

A Covenant of Human Solidarity
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
Rosh Hashanah 5782
Rabbi Philip N. Bazeley

As some of you may know my wife, Alyson, is one of the Assistant Directors at Crane Lake Camp. Crane Lake Camp is one of the camps affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism it's also where Alyson and I met 15 years ago. Even though she was hired for this position two years ago, this was our first summer back at camp thanks to COVID.

I took two weeks off at the beginning of July and loaded the boys up for the start of camp and drove on up. It was great being back there in a somewhat interesting role for myself. On very few days did I find myself helping out with things that were Judaic in nature, such as teaching about Israel or helping kids prepare for leading services. More frequently I stepped in as the Junior Camp Counselor for kids who were in Matthew's cohort and at other times I was that guy walking our dog Toodles, but much of the time I found myself to be a bit of a handyman.

As some of you may have seen on Facebook (*show photo*), before the camp season began I built a new lectern for the camp. I guess my craft abilities were well regarded because after our 6th consecutive storm, Ross, who oversaw some of the outdoor activities such as ropes and the petting zoo, approached me about a new project. Apparently, goats aren't supposed to get wet (I know, I thought the same thing that you are now, shouldn't evolution have taken care of this already?). He wanted to know if I would I do the camp a favor and help build a goat shelter as well as some podiums for them to stand on because they don't like standing on the ground. So, I present to you the Rabbi Philip N. Bazeley Goat Pen. (*Show photos of the goat pen*) As I was assembling these things I was wearing one of my favorite shirts that read: "Trust me I'm a rabbi" and I deliberately wore it when I was doing these non-rabbi things. It made me chuckle.

I spent so much time at camp doing these "un-rabbi" things that as I was putting the goat pen together one of the counselors came up to me and said: "I don't get your shirt. Why would you buy it? Who gave it to you? Was it one of the faculty members?" It was interesting for me to be in a place where people didn't necessarily know who I was and apparently, I don't make a believable rabbi. People would see me knee deep in mud constructing a goat pen and instantly assumed they knew everything they needed to know about me. I shouldn't be that surprised, that's the world we live in.

Be honest with yourselves, how often do you see someone and instantly judge them based on appearance alone? No? What if I said you see someone not wearing a mask in a store? What assumptions did you just make about them? That they must be vaccinated? That they don't believe in vaccinations? Did you make assumptions about their politics or beliefs? None of us are immune from making judgements and assumptions, it's how the brain is wired and it's also a survival mechanism. What I'm concerned about - what I believe to be a symptom of a larger ill of society - is what we do with those assumptions. What worries me is how we rarely challenge those assumptions and how those assumptions are used to vilify, ostracize, and delegitimize whole swaths of the population. And we do it in the name of "morality". I have seen countless cases where those who believe that they have the moral high ground so that gives them a pass on

decorum. That being morally correct allows them to do atrocious things in the name of righteousness. Our moral compasses should be guiding us towards sacred living, caring for those in need and healing those who are wounded and broken hearted. But that's not the direction society's compass is guiding us today. Today's sensibilities guide towards greater tribalism, greater objectification, and greater strife.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks^z¹ wrote deeply about this in his book, *Morality*. He teaches us that for Jews, "morality is taught through the imperishable message of our scripture that tells us that we are to "love your neighbor. Love the stranger. Hear the cry of the otherwise unheard. Liberate the poor from their poverty. Care for the dignity of all. Let those who have more than they need share their blessing with those who have less. See the hungry, house the homeless, and heal the sick in body and mind. Fight injustice whoever it is done by and whoever it is done against. And do these things because, being human, we are bound by a covenant of human solidarity, whatever our color or culture class or creed."

He tells us that:

"These are moral principles not economic or political ones. They have to do with consciousness, not wealth or power. But without them, freedom will not survive. The free market ... will not save liberty, because liberty can never be built by self-interest alone. I-based societies all eventually died... Morality is not an option it's an essential."ⁱ Morality is the mechanism that causes us to treat other human beings with sanctity instead of as objects. As he put it, Jewish morality teaches us how to treat one another because being human we are bound to a covenant of human solidarity whether our race or creed.

A covenant of human solidarity. He didn't use the phrase social contract, but rather a covenant. It's not just *kol yisrael aravim zeh ba zeh*, that all Jews are responsible for one another, but *kol anishim aravim zeh ba zeh*, that all humanity should care for one another. The usage of the word "covenant" implies that it's a religious imperative to care for other humans.

Take 15 seconds now and attempt to think of at least two occasions, big news stories, in the past year where you can find an example of a supreme lack of this covenant of human solidarity playing out. Go ahead, I'll wait.

If I were to guess, I would imagine that you came up with how people are responding to the mask mandates, the insurrection, race riots and protests turned violent, culture war or cancel culture, our complete inability to talk to people who we disagree with, and the antisemitism that came out of the latest Israeli skirmish with Hamas, to name a few. Just out of curiosity, raise your hands if I named something you thought of. Just imagine what you would come up with if I gave you a full 30 seconds.

Everything I just mentioned, each of those topics are incredibly complex and multifaceted. In a previous version of this sermon, I went into depth with a few of them but was afraid that we would lose the forest for the trees. I'm not interested in the logistics of them, but rather on how we respond to each other in those events. In all the cases I mentioned, it shows that our society is no longer based upon a morality of "we", rather it is now based on the morality of "I." "This is what I feel and what I care about, and I don't care about you. You should have no rights and only my rights matter." You see all those arguments in all the cases I

just mentioned. It's less about science and reason, mostly just "I feel, I need, I want." It might be cloaked in science and reason, but it's not. It's not about, "what we can do, how can we discuss. Let us come together to figure this out."

