the literary structure of the first two chapters of Amos's book. The prophet stood up in the center of a village and began denouncing the sins and ploys of the enemies of the Jews. For the sins of Damascus, for the sins of Gaza, for the sins of Tyre and Edom and Moab. The people loved it and cheered. They detested their enemies and Amos poured his wrath on each and every one of them.

But at the peak moment when he had the crowd with them, Amos changed directions. Now he spoke of the sins of his home country, Judah, to the south, and what they had done. The crowd must have quickly simmered down. And then, he lowered the boom and attacked the kingdom of Israel where he prophesied. His words most have felt like a slap in the face:

“For three transgressions of Israel, for four, I will not hold back
Because you have sold for silver those whose cause is just for silver,
And the needy for a pair sandals....

And then he threatened them

God will bring judgment on Israel for its transgressions
And the horns of the altar will be cut off
And you palaces will be destroyed.

He then marched into the court of the noble women in the north of the Kingdom and attacked them as “cows of Bashan” and warned them that they would be carried off like dead fish in a basket for their sins.

I had never heard anything like this before. My rabbi growing up in Baltimore, Rabbi Abraham Shaw, was polite and dignified. His voice was mellow and soothing, like the announcer on the classical music station on FM. He regularly praised the prophets and spoke of their message of justice but never alleged anything about our own possible hypocrisy or complicity at some level, conscious or unconscious, in our private lives.

My head was spinning. On my own, while at summer camp in a wooden bunk without air conditioning, I read and reread these disturbing passages.

Then, in our final lesson on Amos, we read from Chapter 9, the last chapter in the Book of Amos, we read verse 7. It is part of the Haftarah to Leviticus 19, parshat Kedoshim, which contains the Golden Rule: “love your neighbor as yourself.”

But “Who is your neighbor, the rabbis later asked? Is it the person next door? Is it someone you already know? Is it a fellow Jew?” Amos in 9:7 had a different and challenging answer. “To me O Israelites,” the prophet proclaimed, “you are just like the Kushim, the Ethiopians!” In other words, God and tradition view all people equally. The chosen people are not above humanity, not even the Ethiopians.

The irony was and is sharp. The Hebrew term, Kushim in the vernacular, is like swatze or dunkel or the n-word. No person of any background, color, nationality, faith or class is less a child of God than any other person, even the chosen people. From the perspective of the prophet Amos, humanity exists on a single plane: all people are our neighbors, all people, not just some pre-selected people, are created in the image of God.

When I was recruited to come to KI twenty years ago, one of the regular selling points used by the congregation was its stained glass windows in this sanctuary. They are beautiful, I was told on the afternoon of Yom Kippur at Neilah. The yellow sunlight will come through and illuminate the whole room in shades of golden holiness and divine beauty. That is very true but the windows are not just ornaments. They are not here just to create a sense of beautiful calmness.

They are modern representations of the ancient prophets of Israel and their disturbing, iconoclastic messages. Fight injustice, curb hypocrisy, treat everyone with respect, love mercy, aspire to be your higher self, consecrate this sacred space with moral courage, with commitment to social justice, with hopes for peace combined with a refusal to appease evil. Our windows are unique monuments to prophetic Judaism. They are the Mt. Rushmore of prophetic Justice on which are engraved the words, social

justice, Tikkun Olam -- that all are created in the image of God, that all created equally and should be treated that way in law and life.

The prophets of ancient Israel delivered these messages for hundreds of years and since the close of prophecy in ancient Israel 2,400 years ago, we have continued to read their words in the Jewish tradition and in modern times, and attempted, with mixed success, to transform their words into actions.

The prophet Amos helped his generation see the injustices of their time, not only in society but in themselves. My experiences growing up and my early encounter with the words of Amos helped me see the same thing. We live in an unredeemed world. We live in a world of injustice, hypocrisy, unfairness and cruelty. Even for us living in the modern palaces of Bashan, we are not exempt from these problems, nor are necessarily above adding, perhaps unwittingly, to those problems ourselves.

On the high holy days, we not only fast but we pledge in the spirit of the prophets to fast from the sins of injustice. We know this from our powerful Haftarah on the morning of Yom Kippur from the prophet Isaiah. Where did he learn this powerful teaching? Of course, it was from his predecessor, Amos. Here is Amos 6:21-24, written a full generation before Isaiah:

“I loathe,” the prophet wrote, “I spurn your festivals,
I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies.
If you offer Me burnt offering or your meal offerings,
I will not accept them.
I will pay no heed to your gifts of fatlings.
Spare Me the sound of your hymns
And let Me not hear the music of your lutes.
But let justice well up like water,
Righteousness like an unfailing stream.”

On these high holy days, we rededicate ourselves to the fulfillment of this ancient prophetic challenge. For this new year, 5780, we purposefully refocus our congregational work on the prophet challenge, on social justice, on Tikkun Olam, Not just in the world at large, or in America, or Philadelphia, but in this house and in our hearts.

Social justice is not just a phrase, a theme or a fad.

It is more than the artistic theme which frames this sanctuary.

It is the essence of the Jewish tradition.

It is our sacred mission.

It is our purpose.

It is our reason for collective existence.

It is our path to redemption.

It is our offer of hope to humanity in a world of increasing darkness and despair.

Years ago, the words of the prophet Micah, were carved into the lintel of the entrance of the headquarters of the Reform movement, the old Union of American Hebrew Congregations, on Fifth Ave in New York City. Perhaps more than any other prophetic quote, Micah 6:8, sums up what Tikkun Olam is in Reform Judaism.

We have been told, Micah, the successor to Amos taught, what God expects of us as human beings and what God, the eternal source of truth, calls “good,” the bar in human life to which we should aspire:

To do justly!

To love mercy and kindness!

And to walk humbly with these ideals in our heart.

Do we accept this ancient challenge in this house?

Are these aspirations, the values which pump life into our hearts?

In the year ahead, let us strive to be just in all our actions,
let us be kind and merciful in all our thoughts
And let us conduct ourselves with humility and quiet courage.

May you be blessed with a year of faith, vision and steadfastness.

Amen.

"Israel and America: What's Next?"

Rosh HaShanah Morning - 2019/5780

Monday, September 30, 2019

Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, Ph.D.

As most of you know, I love politics as much as I love history, art, Judaism and every other matter which my mind constantly seeks out like oxygen, diet coke and, assorted types of junk food. Politics is something I crave on a daily basis. At least online, I look at the Philly Inquirer, CNN, MSNBC, Fox, the Hill, the NYT, the WSJ, the BBC, the Times of Israel, the Jerusalem Post (for which I write an op-ed on occasion), Ha-Aretz, Al-Jazera and Mexico News almost every day plus a host of weekly and monthly publications. I had to give up actual paper subscriptions because my "township issued recycling can" couldn't hold all the news that's fit to print and then required to discard. It's a hobby, it's an obsession. It's a necessity. It's a way of life but I can't live without news, or as they say in French, "à la une, "page one, up to the minute, breaking news."

