

The High Holiday season is a time for individuals to engage in rigorous self-examination, to scrutinize their deeds over the course of the past year, to reflect on their merits and on their lapses and shortcomings, and to resolve that in the year to come they will do better. At this season of judgment, when we are held accountable for our deeds, we pray that God will temper judgment with mercy, taking into consideration both our remorse over past wrongdoing and our determination to avoid such misdeeds in the future.

Our liturgy indicates that this season is not only a time of judgment for the individual but for nations and countries as well. In the Musaf prayer of Rosh Hashanah, we read *v'al ha-medinot bo yei-a-meir*, “this is a day of decree for all nations...which will have peace and which will be plagued by war, which shall enjoy abundance and which will be afflicted with scarcity.” One does not have to take these words of the Machzor literally in order to regard this day as an opportune time for us as citizens to reflect on how we as a country are responding to the manifold challenges we are facing and how we will be judged by our posterity. Are we living up to our professed ideals of justice, freedom and equality? And, in what ways could we be doing better?

Because I am venturing into territory that I know to be contentious and controversial, I offer as a prologue some thoughts and reflections by the Israeli journalist Anshel Pfeffer that appeared in one of his recent columns. He relates that he had been at Israel’s border with Syria to observe the Israel Defense Force’s efforts to bring humanitarian assistance to refugees from Syria’s brutal civil war, in the course of which hundreds of thousands of civilians had been killed. While he was there, the soldiers were visited by a rabbi, who was a member of the IDF’s chaplaincy corps. “Are you here to participate alongside the soldiers in their humanitarian endeavor or to offer them a word of encouragement”, Pfeffer asked. “Oh no”, replied the rabbi, “I’m here to see that the soldiers have properly supervised kosher food.” Pfeffer relates this story as an admonition to those who claim to speak in the name of authentic Jewish values. There is, he contends, no one set of values that can lay claim to Jewish authenticity but rather a multiplicity of diverse values and ideals, complementing each other and, at times, diametrically opposed to each other. For some strict observance of kashrut is a Jewish value of surpassing importance, while for others sheltering refugees and providing them with food and medical assistance is the value that inspires them and impels them to action.

Within the pages of Torah and Talmud are to be found sentiments and laws that align with contemporary sensibilities and give voice to humanitarian and universalistic ideals - loving the stranger, for example, pursuing justice, or providing for the poor. One might also find in those same pages, however, expressions of a more narrow and ethnocentric point of view, a focus on the ritualistic rather than the ethical dimensions of piety, and some truly disturbing passages such as the command to annihilate the Canaanite natives of the land that God has promised to the Israelites.

Please know then that when I speak, I do not claim to do so in the name of “Judaism” or of “Jewish values”, because others with differing views may make the same claim with equal legitimacy. But I do believe that the concerns I express about the political and economic issues of the day reflect both an important strand within the Jewish tradition through the ages as well as lessons learned from the historic experiences of our people. I furthermore believe that it is not improper for a spiritual leader to address such concerns. The rabbis taught that *im eyn kemach, eyn Torah*, if there is no flour with which to bake bread, there can be no Torah either. The realization of spiritual values depends on the members of the community enjoying a decent standard of living, having their basic needs for food, shelter and medical care met, and being freed from the burdens of crushing poverty. The Kotzker rebbe, a Chasidic luminary of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, once said that the reason we have two eyes is to use one to look inward at the condition of our own souls and consider how we might grow spiritually, while employing the other to gaze outwardly on our fellow’s material situation and contemplate how we might contribute to improving it.

We recall as well the prophets of ancient Israel – Amos, Micah, and Isaiah – who denounced greed, vast disparities of wealth and poverty, mindless indulgence in luxuries along with complacent indifference to the fate of the nation, oppression of the poor, miscarriages of justice, and abuses of power committed by the kings of Judah and Israel. We read in our Scriptures of Elijah denouncing King Ahab for the judicial murder of Naboth and the theft of his vineyard and of Nathan condemning King David for committing adultery with Bathsheba and arranging for her husband Uriah to be stationed on the front lines of battle, where he was certain to be killed. Today, the prophets are honored figures within the canon of our sacred writings, but

in their day they were often stigmatized as naysayers and agitators and made to pay a heavy price for their outspokenness.

