

Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5780
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
Rabbi Philip Bazeley

Once the world was perfect, and we were happy in that world.
Then we took it for granted.
Discontent began a small rumble in the earthly mind.
Then Doubt pushed through with its spiked head.
And once Doubt ruptured the web,
All manner of demon thoughts
Jumped through -
We destroyed the world we had been given
For inspiration, for life -
Each stone of jealousy, each stone
Of fear, greed, envy, and hatred, put out the light.
No one was without a stone in his or her hand.
There we were,
Right back where we had started.
We were bumping into each other
In the Dark.
And now we had no place to live, since we didn't know
How to live with each other.
Then one of the stumbling ones took pity on another
And shared a blanket.
A spark of kindness made a light.
The light made an
Opening in the darkness.
Everyone worked together to make a ladder.
A Wind Clan person climbed out first into the next world,
And the other clans, the children of those clans, their children,

And their children, all the way through time -
To now, into this morning light to you.ⁱ

This is from the current Poet Laureate of the United States, Joy Harjo. She is not Jewish but a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation. I was rummaging around a bookstore, and this thin little book caught my attention, and in its title alone, *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*, I was pulled right in. I was looking for something that could sum up all of my feelings and emotions of what this past year had been for us, all the trauma, and grief, pain, and suffering. There was great love and celebration, too, but it felt as though with every celebration, there was also pain that came along with it. A Bar Mitzvah in the morning full of celebrating the joy of life and living. His parents standing at this very podium blessing him and sharing their hopes and prayers with him before placing the Torah lovingly in his arms. And then a shooting in a synagogue in Pittsburg and back here in our usual place of comfort, but this time we were gathered with an evening vigil where we cried and held each other, our grief, pain, and fear all mixed together.

A wedding ceremony here on this very *bima* with a couple circling each other before they entered the *chupah* - a symbol of all their hopes and dreams and the world and home they wish to build together. And then a shooting in a Walmart where other spouses' hopes and dreams lay lifeless in a pool of blood. So it didn't matter to me that the author was Native American, her words still spoke to my heart and if we, we holy beings, are to pull ourselves out of the mess that we have created for ourselves, we are all going to have to come together, borrowing from each other's traditions and make the peace we so long for.

Harjo states, "Once the world was perfect." But was it really? We use that language. We all do. We look back upon the years that passed and attribute a golden age and something to long for. "That was a time when we were great! Let's get back to great again." There was never a time when everything was once great for all peoples. Maybe for some, but not for all. There has never been a time in our country when everything has been equitable for everyone. Can you pick a time when everyone lived in perfect harmony? Where Jews, African Americans, individuals of the LGBTQ community, Hispanics and Latinos, those with disabilities, let's just say any "minority group" all lived with equal rights and access to services? Don't even think of a decade, don't even think of a year or a month or a day. Just show me one minute, one sublime minute in our history, when everyone was equal, and it was all perfect. I'll do you one better, find a place in

the world or a time when that was true. “Once the world was perfect,” I wish it were so, but that doesn’t mean it can’t happen.

In her poem, Harjo envisions a ladder that the community puts together. A ladder that is formed from a spark of light caused by a simple act of kindness. The sharing of a blanket a symbol of warmth and protection – security. An act of kindness that was able to reignite the light that was put out by fear, greed, envy, and hatred. An act of kindness saved the world. I must admit, it’s hard to think about our society coming together to build this ladder, particularly after the year of pain we have felt in places like Pittsburg, Poway, El Paso as well as places like New Zealand and Sri Lanka. How do we overcome this hate to build a ladder to bring us towards a perfect world?

Over the past few months, I have heard people say that the world is broken because of the racists and supremacists, or the NRA, or Antifa, or “those” southern invaders, or because of Mitch McConnell or Donald Trump or Ilhan Omar or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. I believe that they are all wrong. Politicians didn’t invent racism or anti-Semitism or the use of fear to obtain power. No. These things have always been around, and we have always worked with others to try and fight it. What I believe is different now is that we have no one to work with and no one to partner with. The reason why our world feels so broken is because everyone seems to be hating each other.

We hate the other and then blame them for why we hate them. “I hate those “insert the blank” so much because they are nuts or raciest or dangerous. I’m not to blame for my hatred of them, they are.” Or what about this one: “If only those Democrats/Republicans would be rational we could get something done.” I don’t mind that there are multiple political parties. In fact, I think it’s essential that there are various ways of seeing an issue, what’s important is how we come together to solve the problems of society and we aren’t doing that. Instead, we as a society are only listening to that which is pleasing to us, ignoring the rest or worst believing that it’s evil. That is why I believe anti-Semitism is on the rise and why people are looking at our country and wondering, “what have we become?”

