

Yom Kippur Evening – 5778  
Who Do I Want to Be at this Moment in History?  
September 29, 2017

We gather together at this sacred time of year, to take a good, hard look and ask ourselves: “Who are we today? And what does that tell us about what we should do in response to the challenges we face?”

I learned a valuable lesson about this question from Larry Dressler, an organizational consultant who specializes in managing high-heat conflict in large organizations.

Larry’s years of practice have been guided by a simple, but powerful question: What are the human qualities that enable one to bring peace, clarity, and hopefulness into situations that are filled with conflict, confusion, and despair? What an important question for our own time!

In his book, Standing in the Fire, Dressler relates an experience that helps ensure that we’re asking the right questions whenever we work on conflict or transformational change. He writes:

I was working with a group of federal law enforcement officers. A conflict between two groups in the agency had escalated over several months, and just prior to our first meeting, a few officers were caught vandalizing the vehicles of their co-workers by scratching the car doors with keys. The rift had taken on a life of its own and was now being played out in a dangerous cycle of revenge and retaliation.

At the first meeting, as the officers sat down and positioned their chairs, the seating configuration started to look more and more like two circles. The geography of the conflict was clear, and the tension in the room was palpable. People sat with crossed arms, hardly able to look at members of the other group. Just as we were about to begin, I noticed that everyone was wearing a gun.

All I could think about in that moment was the twenty or more guns strapped to people who were really angry at each other. My heart was beating fast, and my face felt flushed. I remember looking toward the exit for reassurance. In that moment, I had no idea what to do or say.

In the end, Dressler’s mediation was successful – not because he developed a clever strategy for dealing with hot-headed cops, but by turning within and managing his own reactivity. After years of practice, Dressler learned that no matter what is producing the heat in the room, he can manage his reactions and responses by controlling his own thermostat.

The key to dealing with conflict is to begin with the self. Dressler points out that conflict ignites two kinds of energy. One kind of energy connects to an age-old human survival instinct, the self-protective reaction. It's emotionally charged, instinctual and reactive. The second kind of energy is accessed only when we ask ourselves, **Who do I want to be in this moment?** This question ignites the energy of deliberate choice and wise action.

Tonight I'd like to suggest that when we face the challenges of racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and xenophobia in our country, whether from hate groups or our own government, our first question is not – What should we do? rather – Who do we want to be in this moment of history?

Only by asking – Who we want to be? – can we ignite the kind of energy that leads to deliberate choice and wise action. This applies to us as individuals, and it applies to us as a congregation when we seek to take action as a collective.

By beginning with – Who do we want to be? – we stand a much better chance of acting with integrity in ways that are true to our deeply held values, strengthening our resolve and commitment and even summoning courage in the face of our own vulnerability.

I hardly need to go into detail about the challenges we face today. Suffice it to say that the polarization, vitriol and hatred manifesting as racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia caught most of us by surprise. We've experienced a decade of improving prosperity, record low unemployment, advances in technology, healthcare and social progress, including achieving marriage equality in all 50 states. Hope inspired progress and progress inspired hope. Who would have thought that we would lose that and more in one election cycle?

The scale of the problem, the political realities and the amplitude of the rhetoric of hate can overwhelm us, leave us off-balance, disoriented and confused. Meanwhile, there is no shortage of urgent action that must be taken. We join protest rallies, write congressional representatives, donate money to causes we believe in, support organizations like the ADL and Southern Poverty Law Center who are on the front lines of defense against waves of hatred.

And, I can't express how proud I am that you voted to declare Beth El a sanctuary in support of immigrants – even before we fully understood what that might mean. That declaration was an inspired act of faith – you understood that we had to speak out – that we must not remain silent in the face of such hatred and evil.

How do we know that we must not remain silent? We know it from experience.

Speaking just before Martin Luther King at the March on Washington in 1963, Rabbi Joachim Prinz, urgently called on Americans to overcome silence and speak out on the issue of civil rights. He spoke from his experience as a rabbi serving in Berlin

under the Nazi regime, and he spoke as a Jew who knew our history. Listen to his words:

**I speak to you as an American Jew.**

**As Americans** we share the profound concern of millions of people about the shame and disgrace of inequality and injustice which make a mockery of the great American idea.

**As Jews** we bring to this great demonstration, in which thousands of us proudly participate, a two-fold experience -- one of the spirit and one of our history.

In the realm of the spirit, our fathers taught us thousands of years ago that when God created man, He created him as everybody's neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity.

From our Jewish historic experience of three and a half thousand years we say:

Our ancient history began with slavery and the yearning for freedom. During the Middle Ages my people lived for a thousand years in the ghettos of Europe. Our modern history begins with a proclamation of emancipation.

It is for these reasons that it is not merely sympathy and compassion for the black people of America that motivates us. It is above all and beyond all such sympathies and emotions a sense of complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience.

Beyond his powerful and moving oratory, beyond even the frightening and inspiring resonance with our own time – I am impressed with the way Rabbi Prinz's vision is deeply connected to his understanding of who we are as Jews, and how Jewish identity informs his idea about our obligation to take action.

First, as Jews, we are the purveyors of an ancient, but radical and profoundly unpopular idea: We have the audacity to insist that all people are created in God's image and that we are responsible for the dignity and integrity of all human beings. To be a Jew is to force all societies, governments and peoples to uphold the inalienable rights of all people to justice and equality.

Next, we learned this lesson the hard way – in the crucible of our own historic experiences. Over and over the Torah teaches us that we were slaves in Egypt so that we would know firsthand the suffering of all oppressed people throughout time. As Prinz put it: [To be a Jew is to develop] a complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience.

Before we can know what to do, we must know who we are.

When you know who you are, you can do amazing things. You obtain clarity of vision that enables you to recognize allies by our shared values and powerfully organize for change.

When you know where you come from, you minimize distractions that entice you to waste time and energy by acting on your own.

When you know who your people are, where we come from, and why we are here, we can rise above narrow self-interest – even that of self-preservation – and see that our task is nothing less than the redemption of all humanity, for that is the gift and the burden of the Jewish people.

May we learn from our history and be inspired by our tradition, and may God bless us in all our worthy endeavors. Amen.