The body that is our society is sick, and the pandemic selfishness, the pandemic is pessimism, the pandemic is self-importance - a me first and me only approach. The pandemic is a belief that our covenant of human solidarity has been broken and therefore doesn't need to be followed. Yes, one needs to care for their own, but as Hillel taught us, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I?" Not "who am I" but "what am I?" It's a philosophical question on the meaning of life. Am I human? Am I alive? What am I if I only care for myself? Where do I fit into society? Would there be a place for me? The American population is feeling more alone and isolated than ever before, and I believe that that is also another symptom of this pandemic of "self."

There are so many reasons why society's new sense of morality is based around the self instead of around others: social media and our ability to cater to only that which pleases us; the increased media sources which our smart devices implement an unfaltering algorithm that keeps you engaged with the things that bring you the greatest amount of joy; the fact that you can select from a plethora of news channels that cater to the particular level of politics that you agree with and will never bring you a disagreeing voice – just echo chambers of self-righteousness. We could choose to leave our bubbles, but instead we choose tribalism. We can choose to see the beauty of others' cultures, instead we choose culture war. As the editors of a recent collection of studies, *The Crisis of Connection*, put it: "In place of the 'we,' we have been left with the 'me,' the solitary individual, who needs, wants, and desires take precedence over the collection. Human society has evolved to a stage where the rights of the individual, particularly those with wealth, power, and status supersede all other rights and responsibilities."ⁱⁱ This pandemic of the self is just as dangerous, if not more so, than Covid, because it can lead to hatred, violence, bloodshed, fascism, tyranny, and the downfall of our society.

Our sages teach that within each one of us is the *yetzer harah*, the evil inclination, and the *yetzer hatov*, the good inclination, as their simple translations offer. In reality, the *yetzer hatov* is the urge to gratify self above all else and the *yetzer harah* is the urge to gratify others before the self. Our sages taught that both these forces were incredibly important for society to exist. If there wasn't a *yetzer harah* there would be no urge to procreate, no urge to invent or create, to do well in business. Without the *yetzer harah* scientific advancements would halt completely, nothing new would be built, and humanity would die off within a generation. On the other hand, if there wasn't a *yetzer hatov* society would tear itself apart, we would let our scientific minds run rampant only concerned with the question of "can we do it" instead of "should we do it?" Morality is the mechanism that helps keep our *yetzer harah* in balance with our *yetzer hatov*. I believe that our moral regulator is so off right now that if we were living with this type of culture a generation ago, we probably would never have made it past Polio, Nixon would never have resigned because the rules wouldn't matter, and we may never have integrated schools or have had major social reckonings that tried to address the differences between people.

How do we pull ourselves back from the brink? It isn't through hoping the government can pull us through it, it's through our own actions and choices. The words of Isaiah teaches us what God truly wants of us; and it isn't more prayer. Isaiah declares:

“When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I hide my eyes from you;
Even when you offer many prayers,
I am not listening...
Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.
Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.
Come, let us reach an understanding – says Adonai.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We show God love by loving others and seeking justice. Prayer is not what God wants from us, prayer is the mechanism we use to learn these messages of hope and morality, justice and love; a great coming together. And what is in great abundance around us? Pessimism and narcissism, disdain and injustice; an extreme form of tribalism.

As Jews we can either let the status quo continue, or we can embrace the morality of our faith. To love the other and seek justice with them. Before we judge someone for whatever it may be, ask them, truly and honestly, “help me understand your choice?” We don’t and shouldn’t, agree on everything, but we should be able to have reasonable conversations with one another. We have the chance to draw people together.

How do we help save society from this pandemic of isolation and loneliness; this pandemic of I? It’s through realizing that every part of Judaism, with our covenant with God at its core, is about choosing “we” instead of “I.” It’s about balancing the *Yetzer harah* with the *Yetzer hatov*, it’s about making choices that restore human dignity to all. That’s it, that’s all we have to do, one choice after another like small drops in a bucket that can amass to a tidal wave of love and justice. And perhaps, just perhaps, our examples will serve as an awakening for the rest of society as if we were a light onto the nations.

As our prayerbook Mishkan T’filah states,

AS I AWAKEN, let this be my thought:
may my day be filled with acts of lovingkindness.

Let me be drawn to learning and discernment,
and may my actions be shaped by mitzvot.

Keep me from iniquity, disgrace and sin;
May I not be overwhelmed by temptation or despair.

Distance me from evil people and false friends.
Let me cultivate a life of goodness.

May my hands reach out in kindness,
and I will serve God through acts of righteousness.

Today and every day, may I merit Your mercy,
by living my life with compassion and love.

Holy One of Blessing, draw me to Your words;
teach me the art of sacred living.

Amen v' Amen

ⁱ Sacks, Jonathan, *Morality; Restoring The Common Good in Divided Time* Basic Books New York 2020. PG x
ⁱⁱ Niobe Way, Alisha Ali, and Carol Gillian (eds.), *The Crisis of Connection: Roots, Consequences, and Solutions*, New York University Press, 2018.
ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 1:15-18