Individual piety and a personal sense of closeness to God are desirable ideals, but the focus of both Torah and the rabbinic tradition inclines significantly toward the communal. Torah speaks of a collective, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, and prescribes rules for establishing a just society in the Promised Land, among them laws pertaining to the exercise of political power and the distribution and sharing of economic resources. Wherever Jews lived and enjoyed a measure of autonomy, they set up an infrastructure of communal institutions – synagogues, schools, cemeteries, bathhouses, and charities to attend to the needs of the poor, and all of the members of the community were expected to contribute towards their maintenance. A prayer that is part of our Shabbat morning worship asks God’s blessing on those who faithfully occupy themselves with the needs of the community. *Kofin zeh et zeh* – the members of the community are allowed to exert pressure, to compel one another to provide for communal needs -is a phrase that recurs frequently in the rabbinic codes of law in various diverse contexts. The takeaway from this is that as individuals, we do not live entirely for ourselves; we share a responsibility for the common good.

I concede that it is entirely legitimate for individuals or associations within the community to argue for and promote their own interests; this is what democracy is all about. Ideally, out of the mix of diverse and competing interests, we will come closer to the attainment of a just society that affirms the dignity of all of its members and provides equal opportunity and the possibility of a decent life for all. Unfortunately, the ideal now seems farther and farther from the reality. The competition is no longer one between equals, if it ever was. Those who have the most power and wealth are able to deploy their resources in the form of lobbying and political contributions in order to gain a degree of access and influence that is beyond the reach of those of more modest means. Thus, they are able to maintain their position and status, to shape legislation, and to avoid accountability for any negligence and wrongdoing on their part, often to the detriment of those at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale. The recession of 2008, during which banks were deemed too big to fail and were bailed out and those whose greed had been responsible for crashing the economy by and large escaped punishment, is a case in point. The shadow of that recession continues to stalk us and has convinced many of our countrymen that

our economy is a rigged game, in which both political parties, beholden to their big donors, are complicit.

Rabbi Sharon Brous of Los Angeles, in an inspiring TED talk titled *“It’s time to reclaim religion”*, speaks of the interconnectedness of all the members of the community and notes that radical individualism (which hermetically seals us off from each other and from consideration of the common good) benefits only those who have power, including those who use it to oppress others. Elad Nehorai, a blogger of Yemenite background, who combines adherence to Orthodox Jewish practice with political activism, wrote a cogent article about what he labels “the philosophy of selfishness.” He acknowledges that selfishness is a part of human nature that will always be with us. The real problem occurs when, rather than compromising, accommodating, balancing our own self-interest with that of others, we exalt selfishness and elevate it into a virtue. We then come to interpret success, power and well-being as a zero sum game, so that for one individual to win another must lose out, and for one to succeed another must suffer. Nehorai concludes that all of us within society do better when we work together and that equality of opportunity and access allows everyone to prosper.

The Jews of the first Diaspora, those Judeans who had been exiled to Babylonia in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, were advised by the prophet Jeremiah to seek the peace and welfare of the country to which they had been exiled. “Pray to God in its behalf,” the prophet counseled, “since your welfare depend on its well-being.” Jews took Jeremiah’s words to heart. They came to learn that not only was their well-being linked to the general welfare, but that the converse was also true; when times were bad, Jews were likely the first and most convenient group to be scapegoated. Jews continued to pray for their government and its leaders even in places and under regimes where they were not particularly well-treated. Emancipation in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ultimately made Jews in western countries full participants in the culture, society, economy and politics of the larger community, thereby increasing our stake in the general welfare. The current version of the prayer for the nation in our Shabbat prayer book, authored by Professor Louis Ginzberg, invokes God’s blessing on our government and leaders and prays that they might “administer all affairs of state fairly.” The prayer goes on to express the hope that the people of our country of all races, creeds, and ethnic backgrounds might come together in harmony “to banish hatred and bigotry and to safeguard our country’s free institutions.” These are noble

aspirations that provide us with a yardstick by which to measure ourselves at this season of judgment.

