

Rosh Hashanah DAY 1 5771 Breaking down walls

The minister G. Jeffrey MacDonald, a minister in the United Church of Christ, commented on the recent series of articles describing clergy burnout. According to him, pastor burnout has to do with the EXPECTATIONS of congregations across the country.... He says that when his congregants spoke to him about what they wanted, they gave him a very specific message about his sermons, which many of his colleagues said they had received, as well. "Keep it to 10 minutes, tell some jokes, and make everyone feel good."

It actually doesn't worry me. I'm lucky: I have a 3-day-a-year job, so I don't really get burnout... Plus, it's a free service! You're not really paying (although of course we welcome donations!) so you can't fire me. I'll try to keep it short-ISH, I might throw some jokes in, but be forewarned... I refuse to make you feel good this year!

Because we all know, that would be the easy way out. The thing is, we've gotten pretty comfortable in our ways lately, as individuals and even as a community. Other prisoners would say he had been CORRUPTED by the other world and they would WARN each other not to go out into that world.

Everyone is convinced that his or her own reality is the ONLY one. It sounds far too familiar. We stay in our own little cave, and we believe THIS is the real world... and God forbid, anyone would challenge what we think to be true... we decide THEY are In fact, as more and more studies show, most of us are refusing to step OUT of our comfort zones.

This is described perfectly in a book by Bill Bishop: "The Great Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart."

As he writes, "America may be more diverse than ever coast to coast, but the places where we live are becoming increasingly crowded with people who live, think, and vote like we do. This social transformation didn't happen by accident. We've built a country where we can all choose the neighborhood and synagogue and news show and blog — most compatible with our lifestyle and beliefs. And we are living with the consequences of this way-of-life segregation. Our country has become so polarized, so ideologically inbred, that people don't know and can't understand those who live just a few miles away."

Bishop describes a world where people only WAbout the very crazy, dysfunctional families of Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Yishmael... Why? Because we HAVETCH the news that matches their own opinion, only READ the blogs that fit their own world views, and only TALK to people who agree with them. In fact, he describes people who don't even want to SEE ideas that disagree with their own. On a left-wing email list, one person wrote in to someone who had written an opposing view. "I'm really not interested [in] being surprised by right-wing e-mail in my in box, no matter what its guise. It makes me feel bad, and I don't like it."

I get it. It IS a scary time... in a world where I feel increasingly vulnerable, I want to be surrounded by people who agree with me... anything I can do to help myself feel safer, right?

No... Building walls around us cannot be the answer.

What happened to us? People used to know how to go to dinner parties and socialize with people who disagree with them... We live in neighborhoods where we only encounter those who agree with us...and the worst of it is—even among the most self-proclaimed “open-minded” folks, there is SUCH demonization of the other side.

WHAT has happened to us?

It's as if we're living in Plato's cave. The Greek philosopher warned of this kind of behavior over two thousand years ago when he taught the allegory of the Cave.

As you might remember from Philosophy 101, he described a world in which what people took to be real was in fact an illusion. Imagine a cave, said Plato, which is inhabited by prisoners who have been chained and held immobile since childhood: not only are their arms and legs held in place, but their heads are also fixed, compelled to gaze at a wall in front of them. They understand this to be the whole world, the shadows they see to be real people and the echoes they hear to be real voices. If we were to take a prisoner out of the cave and show him the real world, he would not recognize real people or real voices because he was so used to the shadows and echoes. He would actually be angry for being drawn out of his cave. Of course, eventually, if he were dragged into the sunlight, he would begin to understand the true nature of reality. And then he would consider his original cave pathetic. And if he RETURNED to the cave, the DANGEROUS.

OUR tradition tells the same story... of Shimon bar Yochai, the great mystic, who many believe is the author of the Zohar, the central text of the Kabbalah. In trying to hide from Roman persecution, bar Yochai and his son hid in a cave for 12 years.

