

Rabbi Beth H Klafter
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TORAH: ONE Word for ONE World in the New Year

An English-speaking scholar was invited to deliver a lecture at a conference in Beijing. After her first sentence, she paused so the translator could translate her words into Mandarin. "Go ahead," he said, "I'll tell you when to stop." The scholar spoke for 15 minutes; the translator told her to pause and said just a few words in Mandarin. She continued. After another 15 minutes, the translator spoke another few words. Another 15 minutes, another few words. At the end of the one-hour lecture, the translator spoke just one sentence. The scholar didn't understand and asked the translator what he had said. He explained, "After the first 15 minutes, I said, 'Our speaker has nothing new to say.' After the next 15 minutes, 'Still, she has nothing new to say.' Another 15 minutes, same thing. Finally when you finished, I said to the audience, 'See, I told you, she had nothing new to say.'"

I, too, have nothing **new** to say on this sacred and solemn day. But, rest assured, I will not take one hour to tell you that.

I spoke on Erev Rosh HaShana about what we rabbis call "sermon anxiety." The true anxiety of sermons - this year especially - reflects the anxieties I think many of us are feeling. The anxiety that there is so much to say, so many topics; how can I or **we** begin to choose where to direct our attention or how exert our energies? In that sermon I also asked, "What can the wisdom of our Jewish tradition teach us when the world doesn't feel 'traditional' at all?"

To answer my own question, I have five thousand, seven hundred and eighty years of tradition and texts. So, yes, I have nothing **new** to say; only **ancient** lessons. Words which I hope can elevate our conversations, beyond the partisan rhetoric and divisiveness.

There are many values of Judaism which speak to us, overlapping in meaning and application with one another. Our history informs the way we experience and perceive the events of today. We are a community of individuals; our faith, especially as a Reform congregation, allows for different perspectives and opinions. I cannot attempt to address all of this. After all, I promised that I would not speak for an hour, as the scholar in Beijing did.

In truth, much of the wisdom on my mind today I have actually shared from this bema before. By my calculations, I have spoken 57 thousand, 559 words during the past six High Holiday seasons that I have served as your Senior Rabbi. In this year's sermons so far, I added another eight thousand, 812 to the count. Yes, I actually do have a chart recording all of this data.

A second century rabbi named Ben Bag Bag taught this: "Turn [the Torah] and turn it again, for all is in it; and through it, you shall see." (Avot 5.22) He is not only referring to the sacred scroll in the ark; it is Torah, in the larger sense - centuries of deep wisdom contained in Jewish texts.

This season especially, I have been turning and turning the Torah, seeking an anchor in a spinning world.

When I sit with Bar and Bat Mitzvah students (many of you here today) each student relates to their Torah portion in their own way. Sometimes they offer a viewpoint I had never considered. Sometimes they come up with an interpretation that others have previously shared. Either way, for that student, at that moment, it is a brand new insight.

This is the marvel and the gift of Torah. With each turn, we understand the world from a new angle or perspective. The Torah doesn't change; we do. That is why we read the same Torah portions year after year.

This Yom Kippur, I would like to offer a view of the Torah's wisdom through a slightly different lens than we typically emphasize; to a principle that encompasses others.

"Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu, Adonai Echad."

"Hear, O Israel," we pray, "Adonai, is our God, Adonai is ONE."

Abraham, patriarch of monotheism, followed the word of One God. The oneness of God is mirrored in the oneness of all. Judaism teaches an awareness that all beings are part of one whole. We are connected souls, a continuum across time and space.

Think of the symbol of the Torah itself: it is not a book with pages. When we celebrate Simhat Torah later this month, we will unroll the scroll to form one complete circle. As we read the last words of Deuteronomy at the end, we will immediately begin reading Genesis at the beginning. We are like that scroll, all points and people forming one circle of connection.

Last week, I cited a book called Changing the World from the Inside Out, by David Jaffe. He explains the unity of the world this way: *"Holiness is living in connection and alignment with what it means to be a soul in relationship with all life."* (pp 18-19) Our work in this world is to strive for this holiness and this unity.

