

The Purpose Of The Jewish People In A Global Society

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We are scared. Many of us look around at the world and see instability, lack of civility, suffering, and terror. And beneath the veneer of the normalcy of our lives, many of us are profoundly unsettled. Technology and the sheer pace and extent of global trade are transforming our world almost faster than we can bear.

Bad things happen when the pace of change exceeds our ability to change, and events move faster than our understanding. It is then that we feel the loss of control over our lives. Anxiety creates fear, fear leads to anger, anger breeds violence, and violence – when combined with weapons of mass destruction – becomes a deadly reality. We are scared.

Globalization or global capitalism is driven by a series of institutions, among them the market, the media, multinational corporations and the Internet. It is an immense power, and more effectively than armies, it has won a battle against rival systems and ideologies, among them fascism, communism, and socialism, and has emerged as the dominant option in the twenty first century for countries seeking economic growth. It delivered what it's alternatives merely promised: higher living standards and greater freedoms.

While globalization has brought benefits to many – all of us included in this room, it has also brought distress, disruption and poverty to many others whose voice we must also hear. It's benefits are not spread evenly.

There are winners and losers, within and between countries. The digital divide has heightened inequalities.

The liberal democracies of the West are ill-equipped to deal with such problems, mostly because the opinion is that we differ too greatly as to what constitutes the common good. It seems to some of us that the best that governments can do is to deliver the maximum possible freedom to individuals to make their own choices, and the means best suited to this is the unfettered market where we can buy whatever lifestyle suits us, this year, this month. We need to recover an older tradition – our tradition – that speaks of human solidarity, of Justice and compassion, and of the non-negotiable dignity of individual lives.

The prophets of ancient Israel were the first record of a people who taught to think globally, to conceive of God transcending place and national boundaries and of humanity as a single moral community linked by a covenant of mutual responsibility. Equally, they were the first to conceive of society as a place where ‘justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a never-ending stream.’”

No less significantly, Judaism was the first religion to wrestle with the reality of global dispersion. During the destruction of the first Temple in the sixth century BCE, Jews were transported to Babylon in the East or had escaped to Egypt in the West. By the time of the the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, we had spread throughout much of Europe and Asia. For almost 2000 years, scattered throughout the world, we continued to see ourselves and be seen by others as a single people – the world’s first global people. That experience forced Jews to reflect on many problems that are now the shared experience of humankind: how to maintain

identity as a minority, how to cope with insecurity, and how to sustain human dignity in a world that seems often to deny it.

Reverence, restraint, humility, a sense of limits, the ability to listen and respond to human distress – these are not virtues produced by the market, yet they are attributes we will need if our global civilization is to survive and they are an essential part of the religious imagination.

Yom Kippur is intended to be a force for change in the world. More than the ritual of the high priest, the prophet Isaiah, in the Haftarah we will chant tomorrow said, “it is a day in which we unlock fetters of wickedness...and let the oppressed go free.” Isaiah is saying that the quality of our repentance, the possibility of forgiveness is not judged by what one does on Yom Kippur, but on what one does afterwards – to let the oppressed go free.. Do we take our reflection and then help create a more just world?

So what can we do? First, we need to deeply reflect that our tradition teaches that all of us are created in the Divine image. Can we recognize God’s image in one who is not in my image? There are times when God meets us in the face of a stranger. The global age has turned our world into a society of strangers. That should not be a threat to our identity, but a call to moral and spiritual generosity, more demanding than we had sometimes supposed it to be. Can I, a Jew, recognize God’s image in one who is not in my image: in a Christian, or Sikh, or Muslim, or a Clinton supporter, or a Trump supporter. Can I recognize God’s image in a flaming liberal or right-wing conservative? What then becomes of my faith as a Jew, which usually binds me to those who are like me, and now I must make space for those who are different and have another way of interpreting the world.

This past year, we lost a great man, writer, and activist Elie Wiesel. Elie Wiesel won the Nobel peace prize for his work translating the memory of Jewish suffering during the Shoah to a more broadly framed commitment to stand witness to the dangers of intolerance, persecution and genocide where in the world in occurred. Wiesel's Nobel acceptance speech is a beautiful re-statement of Hillel's famous maxim: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me; but if I am only for myself, what am I?" Wiesel never turned his back on his Jewish commitments. But he did realize that such solidarity with one's own is not sufficient in a world so filled with violence, hatred and oppression.

Wiesel stated two lessons that he learned from the Shoah. One was that we must be forever vigilant against those who might seek to persecute Jews or threaten the State of Israel. Jews have enemies in the world and, after the Shoah, it would be naïve to ignore those ongoing threats. But, he hastened to add, the second lesson he took from the Shoah is that Jews cannot make "defense" the totality of their public agenda. We are a people with a sacred mission to bring healing to a broken world. We must therefore ally with the most vulnerable people in the world, regardless of their race, religion, or creed.