Now nobody can follow the whole world. For years, I tried reading the Economist magazine, exactly for that purpose, but I found their coverage on Israel so thin, I let it go. Instead, I concentrate on a few countries, especially the US, the UK and Israel. Sometimes, I follow news from Germany and/or Mexico but my top three are the US, the UK and, of course, Israel. Categorically, I can tell you that it is never boring, sometimes horrifying and generally annoying. Once in awhile, I take a break and just listen to music, the best of the 60s or opera, just to cool off and then, God help me, plunge right back into the world of politics.

Politics toady, when viewed comparatively and internationally, are an exercise in insanity and as the definition of insanity generally suggests, keeps yielding the same results, over and over again, with little hope of finding sane paths to solutions, compromises or, more distantly, peace. In my opinion, it is the ideology of the right,

the resurgence of nationalism and populism that that is engine of news today, especially in my three news galaxies, the US, the UK and Israel.

Perhaps the most colorful politics for me are in the UK. The Brits know how to talk and how to talk English. I don't always know what they are saying, but I always love how they say it. It is certainly more entertaining to listen to Parliament than to the American Congress. I am constantly amazed at how many English political terms I have never heard of before. My new word this summer was "prorogation." We just say recess, which sounds like fun at school. The Brits say prorogation, which sounds more like a hair fertility treatment.

Besides being a bit of an Anglophile and despite the American revolution 243 years ago, I have family in England and get to hear the inside track on British politics and not just the views expressed on BBC. Its all about Brexit, immigration, the EU, the Irish border and Scottish nationalism. My English family is completely split on the issue of Brexit. You can't even discuss it at dinner. I am anti-Brexit. I dislike both Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn and find English food, at least the way its prepared in the rural midlands, to be pretty good.

For me, American politics are the most toxic and the most annoying of my favorite political theaters. For a person in my position, that is, a rabbi or a clergyman, they are also the most dangerous. This year's decision to emphasize "Tikkun Olam" at KI, is for me, akin to volunteer to walking blindfolded on the gangplank between a well armed pirate ship and a first rate 18th century battle ship over shark infested waters. Its guarantees I will be shot at from every direction with every size and shape of ammunition, without a white flag or body armor. Its one of those things, like fundraising and board politics, that aren't taught in rabbinic school by an academic faculty that never saw a semi-colon they didn't like.

Turning to the American theater, I find that at present, there is a bit of irony in the state of American politics and how it relates to pulpit work. For forty years, I have been admonished not to preach politics from the pulpit. There are several principles at work here. First and most frequently cited is that the American doctrine of the separation of church and state and the separation of religion and politics are one and the same. They are not. One has to do with governance, the establishment of a specific religious tradition and the use of tax dollars to fund religious projects but not politics. We have all types of exceptions to the wall of separation, like legislative benedictions, public space crèches, "menorahs on Independence mall" and military chaplaincy.

Even more poignant is the recent encapsulation of the Johnson Amendment, a 1954 amendment which prevents clergy from endorsing candidates from the pulpit for public office without compromising their non-profit status. Ironically, the current administration in the White House has issued an executive order allowing clergy, especially from the evangelical right, to do exactly that. Why, they argue, should freedom of speech be denied to the people of the cloth, especially the pro-life variety?

We know broadly from American history that abolition, prohibition, anti-war movements, pro-war movements, civil rights and even gender equality debates are all deeply anchored in theologies of social action, left, right and confused. For sure the Reform movement, beginning with KI and the fight against slavery in the 1860s, has been highly political at various points in its history.

In our lobby is a one hundred year old memorial window in honor of Teddy Roosevelt. Make sure you look at the new fabulous TJ museum exhibition explaining its origins, production and reception. I can't image that our pro-Taft or pro-Wilson congregants in 1919 were too happy when it was installed.

Upstairs near the elevator is a life size bust of FDR, originally dedicated by Eleanor Roosevelt herself. Today, we keep it almost out of view although it is an

important piece of art. Anti-FDR sentiment in the Jewish Community today is often fierce.

At one point, KI was one of the leading anti-Zionist synagogues in this country. Today we display an Israeli flag on both our Bimahs and in the auditorium and I personally run regular congregational trips to the holy land. Indeed, it is simply false to say that this pulpit has been a political free zone.

Nor is the reform movement mute on political matters. We have a national Commission on Social Justice and a lobby, the Religious Action Center, in Washington, DC where we send our Confirmation class every year to see Tikkun Olam in the guise of American civic advocacy in action.

Rarely a week goes by and sometimes, a single day, when I don't find myself caught between someone who says, "don't rock the boat," and another who challenges me "not to be a bystander." The reality is someone is going to quit or join the synagogue because someone, me, or another clergy, or an elected congregational leader says either x or y. It's the nature of the beast called politics, which is part of life, which is connected to our personal and social ethics and ultimately to our faith. Thank god, Jack Daniels, has two Jewish names.

Which brings me to my third favorite national, political conversation, but not necessarily in order of importance. I am passionate about Israel. I have been passionate about Israel for over 50 years from even before the first of my 33 trips there, beginning in 1969 and most recently in October 2018 and hopefully again in June, 2020. Please join me in a wonderful, congregation adventure to the Holy Land next Spring. For those who have travelled with me, I love bus microphones even more than I love sanctuary microphones.

So what is going on in Israel today? What are the politics of the moment in the Holy Land? Well, if you like the sport of politics today in the UK and the USA, you will love Israel. What a mess! It's called the Holy Land, but it really is a holy mess and it always has been that way! Four thousand years of political turmoil in a little strip of arid land about the size of the State of New Jersey.

Hebrew is essential to appreciating the current Israeli political moment! If you are a Biblical scholar, you might be reminded of a phrase from the story of creation, "tohu v'vohu," "unformed and void." The Greeks would have called it Chaos -- primeval, primordial chaos in which the state of nature is randomly cruel, impossible to tame and relentlessly oppressive. It's a mess.

Or, if you are modern, perhaps the Hebrew term "balagan" might work for you. Balagan also means chaos but in a less theological way. The kind of chaos you might find if you left your teenagers in charge of your house for a weekend without any adult supervision. You know all those rules on fraternization, drinking, loud music and alike that you work to enforce all year long. As they say in Brooklyn, "forget about it," it's going to be a Balagan, a real mess.

Some background is in order. Israel held elections last April. It seemed that Benny Gantz of the new Blue and White party was headed to the premiership. But then the Knesset, Israel's parliament, did the unthinkable, they dissolved, they prorogated just like the British Parliament did over Brexit and forced a snap election which just took place on September 17, 2019. The results were amazingly tight and there is no clear path to form a government. Almost everyone agrees they don't want a third election in Israel in one year, but to date, no one is able to form a government.

There are a number of complicating factors. The leaders of the two main parties, Blue and White and Likud, can barely sit in the same room together, moreover, Netanyahu needs to stay in power to retain immunity in his upcoming court cases.