In May of 1958, Rabbi Jacob Rothschild of the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation in Atlanta, GA, delivered a sermon entitled “Can This Be America?” He gave this sermon in the face of growing white nationalism - terrorists - who were burning crosses and lynching individuals across the country. He spoke about threats and attacks on those who were minorities,

and in particular, he talked about attacks related to religious institutions, of which there have been plenty this past year. He pointed out that one out of every ten attacks were directed at Jews, at synagogues and community centers. Rabbi Rothschild grew up in Pittsburgh, in Squirrel Hill and was raised just blocks away from the Tree of Life Synagogue. Almost 60 years to the date of Rabbi Rothschild's sermon, a shooter came into the Tree of Life Synagogue and killed eleven worshipers, one of which was Melvin Wax, a cousin of our congregant Stu Kohn. The white nationalism that Rabbi Rothschild decried in his sermon is still very much alive in this country. There have been so many shootings in the last few years. So many of these attacks have been against the innocent and have been rooted in racial prejudice. As I stand here this morning, I too ask myself, can this be America?

America, for so many, is a dream, a beacon of hope. For us Jews, America was seen as a safe refuge; the same is true for all those who try to escape persecution. But our history with America, like so many others, was a mix of dreams realized and dreams destroyed. So many of our ancestors made it into this country, and so many were turned away. America's identity as a nation-state has not always matched what our founding vision proclaimed. We, as a country, have always done better when individuals stand together with those who seek to preserve life and liberty and seek justice and equality for all.

In the face of this terror, in the face of this nationalistic inspired hatred, in the face of fear and growing anti-Semitism, we must have the courage to call out injustice and prejudice, and we must do it as Jews. As Jews, we should always strive to help improve the fabric of our nation and help support those who weep the most profound of losses. Let us raise our voices and stop the spread of this dangerous form of nationalism so that none again will have their world destroyed due to hatred. It is not enough to condemn the voices of racism and white supremacy; we need to push for education and programming in our schools and our communities that teach respect and understanding. And we need to be the embodiment of what we long for.

Let me also be clear; this is not about politics. It's not about immigration law or gun control. This is not about Democrats and Republicans. This is about the belief that all people are created *B'tzelem Elohim*, that all people are not only created equal but, more importantly, are created in the image of God and contain the Divine spark and therefore should be afforded the right to life. Hate should have no home within our borders, and as Jews, we should be part of the cause that stands united against such supremacy. As a Jew, as a Rabbi, and as a citizen of this

country, I cannot stand idly by in my brother's blood and let more blood be spilled due to inaction. For decades now the rhetoric used in society has been ratcheted up and up. It is like air pollution. It's hard not to suck it in while gasping for fresh air. How, how on earth do we move in a new direction?

I am reminded of a story, one told by Rabbi Yisrael Salanter.

He once said,

When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, but instead of giving up, I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town, and as an older man, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation, and I could indeed have changed the world.

First, we start with the realization that we need to begin by looking at ourselves. Can I give up the hate I have for "The other?" In 2015, the relatives of people slain inside the historic AME church in Charleston, South Carolina, were able to speak directly to the shooter, Dylan Roof, who had murdered their loved ones. They were at his first court appearance, and one by one, those who chose to speak did not turn to anger. What they did instead was utterly remarkable - they offered him forgiveness and said they were praying for his soul. They did this even as they described the pain of their losses.

To me this is the embodiment of a Jewish principle of *Yesh Hahavah v'yesh G'vul*. That we should have love for others, but we should have limits as well. That when someone goes over a line for you, when they hit your boundary, a *G'vul*, you should keep that line, but that doesn't mean you respond in anger or rage or bring hate up to motivate yourself to hold the line. It's just your line, and you won't cross it. For me, my line is crossed when the actions of others attempt to diminish the Divine spark in another. That is when I say enough. However, it does not mean that I hate the individual doing it.

For example, I find the idea of family separation at the border antithetical to our Jewish tradition which speaks much about protecting the stranger and those who are vulnerable, like orphans. Our tradition doesn't tell us to separate families and create orphans, rather the opposite.

I have spoken out about it multiple times and have gone to detention centers to protest it. But I am protesting the action of it, not the people who are doing it. I want us to have a conversation about how we can protect our country and protect immigrants; I don't believe the two are mutually exclusive. I want to see if we can work together to change laws and policies so that they will reflect the humanity and divinity that is in each human being. I want to treat those who disagree with me as a "Thou" as a holy being, not as an "It" an object with no heart or soul. We can't create peace if I see them as evil and a force to be dealt with. I will not let the hate infect my heart because, as soon as you let hate in, it will grow in you like an all-consuming cancer. It's slow-growing, but when it takes root and is very hard to cut out.