This is the meaning of the word, 'Shalom,' commonly translated as peace. In English we think of peace as the absence of strife. In Hebrew, the root of the word means 'whole' or 'complete.' We praise God, "Oseh haShalom," the maker of wholeness and peace. We greet one another, "Shalom," meaning, "I hope you are whole." If I yearn for wholeness for myself, I can bring wholeness to the world around me. Conversely, when the world feels fragmented, so do I.

Our connection **to** the world begins with the creation **of** the world. Human beings are "*adam*," coming forth from "*adama*," the earth. God blessed the first people, as stewards of the planet and all it contains. And so we must care for the earth, protect it from the emergency of climate change to preserve it for generations to come because we are connected to all. As the climate and environment are damaged, so are we.

We are also connected to all people: I just read from Deuteronomy: "*Atem Nitzavim ha-yom, kol-chem.*" "You stand this day, ALL of you, the heads of your tribes, your elders and officers,

everyone in Israel, and the strangers in your camp. ***Kol-chem***, ALL of you.” The ancient words describe a gathering of all types of people. Spiritually, we stand together, one humanity, part of one whole.

Ben Azzai taught: “God created the entire human family from one human being [from Adam], so that no one could ever say, ‘my lineage is greater than yours.’” The Talmud continues: “Therefore was a single human being created to teach you that to destroy a single human soul is equivalent to destroying the entire world. And to sustain a single human soul is equivalent to sustaining the entire world.”

Understanding that we are all of one lineage changes our attitude and influences how we live. Today’s world tends to see people for what makes us different from one another, not as different expressions of one humanity. If we are one whole, then mistreating one part impacts the rest. To what can this be compared, asked the rabbis? “To sheep. When a sheep is hurt on its head or [on its foot or its torso], all of its body feels the pain.” (Midrash Rabbah Vayikra 4.6)

So it is not only the pursuit of justice and equity that motivates us, it can also be the underlying message of our unity. Like a sheep, when one part of humanity suffers, everyone experiences the suffering. Therefore, we are accountable to the whole.

The Talmud includes the phrase, “*Kol yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*, meaning, all of Israel are responsible for each other.” (Shevuot 39a)

We are radically connected to the rest of the Jewish people. The horrific tragedy at Tree of Life Synagogue nearly one year ago, the rampage at a California Chabad months ago, acts of anti-Semitism across the globe and hate crimes close to home cause us deep outrage, fear and anguish.

As we know, we are facing what some are calling a ‘new anti-Semitism.’ It is coming from the left and it is coming from the right. The causes and consequences are complex and alarming. Professor Deborah Lipstadt’s newest book, Anti-Semitism: Here and Now, was published just last January. Jonathan Weisman’s book called, (((Semitism))), is printed with triple parentheses before and after the word, reclaiming punctuation used by online harassers and anti-Semites.

We must heed the lessons of Elie Wiesel to respond to all that threatens our unity as a nation among the nations. Wiesel taught: “When you see the signs of hate, don’t wait to act.” He advises: “Don’t fight alone; build unity with other Jews and other communities against the forces that are trying to divide us.” Lastly, “Don’t be defined by the hate you are fighting.”

Most recently, Bari Weiss’ book, How to Fight Anti-Semitism, was published weeks before Rosh HaShana. In it she writes: “The long arc of Jewish history makes it clear that [we must] fight by waging an affirmative battle for who we are.... In these trying times, our best strategy is to build [] a Judaism, a Jewish people and a Jewish state that are not only safe and resilient but also

generative, humane, joyful and life-affirming. A Judaism capable of lighting a fire in every Jewish soul - and in the souls of everyone who throws their lot with ours.”

The rise in overt anti-Semitism threatens our own sense of wholeness, as individual Jews and as a community. It is also symptomatic of the fragmentation of all descendants of Adam and Eve.

