

Everybody who is here in the synagogue today, with only perhaps a handful of exceptions, has been here before. High Holidays are part of our Jewish routine and thank God you come back year after year. I am glad you are here today. I am grateful you are here today. As a great Rabbi once said, there are other places you could be, other things you could be doing, and other Gods you could be serving. Had I the power, I would recreate this every Shabbat morning in our congregation. You wish for this too whether you realize it or not. Like every other congregational Rabbi in American history I dreamt of being the one who could fill the sanctuary each week as we do on the High Holidays. I still dream those dreams – I could not do my job if I didn't, and if I didn't, you probably shouldn't want me to be the Rabbi of this community. But on the off chance I don't fulfill that goal this year, I want to pose a question to you right now: other than the normal reasons of obligation and mitzvah and family and communal pressure, can we articulate why each year we come out in great numbers today? Why we take off weird days of the week that are, except for me, pretty inconvenient and for many of you, quite difficult?

I will tell you why. We come because the High Holidays hold out the promise of not just renewing our bonds to ourselves, our communities, our Judaism, and our God. These are all terribly important, and a lot of work, by a lot of people go into the High Holidays here so that we can create the conditions where some of this can actually be achieved. What I have come to understand over the course of my now 31st High Holiday season, is that we come each year to renew the promise of the Torah and our Rabbis and Sages that the High Holiday season can literally change our lives, and make us better men and women.

In fact, sometimes I think that instead of printing on our HH tickets when the Torah service begins or this is when the Rabbis sermon is expected to start, we print in big letters that this is when we begin the process of changing our lives. Because there is not a person among us here today, whose life is so perfect, so fulfilling, so evenly aligned with their potential that they couldn't find room for a little improvement. So we come. Even putting up with for some at least, a machzor that does not fully speak to us, inconvenient parking, and even alienation. But we come anyway. Not only because of the reasons that I just mentioned. All the obligations but also a sense of hope. The New Year promises endless possibilities and we want to meet the challenge. So here we are.

This year I want to challenge all of us who are here to change and improve, but instead of talking about generalities, focus on one particular area of concern, where all who are here today as well as those who are not here today, Jews and non-Jews, all of us who love this great nation and are concerned about its future need to improve. It has to do with what is often called race relations, but what I want to call today acceptance and even greater appreciation for the diversity that now defines 21st century America, and the responsibilities that come with that. And I want to say that because in truth we have very few spaces to talk about how a rapidly changing America is often quite threatening to people. And saying so does not make you a bigot or a racist. It simply means that rapid demographic change is challenging, and confusing, and even potentially risky but to react with fear is always a mistake. When faced with challenges, we must resist our all too human weakness toward thinking emotionally and instead

train ourselves – yes train ourselves to think and act differently. That's the essence of the High Holiday experience. To liberate ourselves from yesterday's patterns of behavior and do things better in the New Year.

I have been thinking about this entire issue for the many years. It has informed my writing and sermons over the years. But more recently I have thought of this issue through a series of events have occurred in our nation that all of you are familiar with, and that many have spoken to me about. I have been very interested and concerned about how our fellow citizens, and even members of our own congregation have reacted to them. Whether it was the violence in Ferguson MO exactly three years ago and the various reactions to that, or the response to the building of the Erev in Mahwah NJ, with all of our education and with all of the advances in American society since the Civil Rights era, several things have remained constant. Too many Americans hold views that are simply racist by even the kindest definition. Too many people hold deeply anti-Semitic views – over 20 years ago the ADL estimated at least 12% of Americans harbor such views and though I believe that number is smaller today, it is still way to big. Despite real progress in our nation over the past 50 years, the fear of the other remains as woven into the fabric of America as ever before. You all know this. There have been too many books written, too much discussion on your favorite news shows, and most importantly too many lives lost to this national crisis. We hate too much. We fear too much. And when we look into the eyes of the other, whether that other is a different race, religion, ethnic or cultural background, or one whose chosen gender does not match that of their birth, too often what we see are the differences, the strangeness, and let's be honest the downright weirdness,

instead of training ourselves to see in those very same eyes the “tzelem Elohim” the image of God. Each encounter is a test. And Americans are failing this test too often, with often bloody results, reinforcing our own bias and God forbid passing it on to our children and grandchildren.

So much has been written about why people hate, why some people are racist and anti -Semitic, and misogynist. I have been studying this question my entire adult life and most of the answers are well intentioned but lacking. Well intentioned to be sure but militantly avoiding a hard truth. So the perspective of the Torah and our Jewish heritage, is particularly important. Whether or not hate is instinctual or learned, Torah demands that we not hate. And if we are not capable of that, demands that we not act on that hatred. That we are capable of.

To illustrate my point let me tell you of a study from the University of Colorado that should really challenge us. The point of this study was to examine unconscious attitudes toward race. People were asked to play a video game, where they would take the role of a police officer confronted by a series of images of white or black men either holding guns, or wallets or cell phones. The goal was to shoot at anyone with a gun, yet holstering your weapon in the other cases. In control group after control group people routinely shot at black men more often than white, and were more likely to mistakenly shoot an unarmed black man than an unarmed white man.

