

YOM KIPPUR
5778

I am not sure yet what to make of what happened in Charlottesville this summer. The image of white nationalists standing across the street from a synagogue during Shabbat services holding semi-automatic weapons, giving the Nazi salute and yelling “Seig Heil;” the chant, “You will not replace us; Jews will not replace us,” certainly got my attention. I have always believed that while there will always be anti-Semites in the world, America was different. That this country, founded on the belief that all people are created equal and are endowed with unalienable rights, is on a trajectory – however slow and uneven – to grant equality and dignity to all people regardless of race, religion, creed. (orientation?) I have believed that whatever divided us as individuals, most Americans had great pride in the special spirit of this country. We were proud that America was a beacon of freedom throughout the world.

I do not yet believe that this fundamental spirit of America has changed. Maybe the White Supremacy movement is still a very small group of radicals that just knows how to make a lot of noise. But I do think we Jews must pay very close attention and take necessary precautions. And I think what happened in Charlottesville is symptomatic of some deep divisions in American society.

Bret Stephens wrote this week in the New York Times: “This is yet another age in which we judge one another morally depending on where we stand politically.” That we are so divided politically, culturally, and socio-economically will hurt this country and could be very hurtful to us Jews.

I believe the religious world has a role to play in healing the rifts in our country.

There are two kinds of religion. There is religion that divides people into “us” and “them.” “We have the truth and they have falsehood.” Extremists of many religions then go further to say, “Because they have falsehood, they are evil and should die.” Sunni and Shia Muslims say this about each other; Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland used to say this about each other. A lot of people used to say that about us Jews. That kind of thinking leads a Dylan Roof to walk into a black church in Charleston and kill people at a Bible study.

And there is religion that brings people together. This approach is based on the belief that we serve God by serving human beings; that we bring God’s presence into the world with our acts of kindness and generosity.

- On Erev Rosh HaShanah I told the congregation that the silver crowns and breastplates on our Torah scrolls were polished this year by my Brazilian Catholic neighbor who is a jeweler. He said,

“When you do something for God, it does not matter what your religion is.”

That kind of religion does not erase the differences between people. But it believes that all people are God’s children and that all faiths have a unique insight on God’s will. We may believe that ours is better, at least for us, but we do not deny the dignity of other people and their desire to do God’s work in the world.

The book of Jonah that we read this afternoon affirms that God is concerned for all human beings – including those we’re most inclined not to trust. Jonah is sent to Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria, the nation that destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. To the ancient Israelite, God sent Jonah to the worst place on earth. Jonah ran in the other direction. He cared about a tree that gave him shade but he wanted the people of Nineveh dead. But God reminded him that his concern was

misplaced. God's concern is for human beings, Jewish or not Jewish, and their dignity. God wants the same thing from us.

The rabbis said something similar. Using the phrase *mipnei darkhei shalom*, "for the sake of the ways of peace," the Mishnah teaches this:

- For the sake of peace, the poor of the Gentiles should be supported as we support the poor of Israel, the sick of the Gentiles should be visited as we visit the sick of Israel, and the dead of the Gentiles should be buried as we bury the dead of Israel.

To live in this world we must be concerned about and take care of those who are different from us *mipnei darkhei shalom* – for the sake of peace.

David Baum was an Orthodox pediatrician in Great Britain. He created the Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health and became its first president. Wanting to do more work, he went to Brazil, Ethiopia and

Thailand to consult with doctors there to improve children's health care. And then, this religious Zionist who is now buried in Rosh Pina, created a state-of-the-art child health care center for Palestinian children in Gaza. He said that this is what Zionism meant to him – that love, decency and care know no religious or ethnic boundaries.

What can Temple Judea do in response to Charlottesville? I believe there is: In addition to enhancing our security, which we have already done, we can continue to build relations with our neighbors.

- We will continue to be part of an interfaith Thanksgiving service.
- We will have joint programs of study.
- We will look for community projects that we can do together.
- Our small congregation will continue to serve dinner at the Salvation Army soup kitchen two Sundays per month.

That will be good for the Jewish community. It will be good for Fort Myers. We will do this all *mipnei darkhei shalom*, for the sake of the ways of peace.

I did a funeral about fifteen years ago for Izzy Oster. In meeting with his family, I learned how poor Izzy was as a boy. During the Depression, he shined shoes and did a song and dance routine on street corners to make extra money for his family. As an adult, he did very well in the scrap business. Izzy Oster never forgot where he came from. On Christmas day, he loaded up his station wagon with turkeys, groceries and toys and made deliveries to the poorest neighborhoods of Tampa.

We live in a time when some people create thick boundaries between us and them. We will never lose our identity as Jews who are concerned about the Jewish people. But we will also work hard to build relations with our neighbors. We will be part of the solution. We will act for the sake of the ways of peace.