The attacks against our shared, collective lineage takes many forms: in the injustices based upon race, ethnicity and religion, country of origin, the color of our skin or our gender expression and orientation; in the lack of rights and protections for those with different physical, social and cognitive abilities; in actions and policies limiting access to healthcare, food security and reproductive justice, to voting and to an education.

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai taught a parable:

“Many people were on a ship. One of them took out a drill and started drilling underneath their own seat. The others said, ‘What are you doing?’ ‘What do you care? It is only underneath my seat.’ The other people replied, ‘Fool. You’re drilling beneath yourself, but the water will come in and we will all be lost.’” (Midrash Yelamedenu, Otzar Ha Midrashim 225)

We are all on one boat: we and the past; we and our future generations.

“Uvacharta ba-chayim, l’ma-an t’chiyeh atah v’zarecha,” I read in today’s Torah portion. “I call heaven and earth to witness this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore, choose life, that you and your children may live.” (Deut 30.19)

In 5774/2013, I preached about being ‘moral heroes for our children,’ by protecting them today and by acting to ensure that they are inheriting a safe and just world. This year, as then, there are young adults in our midst who are leading the way for us: the survivors of the Parkland tragedy fighting each day for gun control; Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teen, protesting against climate change and our own children sounding the alarms. From our youth, we have much to learn.

A Midrash teaches *“When a child walks down the road, a company of angels goes ahead proclaiming, ‘Make way for the image of the Holy One.’”* (Deuteronomy Rabbah 4.4) Our world will be one when we see the ‘image of the Holy One’ in every human soul, all around us.

To make everything unified and whole is Tikkun Olam, to repair the world. As I expressed last week on Erev Rosh HaShana, this task is complex and overwhelming. Though we may feel “daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief,” if we accept the oneness of God and the oneness of humanity, then each of us is responsible to work for wholeness and oneness around us.

The message of that sermon is another deep wisdom of Judaism, contained in this verse from Pirke Avot (2.21). Rabbi Tarfon taught: *“Lo Alecha Ham’la’cha lig’mor, v’lo atah ben chorein*

l'hee-ba-tail mee-mena. You are not required to complete the work but neither are you at liberty to abstain from it.”

Judaism affirms that human actions matter; that doing what is just and what is right has an impact. We all have a role to play, as one human being connected to others. I read recently, “I cannot do all the good that the world needs. But the world needs all the good I can do.” Each word, each act, each moment and each individual can make a difference.

A Yiddish Proverb advises: *“You cannot control the wind but you can adjust your sails.”*

On the High Holidays, we come together to find the anchors in the deep wisdom of our tradition. The miracle and strength of Judaism is our eternal hope for the future, faith in humanity, and the vision of a messianic age.

I spoke about hope in 5775/2014. *Tikvah*, hope, is wound into the ancient words of Torah and in the national anthem of the modern State of Israel. We are a people of hope even -- perhaps especially -- in the face of adversity.

That is why a broken wall in Jerusalem is the holiest place for the Jews. The Kotel links us to our people’s history, but still, it is broken. Why do we stand there when there are many other beautiful edifices? Because Jews know that this is not a perfect world. As long as the world is not perfect, we are not perfect and we don’t stand in a perfect place to express our deepest prayers. To live with hope is a great challenge of our time. But to live without hope is to risk everything we have and everything that we are.

Though we may feel we are living in the eye of a storm, caught in its crashing waves, we hold onto hope.

See, I told you I had nothing new to say. And, yes, I said it in less than one hour. The messages of my High Holiday sermons form one whole: the deep wisdom of Torah and the power of community is our anchor; Torah lights our way.

And so I end my words today with a prayer similar to those I shared on the first evening of these Days of Awe:

Avinu Malkenu, God, our Parent and our Ruler, May you grant our souls and our world the divine, precious gift of Shalom, of wholeness, connectedness and oneness.

Avinu Malkenu, may we navigate the waters of this world, guided by the words and wisdom of Torah.

Avinu Malkenu, in the year 5780 may our sense of hope and strength be restored.

AMEN