If we are serious about the reality of each person being created in God's image, then we cannot take monotheism to mean that one God means one path to salvation. We have to realize that unity is worshipped in diversity. The glory of the created world is its astonishing multiplicity: the thousands of different languages spoken by humankind, the proliferation of cultures, the sheer variety of the imaginative expressions of the human

spirit, in most of which, if we listen carefully, we will hear the voice of wisdom telling us something we need to know.

Oddly enough, it is the market – the least overtly spiritual of contexts – that delivers a profoundly spiritual message: that it is through exchange that difference becomes a blessing, not a curse. When difference leads to war, both sides lose. When it leads to mutual enrichment, both sides gain.

I want propose three concrete ways that each one of us at Temple Beth El can actively contribute to what Elie Wiesel calls “the Jewish sacred mission to bring healing to the world.” The first is to reclaim the art of conversation. Open any newspaper; turn on the TV; check your Facebook feed. No matter where you turn, our country seems more divided than any of us can remember. But even more than the issues that divide us, it is our inability to talk about those issues with each other that we must address. Too often, we refuse to even attempt to understand and appreciate the possibility that the other side has a position worth considering. We read different newspapers or websites and watch different news – and the news really is different, depending on who’s presenting it to us. And, with Facebook and other social media outlets providing us with a personalized, individualized feed, we literally don’t or can’t see positions different from our own.

This attitude of failing to see the value in another’s argument, the ability to label another and to write them off without listening is not only wrong and dangerous; it’s also against one of the core values of Jewish tradition. Throughout history, rabbis have always been good at arguing. But rather than causing discord and distance, the Sages viewed argument not as a means to divide, but instead as a means to understand each other and grow

closer together. There is a famous Mishnah – a famous rabbinic text that says that any argument that is for the sake of heaven is destined to endure; and one that is not for the sake of heaven is not destined to endure. Which is an argument for the sake of heaven? The argument between Hillel and Shammai where the ultimate goal is to achieve the truth. The dispute that is not for the sake of heaven is the dispute of Korach and all his company against Moses where the desired goals was authority, victory, and being right. Hillel and Shammai were two different schools of learning and thought who are held up as a model for the pursuit of truth, because not only would they would present the other's argument in addition of their own, but they would eat in each other's houses even if they differed in their opinions of what is kosher. Their relationship and connection was primary and even though they might not agree with the other, they valued the other's perspective and believed it had a place.

Our actions – the way that we argue – clearly demonstrate our motivations. We no longer throw physical stones like Korach and his men. We do it virtually, on Facebook. Instead of trying to understand and value those with whom we disagree, we engage in name-calling, labeling and character assassination, which may garner likes and shares online, but bring no actual love or understanding in the real world.

This year's presidential election certainly hasn't helped matters – we may even call it the nastiest, most divisive, most negative campaign since Jefferson vs. Adams in the early days of the republic. Yet someone will be elected president. How will he or she be able to govern? How will our country function if our collective rhetoric has poisoned the atmosphere so completely that both political poles inherently reject the policies of the

other side, because they have already written off the other and are not even willing to listen?

We can find fault with both candidates. Many Americans don't even want to vote. But consider this – Clinton or Trump will become president. Either one will need a lot of help. The second concrete thing that each one of us can do is to vote and elect one of our two candidates as President of the United States, as well as many of the other important offices and bills in the general election. As we get ready to approach the polls, I want to encourage us to vote as a descendant of the prophets of ancient Israel. Which one of the candidates actually has the most potential to listen, to consider, to dialogue, to be willing and able to respond to human distress? These are the values of our tradition.

And finally, Temple Beth has been chosen by the Union of Reform Judaism to be one of the twelve congregations in North America to be part of an initiative called “Moving Justice Towards the Center of Congregation.” Temple Beth El a long history, started by our Rabbi Emeritus, Allen Krause, of pursuing justice in our greater world as a Jewish community. We'll work to bring Justice Toward the Center by using the tools of community organizing, education and advocacy.

In early 2017, our community will launch a listening campaign where you will have an opportunity to share what is important to you when pursuing Tikkun Olam, Fixing Our World. We will then translate our collective voices into an advocacy project, looking to not only put Band-Aids on problems affecting our community, country and world, but looking to address the larger systems that are the root causes of brokenness. Listening is a central tool in community organizing and we invite and encourage you to become involved in this initiative to help us identify what is important to Temple Beth El as a community at large, not only your rabbis or a

handful of members, giving us the opportunity to put the vision of our Prophets into action.

Our tradition teach us that “It is not for you to complete the task, neither are you free to desist from it.” Nowhere is this saying from Pirke Avot more relevant than the matter of mission as Jews here on earth. This year, let’s take teshuvah – repentance out of the synagogue, disconnect Yom Kippur from its myriad of rituals, and place it at the foundation of our everyday lives.