It is also true that the majority of Israelis would like to see the religious parties out of the government but it is hard to form a coalition without them and few Israeli Jews want the Arab parties which represent 2 of Israel's 9 million person population in the government. In other words, Israel is faced with a political stalemate, a Gordian knot, without a solution.

What is so remarkable about the current state of politics in Israel is that it is not about the big questions the Jewish state is facing. It is not about Jerusalem or the settlements. It is not about Iran. It is not about the Arabs or BDS. It is not even about the , although issues like the high cost of housing continue to simmer on the back burner.

First and foremost, the big question in Israeli politics today is the future of Bibi Netanyahu. Netanyahu is a highly controversial figure in Israel with a near cult like following in Likud. He also has numerous political enemies on the right and left, especially among secular Israelis.

The number one question in Israeli politics is Bibi Netanyahu. If he was the subject of a musical, there would need to be a song titled "How do solve a problem like Netanyahu, how do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?"

Who is Bibi? We here in Cheltenham, PA have a special interest in Mr. Netanyahu because he lived here and graduated from Cheltenham High School. Every report I have ever heard about him depicts him as brilliant, athletic, serious, and an Israeli patriot. His family belonged to Temple Judea which later merged with KI. Later in life, he was influenced by the Lubavticher rebbe and the Chabad movement, although he remained a secular Jew.

Netanyahu skipped High School graduation on Rices Mill Road so he could join the Israeli Army, literally days before the six day war. His brother, Yonathan, was the hero of Entebbe, His father was a leading Jewish scholar, taught at the old Dropsie College and was part of Israel's right wing political aristocracy. Bibi Netanyahu himself was a genuine war hero and studied at MIT earning both a BS and an MS. He had a brief career in the private sector along with Mitt Romney.

His flawless Philadelphia English helped him succeed as a long term Israeli diplomat at the UN and in Washington. In the early 1990s, he emerged as the leader of the Likud party and in 1996 was elected Prime Minister of Israel, the first native born Israeli to hold that post. Rabin was born in British Palestine. For years, he battled in the trenches of Israeli politics trying to keep himself as a "right of center" politician, sometimes angering his more right wing colleagues.

Raised as a right wing Revisionist, Netanyahu took great exception to Pres Obama's outreach to the Muslim world and resisted Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's efforts at implementing a two state solution. At one point, he made the argument that the idea of the Holocaust was given to Hitler by the Mufti of Jerusalem, a view strongly rejected by the German government which did not want the world to think it was seeking absolution.

Ten years ago in September, 2009, Netanyahu gave a powerful speech at the UN challenging the world to block Iran's attempt to become a nuclear power. It became the cornerstone of his foreign policy. Simultaneously, he increased his support of the settlement movement, especially in the area around Jerusalem. He led the Israeli government during Operation Protective Edge in the Gaza Strip and increasingly limited what he meant when he endorsed the idea of a two state solution to the point where there is now doubt Israel will ever agree to a full Palestine State in the West Bank.

To create his fourth government, he broadened his coalition to include far right and ultra religious parties who sat uneasily together because of differences over draft exemptions from the Israeli army. To curry favor with the settlers, he recently promised to annex the Jordan Valley and a number of major settlement blocks. This shift toward the settlers energized Israeli Arabs to vote in increased numbers to block Netanyahu despite his efforts to suppress the Arab vote.

At the same time, he obfuscated agreements with the Reform and Conservative movements in Judaism about their access to prayer areas at the Western wall. Netanyahu's 2015 speech before the American Congress further alienated him from progressive American Jews. He became closely aligned with the policies of President Trump. Although President Trump moved the American embassy to Jerusalem and recognized Israeli control of the Golan to the delight of most Israelis, he also announced a willingness to meet with Iranian officials two weeks before the most recent Israeli election and then fired John Bolton with whom Netanyahu shared many basic views. Remarkably, the Israeli press, including the Jerusalem Post, angrily suggested Trump's moves cost Netanyahu a clear mandate in the recent elections.

Beginning in 2017, Netanyahu became the target of three Israeli police investigations, including cases 1000, 2000 and 4000. The 1st has to do with general financial matters, the middle with inappropriate relations with the Israeli press and the 3rd with bribery. Remarkably, the Likkud party voted it would continue to support Netanyahu even if he had to serve as Prime Minister from jail. Charges of corruption provided fuel for his political opponents. Bibi and the Attorney General continue to negotiate the scheduling of his court appearance.

Although Benny Gantz's Blue and White Party received more votes than Netanyahu's Likkud, Likkud has more partners. Thus, the President of Israel, Reuven Rivlin, has asked Netanyahu to form a fifth government including a rotating premiership with Gantz. Although the majority of Israelis, about 2/3 want a unity government,

Gantz is unlikely to agree to work with Netanyahu. As of yesterday, a small majority of Israeli, about 52% want Netanyahu to step down and allow a different Likud leader to take his place and work with Gantz. No one knows if that will happen. If it does, it will usher in the post-Netanyahu era in Israeli politics a defining moment in 21st Century Jewish History.

A unity government would have enough votes to govern effectively. It would also remove the religious parties from the government and discount the Arab vote. In my view, excluding the Arabs who make up 20% of the population from the government of Israel is likely, but ultimately problematic. Israel's Declaration of Independence calls on its Arab citizens to fully participate in Israeli democracy but it is not a simple matter. Israelis call Arab citizens "Arab Israelis" but the Arabs call themselves "Palestinian citizens of Israel." Netanyahu has stated he will only serve a Zionist government without Arabs. The Israeli Arab themselves are unified against Netanyahu but there is also no scenario available at present which bring the Arab list into the next Israeli government, even if led by Gantz.

A truly radical proposal has been forwarded by the Soviet born leader of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, Avigdor Lieberman. Lieberman is against including the religious parties in the government, cannot stand Netanyahu and has proposed that Israel swap territory with a future Palestine in which areas in Israel's north which have an Arab majority become part of an Arab state and Jewish areas in the West Bank be annexed by Israel. Crazy, unlikely but creative.

Because we do not know, nor can we predict, the final outcome of the Israeli elections, we also cannot assess the impact of a new Israeli government on Israeli-American relations. For example, at present it is unclear what will happen between the United States and Iran. Anti-Iranism was a keystone of the Trump-Netanyahu worldview. Iran is deeply embedded in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. Both directly

and through proxies, Iran has the capacity to take devastating aggressive action against Israel.

It is also difficult to figure out where Israel fits in with respect to the US-Saudi-Sunni alliance. Numerous Sunni Arab countries, beginning with Jordan have rejected normalizing relations with Israel although there is evidence of growing economic cooperation between Israel and several Arab countries. This November, I plan to visit Morocco and learn more about the dynamics of this critical area of development.

We also cannot assess the potential success of the Trump-Kushner peace plan. Its roll out has been slow and uneven. The recent resignation of Jason Greenblatt, the plan's special envoy, may have been a significant setback as well. So far, we only know about economic incentives for the Palestinians currently living in the west bank in the plan. The PA, has categorically rejected the plan as lacking any political benefit for them. On the other hand, the PA is weak today and heavily dependent on both Israeli and American support and there is increasing evidence of Hamas making inroads in the West Bank.

