

Fear or Hope: The Choice is in The Power Of Our Prayers

A sermon delivered by
Rabbi Bennett F. Miller

Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
New Brunswick, New Jersey
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5778/September 20, 2017

Very often, I have used a bit of humor to begin a Rosh Hashanah sermon. You know, warm everyone up and put you a bit at ease, transition from the prayers and music to the word. Tonight, there is little if anything for us to laugh about. That's not how I wanted to start these days with you.

I have often felt that for Jews, in storm tossed and turbulent times the sanctuary, the synagogue, serves as the safe port where we bring the ship that carries us on our life's journey. Here is the place where we anchor ourselves in a rich and evolving faith and tradition that teaches us the meaning of life when life seems to have lost all meaning. You and I, travelers on the seas of life's journey, once again, have come into home's harbor for respite and renewal. That is what tonight and these days to follow represent. In a time of insanity, we come here to reset our compass, the spiritual and moral compass that enables us to navigate the storms of life.

I hope you will all agree that this year, more than others in recent recollection, we need to anchor ourselves, for as we all know we have witnessed (fortunately, only vicariously for most of us here) at least two powerful and destructive hurricanes that have affected millions of people in Houston and Florida and the Caribbean; and we have also experienced another storm, a perfect storm in our nation's capital, and now at the United Nations, that has equally affected millions of Americans, of would be Americans called dreamers, and millions of people living throughout the world. The perfect storm to which I refer is, after an outrageous and malicious election, the collapse of moral leadership at our highest levels, and the collapse of responsible elected governance in the most cherished chambers of our nation's capital.

Last year as we ushered in what we all knew would be a year unlike any other, I suggested that the operative word to describe our season of awe was "change." And change is exactly what we got. In this year now ended you and I have experienced rapid and radical change that impacts and affects everything that we do, the way we live our lives, the way we think, and the way we react to the swirling forces and winds of change that surround us and run through our lives and our communities. And we have found no place to hide, nowhere to flee, and nowhere to evacuate to until the storms are over and we return to clean up the destruction and the devastation – except here in our sanctuary.

It is not my intention to sound apocalyptic; I don't believe the world is coming to an end, (unless someone presses his thumb against the button releasing nuclear destruction) nor do I believe that the great experiment in democracy, established by the founders of America is soon

to be over. But I think we can all agree that we have come to a crossroad in American history. We can and should all agree that we are at a crossroad in Jewish history, too, especially as a Jewish community in America. Our democracy, and our Jewish way of life; both, are most certainly being challenged, and even more our moral and ethical leadership in the world is being questioned. How we as Americans and as Jews will face this moment in history will have significant impact on our lives, on America, on Israel, and for that matter, on all of humanity. We need these Days of Awe, these Yamim Noraim, to consider and contemplate what we will be and what we will do in the new year about to begin. We need the urgency of the High Holy Days to force us to give pause from our daily routine and reflect, with utmost honesty, about how we will face the future as Jews, as people of faith, a people who have encountered moments like this before throughout our journey.

I

Author and columnist David Brooks penned a powerful piece entitled the Epidemic of Worry. In that piece, he wrote “We’ve had a tutorial on worry this year... led by two candidates who arouse[d] gargantuan anxieties, fear, and hatred in their opposition.” As a result, Americans are living with higher anxiety than ever before, fears that have deeply impacted our daily lives, and hatred that has broken out into the streets in ways we have not witnessed in more than a half century.

Brooks is correct. Fear, anxiety, and hatred have become the buzzwords of these days. The forces of arrogant contempt for the other, the insistent pitch of a politics of exclusion, of a deliberate confusion of personal power with public good – each of these is contributing to the anxiety affecting us all. We are witnessing a false prophecy assuring security and well-being while the welcome carpet is being rolled up, and the forces of hatred are feeding at the trough of arrogance.

II

I believe America is at a crossroads. This is not the first time that America has dealt with issues of immigration, issues of race, issues of economic justice, issues of nuclear war, and issues of the place and role of the president in our country. And it won’t be the last. Our choice is to confront the issues of our day or let others determine the direction of our nation. Either way, America will be different in the years ahead, and our place in America will never be the same.

Some years ago, I met Naomi Levine. Mrs. Levine, as she is known, was one of the first women to graduate from Columbia Law School. She was a member of the legal team that worked on the brief for the famous supreme court case known as Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansa. She was a long time senior member of the staff of the American Jewish Congress. She almost became its president, except that she was a woman.

This same Naomi Levine was asked by the Chairman of the Board of New York University, to come to work for NYU and be in charge of fund raising. She has raised millions

upon millions of dollars for NYU. Today, she is in her nineties and continues her efforts on behalf of the school.

One night, in a course that she was teaching, she told us the following: “Every winter I fly down to Palm Beach Florida to raise funds for the university. When the driver picks me up I ask him to first drive me around West Palm (not the gated communities, but the other parts of West Palm where people live) before he takes me over the causeway to Palm Beach. I want to see how one part of America lives. Then I go over to the other part. And when I meet with people in Palm Beach, I ask them the following, “If you like what you have and want to keep it, you better make sure that the people who live on the other side of the causeway think they have a shot at getting what you have. If not, they will riot in the streets and either take it away from you or destroy it.” And then she said, “the folks in Palm Beach are then very happy to donate to NYU!”

We are at a crossroads in America because increasingly the people who live on the other side are coming to believe they have no shot at living like those of us on this side. They have seen their lives remain stagnant or deteriorate and they live in fear every day of the future because they don't believe the future is bright for them and for their children. And they are becoming more and more angry every day and every year.