Now let's ask ourselves honesty. Is anyone surprised by that?

I learned about this study from a column in the NY Times written by Nicholas Kristof, who in my opinion is as liberal and race sensitive as anyone at the NY Times. He also took this test and he also shot armed black men more quickly than he shot an armed white men, and holstered more quickly when confronted with unarmed whites than unarmed blacks. I am sure that was difficult for him to publish that, yet to his great credit he did not shy away from this truth. This terrible yet all too real truth.

But even more significant perhaps was this conclusion of the lead scientist of this experiment. He found no statistical differences between blacks or whites playing this game. His conclusion was “there is a whole culture that promotes the idea of aggressive black men...and therefore in our mind black men are associated with danger, whether we like it or not, whether we accept it or not, whether we admit it or not. There is a terrible amount of bias in our nation and we cannot help but absorb it.” Kristof’s conclusion, and for the record the Torahs conclusion are that these attitudes are real, they are out there. They are part of who we are. So we can waste time trying to figure out why this is. But that knowledge will not help us fix the problem. For the reality remains the same. But we need not surrender to our most base impulses.

I have always believed that human beings are hard wired for bias. The truth is that human beings have been on the lookout for “the other” since our ancestors roamed the savannah 75,000 years ago, and that remains instinctual for most people. And we spend a great deal of our lives learning how not to hate, and how not to act on the basis of what comes to us naturally.

We were born with inherent traits and characteristics—and not all of them so worthy. Not everything natural is necessary moral or good.

Theologically, you might say we are born morally neutral. And certainly our environment plays a role in determining the decisions we make about the other. There is no society that has ever erased bias. I am among many who believe that bias is also instinctual, that is, some of our bias is innate, it's there within us and we spend our lives trying to overcome it. Think about it. We don't teach children in our public schools techniques for bullying other people, do we? We spend a great deal of resources and energy trying to encourage and train our young men and women not to bully others. I'm 56 years old. I have been to college, I played on athletic teams, I served in the Navy and no one ever said to me – “Men, this is how you oppress women. This is how you take advantage of women.” Just like bullying, as a society we are now spending a great deal of energy and resources trying to teach young men and no so young men to act like menches, honorable dignified people. And I use these two examples because they exist in every single society since antiquity and the literature of all societies have contained stories of people behaving like this. So we can keep on talking about the origin of bias and bigotry and anti-Semitism and the like but the truth is, it has many sources. And all the analysis of the reasons why human beings hate, and act on that hatred, however interesting, means nothing when a person is having their life or liberty threatened as a result.

Our holy Torah teaches that the Jewish people are to observe 613 mitzvot - commandants, presented in the following manner. There are 248 that

command us to do something, like honor you mother and father or put a mezuzah up on your door post. And there are 365 that command us to refrain from doing something. And our Rabbis teach that there are more negative commandments than positive commandments because greater strength and wisdom and love of humanity is often expressed not only by what we are willing to do, but what we are willing to refrain from doing to achieve our ultimate goals. Why is it that the Torah tells us in over 40 different places not to oppress the poor, the widow, the stranger and the elderly? 40 times. Never once does it tell us, don't oppress the guy who owns a lot of land. Don't oppress the guy who owns a lot of sheep. But it doesn't have to because we know not to do that. The Torah knows that we do take advantage of those who are less than us, who we perceive are weaker than us. Like my earlier examples we do not need lessons how to do that. But we do need a strong moral code, enacted by a loving God, whose laws and teachings challenge us to do better, and if we cannot do better on our own, basically says to us, in clear and unambiguous language, stop this crap now. Because ultimately the clearest way to serve our God is to love his creation, whether that example of creation is as dark or as light as you are, or wears a yarmulke or a turban or nothing at all on his head – you get the idea. Or as God told Cain before he killed his brother Abel:

לָמָּה חָרָה לְךָ וְלָמָּה נִפְּלוּ פָּנֶיךָ : זֶה הָלוֹא אִם־תֵּיטִיב שְׂאֵת וְאִם לֹא תֵיטִיב
 לַפֶּתַח חַטָּאת רִבְיָץ וְאֵלֶיךָ תִּשְׁוֹקוּתוֹ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל־בּוֹ

Sin crouches by the door but you are capable of rising above it. It is a reminder to us that we may never fully root out and destroy our bigotry and bias fully, but what we are capable of is acknowledging our imperfections, and resolving to do the hard work of confronting them. And a no holds barred confrontation with the national epidemic of racism and bigotry and anti-Semitism and other forms of hatred in all it's guises and forms is what our nation needs from its responsible citizens right now.

We will not solve the problems of hate in America with quotes from the Bible or appeals to the angels of our better nature alone. But if I can share with you one message today. One that I have been thinking about and talking about for a while and one that we all need to work on this year. Our Jewish tradition is challenging us to ask hard questions today that if we have the courage to really confront, just may lead to new answers and new patterns of behavior that could truly free us from our normal way of looking at the world and truly help create a better reality for all. For all

L'Shanah Tovah