Finally, a word about American Jewish-Israeli relations. Under Netanyahu, national level American-Israeli ties have shifted to the right. At the same time, American Jews have largely kept their center and left of center political views. For many, the national shift created concern that American Jews were drifting away from Israel. In my view, that is only true of the far left in the American Jewish community, not to be confused with liberals, progressives, centrists and social moderates. Today, there is an urgent need for “panim el panim” programs which directly link American Jews and their Israeli counterparts, unfiltered by corporate style philanthropic concerns.

I deeply believe American Jews and Israeli Jews need one another. We need Israel to anchor our Jewishness. Israelis need us to anchor their democratic values. The

politics of the moment, the political balagan of the US, the UK and Israel, all drive us apart when, in fact, what we need is to be brought together. Given zoom and Facebook and online streaming, we should be much closer to one another where it counts, at home, in our Hebrew schools, in the private dimension, and perhaps, even in business.

In my view, as much as we need to slug it out over politics and embrace the reform approach to social justice, we also need a movement for Tikkun am Yisrael, a movement to heal the Jewish people, to reunite us as a global community, to be a Keneseth Israel, a Jewish people which embraces one another over the generations and across the time zones and cultures. We need to go beyond the balagan of the moment, to bring order to the *tohu v'vohu* of our times and reunite.

May we have the courage, wisdom and strength we need as a world Jewish community in the 5780.

Amen.

"Antisemitism and Jewish Spiritual Resistance"

Erev Yom Kippur - 2019/5780

Tuesday, October 8, 2019

Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, Ph.D.

In preparation for Yom Kippur this year, I visited the special Auschwitz exhibition at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, Battery Place, in New York City. Months ago, when KI's senior staff selected Tikkun Olam, "repair of the world," as this year's theme for the new year, 5780, I decided that I would address contemporary anti-Semitism tonight, on Kol Nidrei, as symptomatic of what is broken in our world today and in need of Tikkun Olam.

As all of us know, there has been a precipitous spike in violent anti-Semitism during the last two years, resulting in the most lethal attack on American Jews in our 365 year old community on this continent. I needed to dig in deep into my topic and I thought the Museum exhibition might provide me with insights and direction. I was not disappointed. If you want to see "Auschwitz: Not Long Ago, Not Far Away," it will be on view until January 2, 2020.

The exhibition came to New York from the Arte Canal Exhibition Centre in Madrid, Spain where over 600,000 people saw it. A huge display, the Auschwitz exhibition requires three full floors to present its more than 700 original objects, 400 contemporaneous photographs and a wide array of original pieces of art. More than 20 institutions and museums around the world contributed materials.

While the topic of Auschwitz is timeless, the timing of this exhibition was specific and purposeful. January 27, 2020 will mark the 75th liberation of the largest and deadliest death camp by Soviet troops. It also marks the beginning of five months of similar commemorations ending with the observance of VE Day on May 8, 2020.

We know that 75th anniversaries of milestone historic events are highly significant as the number of direct participants is almost at its natural end. Just as we observed the 75th anniversary of D-Day last June and the beginning of the end of Nazi, Germany, so too we must mark the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the world's largest city-factory of death where over one million Jews alone perished between 1940 and 1945.

As you know, I am not a stranger to the topic of Auschwitz. After seeing the 1993 movie Schindler's List, I decided I had to go to see it myself. My opportunity came when I was invited to present a paper at an academic conference at the Jagelonian University in nearby Krakow, Poland. I had determined that the first time I would visit Auschwitz, I wanted to do it alone. I knew it was going to be an overwhelming experience. At the time in the 90's, Liz and our kids were away at summer camp. It was time for me to go to Poland.

In general, I have strong reactions to historical places. Especially places where catastrophic events took place or to battlefields where there was tremendous loss of life. Every time I go to Gettysburg, I am overwhelmed by the fields, the graves and the markers which tell the story of the Civil War's watershed moment. It is like the hinge in our country's history. What happened at Gettysburg, changed the course of our natural history.

Similarly, the first time I saw the coast of Israel in 1969 from an El Al plane, I was deeply moved. Although only 15, I felt the force of generations of the Jewish people longing to see what I was witnessing, literally flow through me at 15,000 feet. It was a transformational moment I will never forget.

But nothing prepared me for visiting Auschwitz. It was a brutally hot day in rural Poland. I signed up with a day tour and travelled 50 miles with a small group of non-English speaking strangers. First, we went to Auschwitz I, the original camp with its

brick buildings, visitors' center and powerful onsite museum. Then it was back in the van and across the infamous railroad tracks to Birkenau, the main camp whose iconic gate has become a symbol of the Holocaust. Under a blazing sun, we walked to the end of the tracks inside the camp where hundreds of thousands of prisoners arrived, were separated with an inordinate number of them being sent directly to their deaths in the gas chambers.

At the end of those tracks, my head swirled and my stomach got sick. Like the tornado in the Wizard of Oz, images from across the centuries of Jewish history spun in my head. I fought to remain conscious, dropped to ground and threw up my breakfast. It had hit me that the place where I had fallen had been chosen to be the final place of the entire Jewish people since Abraham and Sarah. No Jew was meant to survive that place and only a few did. Ultimately, all 11 million Jews within Hitler's reach were to be annihilated. The Nazi goal was to remove from the world of every last double helix of Jewish DNA and there I was, on the ground, in the middle of the world's largest Jewish cemetery.

I really did not expect to learn anything new about Auschwitz at the Museum of American Jewish History, only to be reminded and hopefully moved by the exhibition. But I was wrong. I did learn something new. 75 years ago on the morning of September 17, 1944 a dying Jew who had secretly brought a shofar into the death camp, blasted out a Tekiah in the city of death. It was an incredible, inspiring act of spiritual resistance I am still trying to process.

The Baal Tekiah handed off the shofar to another prisoner and laborer, Chaskell Tydor, who not only survived Auschwitz but was able to hold on to the shofar. He later entrusted it to his daughter, Prof Judith Tydor Schwartz, a distinguished professor of Jewish history at Bar Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel. 10 days before Rosh HaShana this year, 20 days ago, the Auschwitz shofar was presented to the Museum to be displayed in its area illustrating various acts of spiritual resistance, Jewish and Christian, at Auschwitz during the Holocaust.

Holocaust experts and historians of Auschwitz were quick to authenticate the story. That had been reports. Now the Shofar of Auschwitz could be shared with the world.

It is correct to say, in my opinion, that the sound of the Shofar is the primordial sound of the Jewish people. No other sound symbolizes our tradition more. Our powerful presentation of the Shofar here at KI is unique, but not an exception to the rule.

The sound of the Shofar, is the voice of the Jewish people rising above all the generations of our people. It is sound that accompanied the soldiers at the Western Wall in June of 1967. It is now the sound which rises from the ashes of the crematoria to proclaim, like the Jewish resistance fighters of Poland, “mir zi-nen dah,” we are here in Yiddish,; we are still here in English, “anachnu po” in Hebrew, “nous sommes la” in French, in every language Jews speak across the world today.