So I begin with myself and work my way out – that's my first step. The second is with rethinking who should control the narrative. In his book, *American Gospel*, Jon Meacham reminds us that belief in God is central to the American experience. That the Founders believed themselves at work in the service of both God and people, not just one or the other. That is why The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, are meant to help protect us from excessive religious influence as well as extreme secularism.ⁱⁱ The Founders believed that the religious voice that reminds us that we are called to be holy is essential. It is a voice that calls us not to live in the swamp of politics but to come together to help solve society's ills.

The politicians should not be the only ones controlling the narrative of where we see the future of our country. We, with a religious voice, should speak up and tell them that the hate they are fermenting is no longer acceptable. We should all raise our religious and moral voices.

By all means, let's talk about the issues. Let's debate them like human beings or rather divine creatures, and to do so we need to have a few ground rules, like how we should treat one another. A *Derek Eretz*, if you will, of political discourse influenced by our religious tradition.

I have always believed that the synagogue should be the place where we can debate society's toughest questions in a safe and respectable manner. Too often these challenges are used as chess pieces by politicians for personal gains and very rarely handled in any substantive way. But here at Anshe Emeth we will engage with these topics not from a political point of view but a theological and Judaic perspective. That's why this year, I am hosting two Rabbinic Forums as a place where we can respectfully debate society's problems. This is not to create more Democrats or Republicans, Conservatives, or Liberals, but a forum for understanding where each of us is coming from and finding rooting for ourselves in our tradition.

You can find the details in our Program Book, but the first is on the American political divide, and the second is on how we talk about Israel.

What these Rabbinic Forums hope to offer is another way of looking at the world and perhaps be moved and changed by others. At the very least, we can develop empathy for where we are each coming from. The hope is that our tradition will give us guidance in our political views and not the other way around. As Jews, we should never be loyal to a particular political party, only to our faith, tradition, and God.

These are the steps just as Rabbi Salanter spoke of. First, we take a look at our own hearts and homes and then our immediate community and then society around us. That is how we can change the world, and that is what we will be doing here. Small steps, but essential steps if we are to ever work on the more significant issues.

When it comes to anti-Semitism, that is one of the things we will never be able to protest away. Yes, we want to push back against the bullies of the world. But, as Bari Weiss puts it, “If the response ends there, with anger, you have missed a tremendous opportunity to examine *why* you want to fight back and *what*, exactly, you want to fight for!”ⁱⁱⁱ

When responding to anti-Semitism and supremacy, we must always speak the truth and have the rhetoric for what it is. We must be comfortable with the discomfort of seeing and hearing this anti-Semitic rhetoric. Don’t flee from it; otherwise, you can’t call it out...and call it out you must, especially when it’s hard.

It is not easy to call out anti-Semitism, especially if it comes from the people in your office who you are close to or even if it’s people from your own political party, whether it is Representative Steve King or Representative Ilhan Omar or whether it is the President of the United States. Anti-Semitism knows no party affiliation; it is everywhere, and we must call it out for what it is - bigoted and racist anti-Semitic language. And maybe in the calling out of this hatred, there is a possibility for them to change. We should always make space for one to turn their ways around, that is, in fact, what *teshuvah* is all about.

Lastly, if you are discontent with what you see around you, do not be a passerby, be a participant. Get some skin in the game. Don’t just watch it transpire before you and let it fester in anger, do something about it. To quote Joy Harjo:

For any spark to make a song, it must be transformed by pressure. There must be an unspeakable need, muscle of a belief, and wild unknowable elements.^{iv}

On these High Holy Days, it's not just "us" as individuals that need to do *teshuvah*; it is our whole society. Not a *teshuvah* like the big "R" of repentance, but a *teshuvah* to help us cast off the darkness that infects us, to bring ourselves closer to light and closer to sacred living. Let us all come together as one community to engage in this repair.

Amen v' Amen.

ⁱ Harjo, Joy. *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015. Pgs. 14-15

ⁱⁱ Meacham, John. *American Gospel; God, The Founding Fathers, an the Making of a Nation*. New York: Random House, 2006. Pg. 5

ⁱⁱⁱ Weiss, Bari. *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*. New York: Random House, 2019. Pg. 167

^{iv} Harjo, Joy. *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015. Pg. 7