And so we ask ourselves: Are we as a nation coming together in harmony? Have hatred and bigotry been banished from our communities and from our public life? Are we providing adequate safeguards for our country's free institutions? As I contemplate my answers to these questions, I find cause for discouragement and concern. And please note, by the way, that the things I find worrisome and disturbing did not pop up overnight and are not attributable to any one individual or administration; they have been developing over a long time.

Our civic harmony has been fractured by hyper-partisanship and political polarization. Politicians eschew compromise and moderation, fearful either that the opposition party will get credit for any resulting positive achievements or that they will face a primary election challenge from a candidate who can pander more successfully to the party's base. Legislative gridlock ensues and has kept us from addressing such serious and longstanding challenges as the opioid addiction crisis, climate change, repair of our crumbling infrastructure, and retraining of workers displaced by offshoring and automation. Among our general population, civility and reasoned dialogue are in short supply with the anonymity of the internet exacerbating the shrillness of the argument.

Hatred and bigotry have never entirely faded away and now they seem to be re-emerging from the shadows. We recall the infamous Charlottesville rally of white supremacists and neo-Nazis that occurred in August of 2017 and note that at least five candidates currently running for office in the November midterm elections (including an avowed Nazi in our own state) have affiliations with hate groups or have given voice to racist and anti-Semitic sentiments. Apart from the ugliness and immorality of defaming and stigmatizing a group of people on the basis of race or religion, threatening them with harm, and indulging in stereotypes, bigotry only serves to divide us and to make it easier for people to be exploited. Lyndon Johnson, describing the racial politics of the pre-civil rights era South had it right: give a person someone to look down on, and he won't even notice that you're picking his pocket.

The reference in the prayer to safeguarding our country's free institutions reflects an important insight, that democracy means more than just holding elections in which the will of the majority is expressed. This is why the transition from dictatorship and autocracy to a democratic

regime is not always a smooth one, particularly in the absence of a robust civil society. The underpinnings of democracy include a free and independent press, an independent judiciary, an informed citizenry, recognition of and respect for the rights of minorities, and respect for facts and for the findings of science. Illiberal democracy, in which free elections are held but where all of the aforementioned institutions are under attack, has become a worldwide phenomenon, exemplified by regimes in Turkey, Hungary and Poland. We in America can observe a similar attack here at home on democracy's underpinnings and are not immune to the temptations and perils of illiberalism.

Traditionally, the middle class has been the backbone and the great bulwark of democracy, but it has been eroded over the past three decades, as economic inequality has increased, as the profits from economic growth have gone largely to those in the top socio-economic bracket, and as wages and social mobility have remained stagnant. When immigrants came to this country, it was with the expectation that they themselves would struggle but that their children would enjoy a better standard of living. That our children will do better than we have done, however, is no longer now the sure thing it once was. Young people graduate from college with crushing burdens of debt from their student loans, and a college degree no longer guarantees that one will find a job that will support a minimally comfortable life.

Louis Brandeis is a revered figure in American Jewish history, the first Jew to be appointed to the Supreme Court, and an early Zionist who embraced the endeavor to establish a Jewish homeland when it was unpopular to do so among the upper crust of American Jewry. How many of us know that he was also a political progressive whose thoughts on democracy and economic justice were similar to those of President Theodore Roosevelt? Brandeis wrote that “we can either have democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of the few; we can't have both.”

There are no magic bullets and no easy fixes to what ails us. Indeed, as lawyer and journalist Steven Brill points out in his recent book, *Tailspin*, many of our current problems are the result of well-meaning and well-intended reforms that had unforeseen consequences. What we cannot afford, however, is complacency, ignoring our problems or dismissing them as “fake news.”

The Days of Awe, if we are attentive to their message, inspire us as individuals to do better – to strive to be more loving, more compassionate, more grateful for our blessings, and more devoted to the service of God and fellow persons. May they inspire us as well to do better as citizens of this great country– to promote civic harmony, to fight racism and hate, to strengthen democracy and pursue justice, to hold ourselves and others accountable, and never to give up on our vision of and dedication to the common good.