Anti-Semitism is as old as the Jewish people. The Torah teaches that it began with Amalek, the rear guard murderous attackers of the Exodus in the days of Moses and Miriam. Historians have speculated that the rise of Israelite monotheism in the 8th century BCE was irksome to the polytheists of the time, who not only believed in many gods but were quick to absorb gods of other people into their own pantheon. The Jews alone, the theory goes, insisted that their single deity was the only god in heaven and were detested for their apparent religious exclusivism.

With the rise of Christianity and the age old charge that the Jews were guilty of the death of Christ, a new and fierce aspect of anti-Semitism appeared. In early Christianity, the Jews were a criminal class whose behavior toward and rejection of Jesus of Nazareth was symptomatic of their criminal nature. The synagogue, the Book of Revelations states, is a cult of Satan.

Over the centuries, vicious state and church based persecution of the Jews were derived from these teachings. Expulsions, blood libels, crusades, the Inquisition, auto-de-fes, public blasphemy trials and more, afflicted the Jews of Christendom. It was not until the rise of an interfaith movement in modern times, parallel critical Biblical studies and Vatican II that Christian anti-Semitism was broadly challenged.

Islam, at least in theory, was kinder. It called the Jews “the people of the Book,” Am Ha Sefer, and respected Jewish monotheism and Israelite prophecy. Under Islam, the Jews officially became a protected people. But there were also counter traditions and memories of the Prophet Mohammed’s violent encounters with the Jewish tribes of Arabia. In Moorish Spain, Jews enjoyed a Golden Age but also were subject to persecution and forced conversion.

In Europe, at the dawn of modernity, a great debate raged as to whether or not Jews could become acculturated citizens of the new nation state. Will a Jew always remain a Jew, longing to return to the Holy Land, or can they become Frenchmen, Germans, Italians and Americans of the Jewish faith? Many enlightened states, beginning with the United States, said yes, but with the rise of race based anti-Semitism late in the 19th century, it seemed to many in the Jewish community that Jews would never be accepted among the people.

The answer: either overthrow the old regime and bring in a new post-national world order under the guise of Socialism or embrace Jewish nationalism, and recreate the Jews as a nation among the nations. To a great extent, Zionism was conceived and is still supported as the antidote to modern anti-Semitism and the need for a safe haven for Jews among the nations under Jewish political leadership and protected by a Jewish military.

Tragically, the seed or weed of racial anti-Semitism did not abate but instead grew and ultimately swallowed up Germany and Austria. Unlike in medieval religious anti-Judaism, conversion out of Judaism did not solve the Jewish problem in racial anti-Semitism. The term anti-Semitism itself, coined in 1860, was originally specifically racial in orientation but came to include all forms of animus against Jews and Judaism.

Jews, the new argument went, would always be Jews and no amount of education or biological dilution in the wake of mixed marriage could take the Jewishness out of the Jew. Quarantine, the Nazis concluded, wasn't safe enough. Somehow the villainous Jewish DNA would find its way into Aryan bloodstreams. The only answer was total annihilation or what became known as "genocide," a term invented by a Jewish officer in the Pentagon who, at the time, was working on the post-war prosecution of the Nazi High command. Auschwitz is not only the symbol but the core agent in the Nazi's war to exterminate the Jewish people, the Final Solution of the Jewish problem, but it is the supreme example of modern, industrialized state-sponsored genocide. [pause]

Today, scholars of the history of anti-Semitism also talk about another form of anti-Semitism -- political anti-Semitism, the belief that the Jewish people do not have a right to a national homeland with their own political autonomy. Embraced by elements both in various religious and secular sectors of society, today political anti-Semitism is closely associated with anti-Zionism. Anti-Zionists try to argue they are not against either Jews or Judaism, only Israel. But their arguments tend to be thinly veiled as was recently argued in an extensive UN report on the anti-Semitic aspects of the BDS movement.

Israel is the home of the largest Jewish community, not in the world, but in the history of the Jewish people. To dismantle or destroy Israel, the goal of anti-Zionism, would be a catastrophe for the Jewish people and potentially as deadly as the Holocaust itself. While there is, of course, room to take issue with Israeli policies, to take

exception to the existence of Israel itself is a view of a different order and, in my view, categorically and deeply anti-Semitic.

What about anti-Semitism in the United States? How widespread is it? How deep is it? To what extent are the different modalities of Old World anti-Semitism rooted in the soil of the New World? Can one apply American exceptionalism to anti-Semitism in this society? Is America different? Is there a limit to anti-Semitism in this country or is just a matter of time, the economy and political circumstances before American anti-Semitism becomes indistinguishable from Polish anti-Semitism, French anti-Semitism or German anti-Semitism?

On the one hand, we have powerful cultural symbols that America is different, that American exceptionalism is real, but on the other hand, we also have recent events like Charlottesville and Pittsburgh which suggest that the cancer called anti-Semitism has the capacity to metastasize and take root on these shores just like it has everywhere else in history.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC is a remarkable statement about American exceptionalism. Built in 1993 adjacent to the National Mall, the Museum has welcomed nearly 40 million visitors. One educated guess is less than 10% of those visitors are Jewish. About 40% of its \$130 million budget is from public funds. Most of all, it seemingly contextualizes the American war to defeat Nazism as a national expression of American anti-“anti-Semitism.” I don’t believe there is a parallel national museum in any country, except Israel’s Yad v’Shem in Jerusalem.

Equally dramatic is the location and architecture of the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York. If you are familiar with the floor plan of the Museum of Jewish History in New York, you know that the exhibition ends with a spectacular Hudson River view of the Statute of Liberty and Ellis Island. At the end of my recent tour of the

exhibit, I was struck by the sight of those American symbols. The museum's planners had clearly framed in a way to make the statement that America really is different, that anti-Semitism is inherently foreign to the American way of life.

Indeed, much of American history supports this view. From its beginning, the United States has embraced Jews more fully than other minorities. Although not every one of the original thirteen states gave Jews full political equality, Jews have successfully fought for full legal enfranchisement in the United States. In 1862, when General Grant ordered the expulsion of all Jews from the Department of Tennessee, the order was almost immediately reversed by President Lincoln. There would be no Jewish "Trail of Tears" in America.

By contrast, starting after the Civil War, anti-Semitism intensified across the United States. Restrictive covenants became commonplace. Jews were banned from clubs, neighborhoods and entire industries. Xenophobic, anti-immigrant legislation was focused, although not exclusively, on Jews after World War I. Those extreme laws blocked a significant escape route for Jews in Hitler's Europe during the 1930s and early 1940s, a legal obstacle greatly reinforced by FDR's icy indifference to the plight of European Jewry. Indeed, it wasn't until after World War II with the rise of the suburbs and the Civil Right movement that American Anti-Semitism began to decline. By the end of the 20th century, American anti-Semitism had largely become anemic and the rate of mixed marriage soared as social barriers between Jews and non-Jews disappeared.