The founders of our country never envisioned that we would encounter the kind of economic and social inequality that we face today in America. They enshrined a notion of equality that they believed was attainable, and they developed that notion based on the teachings of their religious faith, which they got from the Bible, our Bible. And their vision for America had become our vision, too. You and I have been raised on that vision – a land of opportunity, with equality for all, a nation founded on justice (that is blind to corruption), and mercy, and compassion, biblical notions articulated over and over again in our Torah. I could quote you each chapter and verse from our Torah but will not for the sake of time this evening. We will save that for our Torah study classes and Tanach classes, for the times we gather around the table and grapple with our sacred texts.

Look around my friends, we are witnessing a chipping away at the foundations of democratic decency and hope. We are watching as some in our country want to enshrine an oligarchy for one part of America, thereby shrinking or destroying opportunity for others, and demolish all hope for those who live near or under the line of poverty. All of this is being accomplished by demonizing the stranger, the other, and the poor. And it is further being accomplished by raising the levels of anxiety about our nation's security, over the threat of nuclear war, by delegitimizing the media and the press, and by the encouragement of racism and hatred as a means to make everyone in America more anxious about life and security.

The crossroad that we face is, what notion of America will prevail? Will our country be a beacon of light and hope to us and to the world or will it close its doors to the huddled masses yearning to be free? Will there be one America, an America of hope that our children, all of our children will be able to rise up the ladder of opportunity, and live lives that are safe and noble, or will there be two Americas, one a privileged class that perpetuates itself, and the other, a class seething with growing frustration and hatred about its treatment in the market place, in the educational enterprise, on the streets and in our homes, too. Let no one think that this is just

philosophy or theological idealism vs. hard core reality. The truth is, what we want our country to be in this twenty-first century will be determined by one set of forces or another. I pray that we will have the strength to see the forces that I believe in prevail – forces of goodness, forces of kindness, and forces of caring about one another. I have spent my entire career in pursuit of making our country such a place for us and for our neighbors, too

Now, I want to pause here and make a disclaimer. If any of you think I am veering into politics, you are correct. But not because I espouse one political view or another. Over my career I have had no problem speaking what I believe is truth to power, religious truth that compels me and you to take on the civic power of the day, no matter which party is represented, if their behavior stands in contradistinction to the teachings and tenets of our faith.

One of my teachers, Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, once wrote: I try to walk the road of Judaism. Embedded in that road are many jewels. One is marked “Sabbath” and one “civil rights” and one “Kashrut” and one “Honor Your Parents” and one “Study of Torah” and one “You shall be holy.”

And I would add, one is marked “the law of the land is the law,” and the other shines with these words, “do not trust those with power, they will abandon you when it suits their purposes to do so.” As you and I walk the path of Judaism, and see the jewels of our faith before us, this I truly believe: my words to you, my teaching, drives me to speak as I do because this is what God wants us to do. We, the Jewish people were selected for a sacred calling, that calling to be the conscience of the world, to bring light where there is darkness, to care for the stranger and the needy. As a People, we did not take a vow of poverty; instead we vowed to work to end poverty and injustice. Ours is a religious obligation that I hold sacred and I would hope you do so, too. It is not an easy calling, and sometimes it is fraught with real danger, but it is our sacred calling nevertheless. My fear is that in these troubled times, all too many of us will seek the seeming shelter of faith rather than be driven to act as a matter of faith.

In his wonderful book, *Nine Essential Things I Learned About Life*, Rabbi Harold Kushner writes:

Beliefs, theological premises, don't qualify as religion until we translate them into behavior. Feeling sorry for a homeless person or feeling lucky that we have a roof over our heads, feeling outraged when we read of a crime or feeling lucky that we were not the victim doesn't help the homeless person or the crime victim until we translate those sentiments into helpful acts.

Kushner then shares with the reader a piece from a poem entitled *The Protestor and The Prophet*, credited to Robert Rowland. It reads:

I was hungry and you formed a humanities club and discussed hunger. I was sick and you thanked God for your good health. I was lonely and you left me alone while you went to pray for me.

You seem so holy, so close to God, but I'm still hungry. I'm still lonely and I'm still cold.

My friends the DACA kids are still lonely, the strangers at our nation's door are still hungry. The sick are still in need of health care. It's not enough for us to pray and consider our own well-being. Our gathering here throughout these days, in light of what has occurred in St. Louis, in Charlottesville, in Atlanta, in Houston, in Florida, in the Caribbean, should give us all pause, and discomfort us in the midst of our comfort. And no one should be and is more discomforted than me. I ate my holiday meal, I prayed with all of my heart. Now, I ask myself, how will the teachings of my faith move me to act, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow? What risks will I take to demand that America stays true to its sacred calling? And I ask the same questions of you?

III

This is a most dangerous time. A time of fear, a time of shock, and a time of awe. What we do over the course of the next days will serve to determine who we will be in the year to come. Will we turn inward and hide from the forces of change that swirl around us? Will we allow our fear to overcome the challenge of our faith? Will we permit the powerful to pursue a course that enshrines their power or will we commit ourselves to work bringing us to a world worthy of the Divine?

The choice is in the power of the prayers that we recite. Not by how loud we recite them or how we shout them out, but by how our prayers move us to action, challenge us to work with tireless energy and effort for a world fashioned by our faith and the faith of our ancestors. I pray that you and I will have the strength to live the words that we pray. And even more, I pray that we will overcome any fear we may have of the future, and that we will have the conviction to stake our lives on the actions we will perform in the new year; for the truth is, that our lives, and the lives of our children and grandchildren are dependent upon just that. I pray that you and I will not disappoint them, that they will say of us, "theirs was a generation of profound courage and strength!"