

From the Pulpit: for October 15, 2016

By Cantor Shoshana Brown

### **Beginning the Task Anew**

The Jewish community has just completed the season of the *Yamim Nora'im* (the “Days of Awe”) which includes the two days of Rosh haShanah (the Jewish New Year) and, seven days later, Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) – all in all, a ten-day period of reflection, repentance, and resolution to lead a more compassionate, upstanding and purposeful life heading into the future. This year I have experienced quite a jarring effect as I have “pivoted” (to use a verb we are hearing *ad nauseam* these days) between the mood of the Jewish calendar and daily breaking political news. Our High Holy Day season, with its solemn liturgy and melodies tuned to the themes of introspection, contrition, and an appeal to God’s compassion, is geared towards re-gaining a state of “at-onement” with both God and humanity (and nowadays many of us include the need to be “at one” with the environment as well). When the process works as intended, one ends the Yom Kippur fast with a sense of being purified, renewed, forgiven, and with a sense of optimism about the new year just begun and of the significance of one’s role in doing *tikkunolam* (repairing/perfecting God’s world).

Yom Kippur begins with the chanting of the awe-inspiring prayer *KolNidrei* just before sundown, and ends one hour after sundown the following day with the blast of the *shofar*, the ram’s horn. Afterwards, here in Fall River, our two Jewish congregations, Temple Beth El and Congregation Adas Israel (we join forces on the High Holy Days) hold a joyful break-the-fast meal: there are smiles all around, and it is not primarily about the food, but rather about being together. One of our quintessential holiday prayers thanks God for “renewing us, keeping us alive, and bringing us to this day.” We are grateful to be alive at this moment, and to be together.

What a contrast, then - after having been in synagogue practically all day, after almost 26 hours of fasting, praying, and singing one’s heart out to God, and finally rejoicing with one’s community – to come home, turn on the news, and hear the latest breaking scandals of the presidential race. It is as if we have just been consorting with angels, and suddenly we are dumped down to earth directly into a giant (and pungent!) cesspool. The commentators keep asking, “Can this race go

any lower?” And, sadly enough, many of us are beginning to feel that there is no bottom to this, there is no low that cannot be stooped to. Even after Election Day, I am beginning to fear that it will not be over – that some factions of our nation’s population will continue to seethe, believing that the election has been “rigged.” Such an atmosphere breeds conspiracy theories.

It was, indeed, a jarring transition, from the time spent in the clear spiritual realms and the subsequent warmth of community embrace, to the so-called “real world.” But many of us can hardly believe that what we have been seeing unfold this election season is *real* – it seems much more like some outlandish Hollywood offering (no doubt involving Nicholas Cage). Do you remember *The Manchurian Candidate* – the 1962 version with Laurence Harvey, Frank Sinatra and Angela Lansbury? That story now seems more plausible than what we are seeing on the cable news networks today. (If you were to combine that 1962 film with the plot twists of the ABC hit show *Scandal*, you would be closer to an approximation of what we are witnessing.)

But these paranoid fantasies aside, the truth is that the issues of sexual morality, of treating each person with the dignity that befits a being created in the image of God, the issues of truth-telling (or not), of bullying, of racism, homophobia, xenophobia, of environmental justice and the need to take measures against rapid climate change – these *are* issues that are relevant to the spiritual and moral soul-work that we have just completed during Yom Kippur. Actually, this work has not just been *completed* – that would be a great misconception. It is work that we have just *begun*. And of course next year we will begin it again. Which is not to say that it is a Sisyphean task. The Jewish year, rather, is like a spiral: we keep coming around to the same place again, but hopefully we come around at a higher level each time.

Many of us are worried about our country, our society, our world. It is hard to keep the faith of those who sang during the ‘60’s “*O deep in my heart, I do believe that we shall overcome someday.*” Will we indeed ever be a nation where everyone knows that it is not okay to treat others as sexual objects, where there is a true effort to end poverty and to raise the standard of education and health care for all, where individuals are not singled out for arrest or suspicion based on their skin color or their faith community, where we recognize the fragility of our planet’s ecosystems, and resolve to preserve them for future generations? It seems such a tall order – it is all too easy to despair. And that is why we return to the rituals of

communal repentance, of standing shoulder to shoulder as we both implore God's mercy and resolve to live up to our divine potentials as we begin the task anew. And although most of you reading this column will not have just taken part in the these "Days of Awe," I pray fervently that we may begin this task anew together, both as citizens of this country, and as dwellers not in heaven, but on this very beautiful, messy, imperfect place that we call earth – a place we also call "home."

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