Of course, there was the neo-Nazism and KKK movements of the 1950s and 60s. Black nationalism had a virulent anti-Semitic feel to it and leaders like Louis Farrakhan were openly and viciously anti-Jewish. It seemed that anti-Semitism was moving further and further to the edge of American society.

The peace was shattered in August, 2017 in Charlottesville, VA when a spectrum of extreme right wing, racist and White nationalist groups converged on that city. The eerie site of American neo-Nazis marching with tiki torches and shouting “the Jews will not replace us” was deeply alarming, although not entirely unprecedented. The cry, "The Jews will not replace us," is a reference to a conspiracy theory that Jews were pushing immigration to America with the goal of removing its white population from power.

Then, the unthinkable happened in America. On Saturday morning, October 27, 2018, just one year ago, a shooter burst into Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life synagogue, killing eleven members of the congregation. It was the worst violence against American Jews in the entire history of the country. In response, American Jews rallied across the country. This sanctuary completely filled with people across the community in protest to the violence and in solidarity with the victims.

Synagogues were compelled to rethink their security plans. Do we need armed guards? What kind of drills do we need to evacuate people from our buildings? Do we need barricades to block the main entrances to our shuls, electronic surveillance, and other dramatic measures? Something had changed. Our previous utopian existence of lightly guarded buildings and unlocked front doors at JCCs and synagogues was gone.

Beyond the tactical measures, deeper questions intensified? Was America changing fundamentally? Is the idea of exceptionalism delusional? Are our national leaders culpable for not speaking out more clearly? Are some of our leaders, especially the current President, purposefully or unwittingly fanning the flames of hatred? Why are incidents of anti-Semitic vandalism and street level violence dramatically rising across the country to record setting levels? [pause]

In my opinion, there can be no question that something has changed in America and that anti-Semitism is on the rise! What would happen if the economy took a dramatic turn for the worse? Didn’t the oil crises of the 1970s already demonstrate that,

at best, anti-Semitism in America is basically a light sleeper, easily awoken and dangerous in its reach and fury?

For sure, we need to be increasingly vigilant and we must take the current rise in anti-Semitism very seriously. But we also need to do something else. What good are secure but empty synagogues? How are we to educate the rest of society about Judaism and Jewish traditions when the Jewish community itself is broadly illiterate about its faith? Except among the Orthodox, Judaism in America is in decline. The number of young Jews learning about Judaism is dropping? Fiscal support of Jewish causes is shrinking among boomers and Millennials. In poll after poll, American Jews maintain that the Holocaust is central to their Jewish identity but then do less and less when it comes to living an informed, meaningful Jewish life and thereby imperil the Jewish future in this country to a greater extent than any expression of anti-Semitism.

Already in the 1960s, Jewish scholars began talking about a bloodless Holocaust in America. Millions of American Jews are falling away from our tradition. Many view it as irrelevant or unimportant. Judaism, which for thousands of years and hundreds of generations, had provided Jews with spiritual sustenance, was increasingly a distant reality, limited to bagels and dancing the Hora at weddings.

Or is Judaism in America itself a light sleeper, ready to be roused by the sound of the Shofar? When I stood, unexpectedly, in front of the Shofar of Auschwitz in New York, chills ran down my spine. What an incredible act of spiritual resistance, the proud voice of the Jewish spirit rising above the city of death. Can that clarion call still awaken our community? Are American Jews spiritually asleep, comatose or dead?

On this Yom Kippur, let us resolve to re-embrace our faith and to overcome the widespread indifference and detachment which is threatening the viability of our community in the United States. Anti-Semitism is a real problem today in America but it is not our biggest problem. Our biggest problem is us. We can be a better community

than we are. Certainly, in this house we are working diligently to live, teach and transmit Judaism in our time and for the future.

We are part of the spiritual Jewish resistance necessary to preserve our tradition on these shores. May the sound of the Shofar awaken in us both the courage to counter the anti-Semitism and, equally important, to strengthen the conviction that Judaism matters, that it should play a central role of our lives. The only safe Judaism in America is a living Judaism. The decision is ours. We can breathe life into our Judaism or we can let it die on the vine. Dead synagogues do not need security and living synagogues are unafraid.

Tekiah! Awaken! This is our moment of truth as a community. Now or never. Forge the links with the generations before and after us, or snap the chain of tradition.

Shevarim! It is for us to repair the brokenness of Judaism in modern times.

Teruah! An alarm has been sounded from the city of death.

Tekiah Gedolah! Move forward into the future with determination, pride and love.

May the year ahead be blessed with health, happiness, security and a renewal of Jewish spirit.

Amen

"Tikkun Olam and Me... A Social Justice Journey"

Yom Kippur Morning ~ 2019/5780

Wednesday, October 9, 2019

Rabbi Stacy Eskovitz Rigler, MAJE

This sermon draws heavily from ideas I learned at the Undoing Racism training from the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond and the resources they suggested I read ahead of time including:

- [Stamped from the Beginning](#): The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America by Ibram X. Kendi
- Seeing White (podcast series) (<https://www.sceneonradio.org/seeing-white/>)
- [I am Not Your Negro](#) (Full length film)
- "[Deconstructing White Privilege](#)" 20 min video by Robin DiAngelo, or other videos from her here: <https://robindiangelo.com/media/> or this 15 page article: <https://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/viewFile/249/116>
- It was not out yet when I attended the workshop but also referenced in this sermon is the [1619 project](#)

Additionally referenced is [Antisemitism Here and Now](#) by Deborah Lipstadt

Once upon a time there was a town. In that town there were lots of good, caring people, who raised their children to care about the world around them – their own version of Tikkun Olam. One day, as members of the town were out for a walk by the river they saw a person had fallen into the river from upstream. Thank goodness the people of the town were nearby and they pulled the person out of the river. The person was rescued and the town was relieved.

A few days later, another person fell down the river by chance a good person from downstream was nearby and able to pull the helpless individual out of harm's way.

“What if it happened again?, the townspeople wondered. They couldn’t stand by and wait. Let’s do something, they said. So they stationed a guard to keep watch. A third person fell down the river, and then a fourth and a fifth person. A town meeting was held. There were those that wanted to help, and others concerned that there were too many problems within the town. We have people who are sick, people who are dying here. We can do both, others exclaimed! Everyone saw the need to give a little more. As the weeks passed more people fell down the river, more rescues, more worries. Until one day someone said – Let’s go up the river and find out why everyone is falling.

This is the work of social justice. Each year I travel to the L’Taken Seminar of the Religious Action Center with our high school students in Washington, DC. On Friday night, my friend and colleague shares this story. He explains to the teens that they can learn about legislation, advocating for bills on Capitol Hill, these teens and make a difference.

Social Action is when you work to help people, Social Justice is when you find out why they need help.

