

EREV ROSH HASHANA 5780

On Tuesday morning, the second day of Rosh Hashana, we will read from the Torah that we are all created in the image of God. According to the sages of old, the Torah teaches that we are all created from one person so that no one can claim a superior ancestry.

Being created in the image of God entitles all of us to a certain level of dignity. The Torah says that even a man executed by hanging must be brought down before nightfall. Even the worst criminal is entitled to a level of human dignity.

As we enter these High Holy Days, we will read and recite many inspiring words, as we seek to reconnect with our highest values. We will focus less on who we are and more on who we hope to become.

So many of our values are challenged on a daily basis that the spiritual recharging provided by these days is more a necessity than an option. No matter how hard we may try, it is virtually impossible to ignore how the image of humanity has been debased, in our nation, in recent years.

Though crime levels have plummeted in the first two decades of the 21st century, levels of bigotry and intolerance have risen to heights not seen since before the Civil Rights movement grew in the late 1950's.

Whether it is body shaming or bullying on social media or attacking others for having a different appearance or way of life, our society has become increasingly combative and aggressive. Rather than listening to those with a different perspective or background, more of us attack first and ask questions later.

The classic story of the starfish and the sea rings true. None of us can completely turn the tide of the debasement of our country and its values, but each of us can do our share.

Whatever our political beliefs, all of us can be better and can do better.

Whatever our political beliefs, all of us should demand better from our leaders, both elected and otherwise.

Of course, sometimes we get the leaders that we deserve. Rather than thinking independently, far too many of us parrot slogans and talking points from our favorite media outlets. From the left and from the right, from the President on down, we are accepting someone else's account of reality. It is as though we lost the ability to think and to put together an intelligent argument for ourselves.

As standardized tests have become more of a yardstick for measuring success, our schools have taught for the test, rather than teaching critical thinking. That ability to think logically is a fundamental element of intelligence which is becoming increasingly scarce in our day. Parrots repeat; people are supposed to think.

Far too many parents want to spare their children the trauma of taking responsibility for their actions, lest they fail or come up short. Yet failure and defeat are part of the process of dealing successfully with the world.

We have to fail. We have to cry. We have to understand that we are not the culmination of all civilization. As Copernicus taught five hundred years ago, the sun does not revolve around us; we revolve around the sun.

The fact that we live in an area with lots of Hasidim, Muslims, Latinos and others whom we largely do not know means that we are vulnerably ignorant and susceptible to those who would divide us. We fear that which and those whom we do not know and disreputable people know how to use that fear against us and for their benefit.

We don't have to agree with people who look different from us or who think differently from us. We don't have to even like them. However, as

long as they live their lives and allow us to live our lives in peace, we can and should accept them, rather than seek to attack them.

Three hundred years ago, the Enlightenment changed the world forever. The same nations of Europe which had been largely ruled or heavily influenced by the Catholic Church were now challenged by the forces of secularism. No longer kneeling obediently, millions throughout Europe now advocated for secular education, intellectual debate, democracy, pluralism, philosophy and more.

I worry that, as a society, we are reversing the Enlightenment. We are allowing science, wisdom and critical thinking to be debased, as long as it results in “our side winning.” Personal principles mean less than power. Any effort to compromise is seen as “giving in to the other side.”

Compromise, however, is what has allowed America to thrive.

Compromise is what preserves and strengthens personal, business and other relationships.

On the High Holy Days, we are challenged to be our very best and that means, we are challenged to visualize the best we can be as individuals and as part of our various communities.

For over a decade, America has been gradually recovering from being on the verge of economic disaster. Interest rates have declined dramatically and the economy has been reasonably strong. Yet even in these good economic times, few of us or our leaders are able to reason together with those holding opposing viewpoints.

If we cannot work together with those who see the world differently in good economic times, what will we do when the economy declines, as it inevitably will? If we think that the forces of hatred and division are bad now, just wait until they reveal themselves, in the future, during their prime growing period, economic hardship.

Success in any field requires preparation. This is the time to sow the seeds not of division and animosity, but of unity and understanding.

Whatever we feel about illegal immigration, can we not all agree that separating babies and children from their parents is wrong? Can we not admit that putting people, even illegal immigrants, into facilities which are brutally unhealthy, is not a good thing?

Whatever we feel about gun control, can we not agree that if we need an identity check to take a book out of the library, it is not unreasonable to require an identity check to purchase a gun?

There are so many areas in which people have managed to come to an agreement in the past and we can do so again in the future. However, we have to change, we have to do *teshuva*. We need to focus less on “our side” winning and more on recalling the words of our Declaration of Independence, that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

We need to focus less on “our side” winning and more on pledging “allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice . . .” not just for me and those who think like me . . . but rather, “with liberty and justice for all.”

That, my friends, is how we really make America great, once again!

AMEN