

D'var Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5773

About three weeks ago I got a call from the Jewish Week. They wanted to know if I was going to address the upcoming elections and the situation with Iran in my High Holy Days' divrei Torah.

The call achieved two unrelated things: First, it forced me to admit to the reporter and to myself that I hadn't yet considered the themes for my High Holy Days' divrei Torah. Second, it got me interested in the ongoing debate regarding the relationship between faith and politics.

For centuries, what moved Jewish opinion throughout the world on almost every single topic –including politics- was the question, "Is it good or bad for the Jews?" In other words, the unstable situation of Jews around the world in the last 2000 years and the primary importance of Jewish physical and spiritual survival was at the center of every major Jewish decision making process.

We learned to count on a sixth sense, one that filters everything that happens around us in terms of "good" or "bad" for the Jews, and even if many American Jews believe, mistakenly in my opinion, that this "old" question is part of the past, for Jews in France, Venezuela, Argentina, Germany, Spain and Iran, it is very much part of the present.

It is not surprising that Jews all over the world created a joke out of it. In America, it is Jake who tells his zeyde that the Red Sox won and in Argentina it is Boca Juniors –the local soccer team- that won, but the zeyde's answer is the same: "Is it good or bad for the Jews?"

So, is a second term of a well-known President Obama good for the Jews or is it bad? Is a less-known Mitt Romney maybe better or worse? And can we agree on what is good and what is bad? And regarding Iran, should the United States of America cooperate in a military action against Iran, or not? And if not, should Israel attack by itself? And if the answer is yes, should Israel attack now or should it wait?

As you probably know, the leadership of the Jewish community is split on how to answer these questions and so is the leadership of the State of Israel, and the accusations between the different factions go all the way from "self-hating Jews" to "racists."

You all know the old joke about a Jewish congregation arguing over whether one should stand or sit during the Shema Yisroel. Half of the congregation said one should sit, the other half insisted one should stand. The fighting became so bad that the congregation was split in two, each half contending that they knew the tradition in that synagogue.

Finally, the rabbi decided to visit a one hundred-year-old member of the synagogue who was living in a nursing home. "Now, tell me," said the rabbi, "what is our tradition?" "Should we stand during the Shema?" "No," said the old man. "That is not our tradition." "Well, then," said the rabbi, "should we sit during the Shema?" "No," said the old man, "that is not our tradition."

"But we need to know what to do," said the rabbi, "because our congregation members are fighting relentlessly among ~~each other~~ themselves." "That," said the oldest member of the congregation, "that is our tradition."

Dear friends, although I myself don't have the answers to the above political questions, I believe I know what is good for the Jews: What really would be very good for the Jews is to change the punch line of our well known joke. One half of our people is divided on these important issues more than ever before, and they keep fighting uncompromisingly with each other, in what seems to be "our tradition," while the other half, a growing half, couldn't care less. This uncompromising fighting, I know for sure, isn't good for the Jews in America, isn't good for the Jewish people, and isn't good for Israel either.

What is good for Jews everywhere, today more than ever, is to stop highlighting what divides us and start focusing on what unites us, what brings us together.

In today's Torah reading, twice we encounter the expression: "Veyeilchu shneihem yachdav" – "The two of them walked together," one to sacrifice and the other to be sacrificed.

At the beginning, Isaac doesn't figure out the true purpose of the journey. They just walked together:

"...and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and the two of them walked together" (Genesis 22: 6).

Then Isaac sees that something is missing, that something is wrong and challenges his father:

"...And he (Isaac) said, Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering; and the two of them walked together." (Genesis 22:7-8)

Can you think of two more separate stories, of two more separate narratives?

And yet the Torah tells us: "Veyeilchu shneihem yachdav" – "The two of them walked together" (Genesis 22:8).

Someone mistakenly made us believe that in order to walk together we need to be on the same page, on the same side of the story. An indeed, at the beginning of the biblical narrative Abraham and Isaac walk together because their stories are the same, because nobody asked any question yet, because nobody voiced any disagreement.