Last October, Rabbi Sussman asked me to serve as the clergy liaison to our Social Justice Task force. I readily agreed and, without knowing it, set myself on a year long journey up the river. I delved into learning about social justice, learning about those doing this work in our congregation, and learning about Philadelphia’s local grassroots efforts, including an organization called Power doing work here in suburbs. Today I will share with you this journey and what I learned along the way. I will talk about how I discovered that all social justice in America is rooted in anti-Racism work, I will share questions that emerged for me about modern anti-Semitism, And I will explain why this is at the core of Tikkun Olam and Yom Kippur.

As I share my story, I am conscious that members of our congregation have already taken this journey, and others were born on this journey, We are all at different stages in our learning and growth.

I am also aware that the topics of racism and anti-Semitism can be deeply uncomfortable. some of my words may invite defensive feelings or triggers. I hope those impulses can be lessened on this Yom Kippur morning.

We just finished the haftarah from Isaiah which reminds us that the meaning our fast today is to break the bonds of injustice. So let us begin that challenging work...

It was the Thursday afternoon of President's weekend, we met at the airport to fly to Atlanta. Excitement and anticipation were racing through me as 30 KI 6th and 7th graders, their parents, and a Mitzvotainu mentor and spouse, along with my own husband and sixth grade son gathered at the airport. For years I wanted to take a group of students on the Etgar 36 social justice trip. We landed in Atlanta, had dinner, and gathered in the only conference room at the Holiday Inn express.

Our guide, Josh, began explaining the Jim Crow South. He spoke about how hierarchy could be maintained using both laws and terror. He wanted us to understand that racism wasn't only about laws, it was about systems of power and social order. He wanted to teach about fear, and hope, and how people can make a difference.

Friday morning we drove to Montgomery, Alabama where we visited the Rosa Parks Museum. Josh asked a few questions to get us started. Picture Rosa Parks he said. Who thinks Rosa was old? Who thinks Rosa was tired? Who thinks Rosa was sitting in the front row of the bus? She was not elderly, and she was not tired of standing, she was tired of being pushed down. She was sitting in the middle of the bus, in the assigned section when she refused to move. Josh wanted us to understand the myths that fed into the mythology.

From the Rosa Parks museum we went to the Equal Justice Institute. Months earlier, I had read Bryan Stevenson's book *Just Mercy*. I knew about the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and was anxious to visit the site. I was completely unprepared. The museum's goal is to lead the visitor on the path from slavery to racial oppression, highlighting the unique roles of lynching and mass incarceration. There were stories of former prisoners, maps with the locations of lynching sites, and recreated slave pens with piercing cries echoing out of the wall.

I'd never seen anything like this, displaying in such detail the original sin of America. Coming into town we drove past the water where the slave boats floated ashore, past the buildings which held people like animals, it all took place right here. It was then, as my thoughts were racing, a student came up to me.

Why didn't they teach us this? He said with what looked like a tear in his eye. How come I'm just learning all of this now? How come we didn't know. Just a few weeks earlier his mom had said to me, good luck taking all these sixth grade boys with you. But now, here he was, this fun loving, silly, sixth grade boy, looking at me with all the pain in the world and piercing my heart. I don't know... I said. How come they didn't teach us? How come I never learned. I had failed to learn about the country I inhabit. I had failed to be an educator.

In order to teach my students about the history of oppression in America
I needed to learn more.

In order to be an advocate for empathy and understanding,
I wanted to learn more.

I had to unpack the myths, re-examine what I had studied in school.

Our founders established America on the idea of a more perfect union,

providing a framework for continued revelation. Each new generation continued the expansion of rights and freedoms. This story is true, but also incomplete.

Nikole Hannah-Jones, in the 1619 Project in the New York Times, explains, the decision to found a democracy for the people, while at the same time declaring that some people are not fully human, cemented a future of separation and degradation that continually under mines our founding principles.

In the early 1700s America's elite landowners developed laws designed to maintain their power and privilege and fuel agriculture. At that time there were both European and African slaves. Afraid of the alliances between them, the Virginia Legislature took steps to divide the power and codify, for the first time, the concept we now call race. Our constitution adopted and preserved these vicious and inhumane power structures for 250 years.

In the 1800's science had its turn, with some of the most damaging work done right here in Philadelphia. Races and classifications of humans were invented with little consistency or merit. Racism wasn't about hatred, bigotry, or separation. The need for people and land to fuel the American colonial enterprise influenced the laws. Science then confused the issues. Inequity, cruelty, and violence infected American society. Coming up against few barriers, the view that some people had rights and others were not fully human, infested the country and spread. The treatment of Native Americans and New Americans, of those discriminated against because of their religion, gender or sexual identity, all are rooted in our greatest national sin. Emancipation did not end this systemic white power. Even when the civil rights movement shone a spotlight on the widespread injustice and terror, policies were changed but the work of undoing racism barely began.

The myth I clung to was that the solution to racism was to do acts of *gimilut chasadim* and to live with love in our hearts. I thought there was power in teaching against prejudice and fighting for diversity.

I was wrong. My confusion is best clarified by Ibram Kendi in his foundational book “Stamped from the beginning”, he writes: It is not that ignorant and hateful people had produced racist ideas, and that these racist people had instituted racist policies.

It has actually been the inverse relationship—racial discrimination and policies led to racist ideas which led to ignorance and hate. Rooting out hate and teaching against ignorance alone cannot undo the way the society that invented race, is taught to see people of color.

Love and acceptance does not provide a path for those in power to see their own privilege and its social impacts. People seen as white, had privilege, access and wealth Giving that up would not come easily for us. Kendi, goes further in his second book Either you are a racist, or you are an anti-racist.

It was so true - as a white person I had power, but I wasn't using it.

I had privilege, but I wasn't conscious of it.

I had absorbed a myth around being color blind and, by default, was a racist.

In the story of the town full of good people, I was a good person. I stood at the river and helped rescue people. I taught children about why we rescue people. I also led trips up the river to ask about what the town upstream was doing and why people in the town were falling.

None of this is the story I now understand as social justice. There are not two towns. I believed a myth. Social justice begins when we look at our society and ask why are some people at the top of the river falling and others at the bottom trying to save. Social justice begins when we understand the power dynamics. Social justice begins when we ask why we see two separate towns and not one community.

I had learned more about our country, and more about social justice.

As I did, I wondered what was my role, as an American and a Jew,

In the work of Anti-Racism?

In the late fall and early winter of last year I began getting to know the members of the Social Justice task force here at KI and the work they were doing to educate the congregation around areas of concern for us, as Jews, At the same time I had reached out to Power, a local grassroots organizing group that worked in an interfaith context. An organization recommended to me at a recent trip for clergy Sponsored by the Religious Action Center.

Through the encouragement of the Religious Action Center and Power we held listening sessions where we asked stakeholders in our community and members of the social justice task force where they witnessed injustice. We brought these issues to the first meeting of the Eastern Montco suburban Power group. Our KI members and our neighbors focused on food insecurity and education, gun violence and immigration reform, We looked at who could vote in our democracy and who felt safe in our community. And we talked about anti-Semitism.

Power rooted its approach in anti-Racist work. It was Will, the community organizer that works with power that sent me to the “Undoing Racism” workshop to which I could attribute much of my learning. I wondered how the committee would respond to the focus on racism.

It seemed to me wherever someone brought up racism, someone else raised their hand and asked what about anti-Semitism? It is understandable that members of the Jewish community empathize with other victims of targeted persecution. The language around racism and anti-Semitism is confusing, given our enemies fictional assertion that our religion constituted a race. I started to question the intersection of Anti-Semitism and Racism in America?

I discussed my questions with Rabbi Sussman. I had learned that when Europeans sought to take the historic Anti-Judaism to an extreme, they merged it with the distorted eugenic theories invented in America. Those theories were then used to

eradicate our culture and so many others. The horrors of 1619 spread throughout America and across the oceans. Racism and Modern Anti-Semitism were grown from the same Petrie dish.

I also turned to my professor, Deborah Lipstadt, and her book *Anti-Semitism Here and Now*. She too links Anti-Semitism in America with white supremacy. All attempts to divide and dehumanize puts us at risk. As both Lipstadt and Rabbi Sussman have explained, we need only listen carefully to the chants in Charlottesville to hear the conflation of racism and Anti-Semitism. We need not wonder which injustice to focus on, there is no single stream of oppression. What Lipstadt also explains is that in America those Jews that are white have privileges that people of color do not. The majority of us are not victims of regular, systemic, prejudice and discrimination. Today, we are seen as white. That whiteness is provisional, it can be revoked. Still, discounting our privileges and the ability to leverage our power would be ignore the central commandments of Tikkun Olam.

This is as true for anti-Semitism on the political left as well. That anti-Semitism, sometimes called anti-Zionism, is tied up European colonialization and dominance. The Jews are the white oppressors of brown skinned Arabs in the land of Israel. Both forms of anti-Semitism emerge from the sins of colonialism. When we work for an America that promises liberty and justice for all, we create a society where justice flows like a mighty water.

What is the role of Jews in the work of Anti-Racism? I was now able to answer the question, for the committee and myself. If we are not engaged in the work of anti-racism, we strengthen those who will seek to do us harm.

It seems that the words of the prophets have enduring truths. How does Isaiah tell us to observe Yom Kippur, this holiest of days? By rooting out injustice, by breaking the bonds of slavery.

How do we ensure we are free and safe to worship on these holy days?
By rooting out injustice and breaking the bonds of slavery.

Thinking back to the town, when the people began falling down the river there were those that thought, we have our own problems. Those that worried about the sick and dying people in their own town. No one considered that it could be the same things making people sick and making people fall down the river. No one considered the deep connections along the river. They had responded, but didn't grasp their collective responsibility.

This year I learned about the roots of injustice in our country.
This year I deepened relationships with KI members and neighbors
As together we research where people feel injustice in our local community.

Today my journey starts again, hopefully if you are not already on this journey, you will join me and our congregation in this work. I hope you will join us in doing this work. Learn more. Read our weekly lessons in EKI and watch or attend services. If you are a teen join our social justice learning group that starts this Sunday. If you are an adult join our social justice committee's book groups. Help us design a day of learning on MLK weekend focused on diversity, equity and inclusion. Or share with me your own ideas. Connect with your neighbors.

Our social justice committee is meeting tomorrow night at 7:00. Our local Power group is meeting in early November. This Sunday night, on Erev Sukkot we will deepen our KI relationships by hearing stories from those who immigrated to the United states from our KI community. Stories from Honduras, Jamaica, and the Ukraine. Our 6th graders will visit the south again, our 10th graders will go to Washington. You can help support this work.

Our synagogue has a bold text written outside the sanctuary on Rt 611

for everyone to see Love your neighbor as yourself. It is contained in today's afternoon Torah reading the words at the heart of our sacred Torah text.

What does it mean to Love your Neighbor? At the March on Washington in 1963, former Berlin Rabbi Yochim Printz Speaking before Martin Luther King Jr explained neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity.

Modern scholar Tamar Eskanazi expands on this: To love another is not about feelings, it is about actions. To love another in the Torah is how we build a just society.

A year ago I decided to go on a journey but I didn't know where to start. I thought it was upstream, but I was wrong. What I needed was to understand how little I knew and to educate myself. What I needed was to find a group of like minded neighbors To figure out how to build relationships and learn more about our community. What I needed was to heed Isaiah's call, to release the bonds of injustice, to undo the chains of slavery, What I needed was to lean in to my community and our resources. So that on this Yom Kippur I am able to stand before God and humbly say Pitchu LI Shaarei Tzedek – Open the Gates of Justice.

"Tikkun & Mourning"

Yom Kippur Yizkor ~ 2019/5780

Wednesday, October 9, 2019

Rabbi Lance J. Sussman Ph.D.

In his complex, mystical speculations about the origins of the universe, the 16th century rabbi of Tzefat in northern central Israel, Isaac Luria, taught about primordial rays of light filled metaphysical vessels or *Kay-leem*. With creation, some of these vessels shattered and, ultimately, for the redemption of the world to occur, the lost fragments of their light needs to be recovered. Luria called that process "tikkun olam" or the 'repair of the world.'

Nothing brings us closer to Luria's ideas of light, shattered vessels and the 'repair of the world' than the loss of a loved one. We have all had people in our lives who were our sacred rays of light. Both in life and even more, in death, they seemed to glow with holiness. Their deaths, too, were shattering experiences which reordered our lives. The impact of these losses were and remain cosmic. It is up to us, the mourners and the living, to recognize the scattered shards of sacred light left to us by our loved ones.

Viewed from the perspective of loss and mourning, grief and the process of returning to the land of the living, no matter how incomplete, Tikkun Olam is our collective. Light, the shattering of our lives and rebuilding in the face of loss are realities and tasks we share as human beings and Jews.

The Jewish tradition has long appreciated the deep relationship between personal loss and tikkun olam. Already at a funeral of a loved one, we are asked to forgo flowers and instead think about Tzedakah. Tzedakah, we are taught, will perpetuate our loved one's memory by ensuring their highest values continue beyond their own efforts. In our prayers, we read that even in death our loved one's teach us to live as they, in their highest moments, wished to live. We cannot prevent death but we

can strengthen the work of redemption, of tikkun olam, and work for the good of all in the name of our departed.

Like light itself, our loved ones never disappear. They travel through the universe with us in perpetuity. Sometimes, their light is veiled and we feel lost in the shadows of the valley of death and darkness. But then their light returns and re-illuminates our paths for us with perfect clarity. We can see them in our memories as on a sunny day. Their light enables us to see life again from the perspective of love and high purpose.

At this sacred moment, on the holiest day of the year, let us remember our most illuminated moments with our loved ones. Those memories can bring new light, even in our darkest nights.

May we have the strength and the courage to bring a new light to a dark and broken world, so badly in need of redemption and love. In the year ahead, may we be agents of tikkun olam and turn our sadness into love, joy and redemption for humanity.
Amen