However, after the few verses that embody the short dialogue between father and son, the reader gets a feeling that our biblical heroes are on different pages, on different sides of the story, on different stories. And yet, the Torah reinforces the message: "Veyeilchu shneihem yachdav" – "The two of them walked together."

We don't have to be on the same page to walk together. It is good to have different opinions. You don't need to agree with your neighbor. The key is not to let your different points of view drive you apart.

Republican Jews, Democratic Jews, and undecided Jews, doves and hawks, AIPAC supporters and J-Street supporters, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Ultra-Orthodox Jews, American, Israeli, Russian and Bukharian Jews, traditionalists and egalitarians, those who cherish old Tudor homes, and those who prefer new high

column homes - we all have different stories, and yet, we can be part of the same big Story.

I believe it is possible. It isn't easy, but it is possible. It isn't easy to bring together people who have diametrically different stories; it isn't easy to share a meal, or a project with someone we believe is wrong; it isn't easy, but it can be done!

And how do we do it?

Intellectually, we do it by highlighting in the text of our shared story, what we have in common instead of what divide us. As Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the British Mandatory Palestine, remarked, referring to the secular Jewish Zionists: "What unites us is much greater than what divides us."

Rav Kook tried to build and maintain channels of communication between the various Jewish sectors, including the secular Jewish Zionist leadership, the Religious Zionists, and more traditional non-Zionist Orthodox Jews. His empathy towards the non-religious elements aroused the suspicions of his more traditionalist haredi opponents. Rav Kook remarked that he was fully capable of rejecting, but since there were enough practicing rejection, he preferred to fill the role of one who embraces.

We know too well how our stories differ, what bring us apart, but if we are going to do what is really good for the Jews, we must focus on what brings us together.

If you are a "frabrenter"¹ Jewish Republican who lives in Queens, who doesn't get how a Jew can be a Democrat, try to picture in your mind a "frabrenter" Jewish Democrat, also living in Queens, who doesn't get how a Jew can be a Republican, and then ask yourself what both of you have in common. If you believe that every single inch of the Land of Israel is holy and non-negotiable, try to picture a fellow congregant, sitting one row in front of you, or maybe one row behind you, who believes that non-concession is too little when it comes to achieving peace; and

¹ From Yiddish: burning one, enflamed, passionate.

then again ask yourself how can both of you walk together, despite your deep and real differences.

It is a mental exercise, but a necessary one we don't do enough.

Practically, we must find opportunities to do things together with fellow Jews from our congregation and from other congregations, in our neighborhood, and in our community, who don't see eye to eye with us. We must push ourselves to share programs with them, to break bread with them, to wish them Shabbat Shalom when we see them in the street, and to surprise them occasionally with a small gift.

Do you want to know what is good for the Jews? What I just told you is very good for the Jews! Much better than what any candidate can deliver to us!

I challenge all of you today to take the first step, to go the extra mile, to give it a try. Start small, push yourself. Many times we proclaim that we are ready to make a big sacrifice for our people. What I am asking from you is a small sacrifice in comparison. Do it for yourself, for your children, and for the thousands of alienated Jews who don't want to belong to a divided people and who are looking for a story to inspire them; you can be that story!

May Hashem give us the courage to change a tradition of strife and contention.

Avinu Malkeinu, bless our families with peace. Teach us to appreciate the treasure of our lives. Help us always to find contentment in one another. Save us from dissension and jealousy; shield us from pettiness and rivalry. May selfish pride not divide us; may pride in one another unite us. Help us to renew our love for one another continually. In the light of Your Torah grant us, the people Israel, and all Your creatures everywhere, health and fulfillment, harmony, peace and joy.²

May we all be blessed with a good, sweet, healthy and meaningful year!

² Adapted from Rabbi Nathan Sternhartz of Nemirov (1780-1845). Ukraine.