After having spent twelve years learning Torah constantly, he left the cave and noticed a farmer plowing and planting a field. "Why is he wasting his precious time? He should be studying Torah!" He looked at him with his penetrating holy eyes and the man immediately turned into a heap of bones. A heavenly voice called out . "Do you want to destroy my world? Go back to the cave." He spent another year in the cave... When he came out, he was able to see a man gathering myrtle leaves and when he heard that the man was gathering the myrtle leaves for Shabbat, he could see the holiness in the everyday act. This time, he was permitted to reenter the world.

See, our tradition is clear, a cave is no place to learn to live in the world! God doesn't want us to live secluded and to JUDGE everyone with our penetrating and destructive eyes. The point of our world is to ACCEPT others, not to judge them.

No matter how much we might not want to interact with those with whom we disagree, we cannot AFFORD to live in a cave. It is actually DANGEROUS to the way we live and the way we think.

On the spectrum of the world community and all the opinions that are out there all over the world, you would think that New York Jews would be kind of a small blip of opinion. But even within just the Jewish community in Metropolitan New York, we act as though those who disagree with us might as well be MURDERERS.

Gary Rosenblatt, the editor of the Jewish Week, had to actually admonish his readers... their letters had gotten TOO mean.

"While communal diversity is a point of pride, the sad reality is that our community is growing ever more divided, on issue after issue, and now is as bitterly polarized as I've seen in the last 17 years, since I began editing The Jewish Week.

I see it each week in the letters to the editor and comments submitted both to our print and online editions, more than half of which we do not publish because of their ugly tenor.

This isn't a partisan issue. From some on the right, President Barack Obama is derided as a Muslim bent on destroying Israel. Liberals are viewed not just as naïve, but virtually treasonous. From others on the left, Israel is perceived as evil, the only nation in the world whose very existence is questioned. Obama is praised for pressuring Jerusalem, and conservatives are seen as warmongers.

And so it goes.

Name a contentious issue, and the two sides line up to spew their vitriol, each convinced the other's policies would bring disaster. There is a great deal of anger, fear and contempt expressed.

But no real dialogue, little if any appreciation for the other side, and less and less willingness to hear another point of view in the hopes of reaching common ground.”

Rosenblatt presents the paper’s new rules for letters to the editor.

“If there is any hope for the future, we can and must do better.”

This matters, because it affects who we are as a people... (The people of Israel USED to stand as ONE. Not today.) It affects who we are as citizens of the world, and it CERTAINLY affects who we are as human beings. The way we speak to each other—the way we speak ABOUT each other-- on a political level, trickles down into our personal relationships as well. How could it NOT? We become the kinds of people who RUSH to JUDGMENT, who gossip all the time, who are filled with meanness.

Believe me, that’s who I’ve become. Maybe BECAUSE it’s such a scary time, I’ve curled back up into my safe zones...those people who agree with me and tell me I’m right... I end up filled with condemnation for those who don’t agree with me... but that’s kind of the easy way out, isn’t it? And the High Holidays demand that we give a hard look at our own behaviors, and this one isn’t working. I don’t want to be a people who gets YELLED at by our local Jewish newspaper. For any of us. And I think it’s my job to say that today... not to let us have our easy little sermon, but to challenge us to open ourselves up and LISTEN to what the other side is saying.

The Talmud tells of the great academies of Hillel and Shammai, who disagreed on almost everything. According to the Talmud, a voice came from heaven and said, “Elu v’Elu divrei Elohim Chayim.” “These and these are the words of the living God.” Now of course, the last part of the sentence is so fabulous... “But the law is always like Hillel.” HUH? How can both be the words of the living God but only one of them can be right? This, my friends, is the magic of the Talmud! The Talmud explains, the academy of Hillel was always filled with humility, and they acted with the ultimate CIVILITY... ready to DEFEND the views of their rivals at all times. They would actually present the others’ views first and THEN they would say their own. And so they merited to have the law decided in their favor.

Rosh Hashanah DEMANDS that we be willing to LISTEN to one another. Think about our Torah reading for today. Instead of reading about the Garden of Eden... about the creation story which we believe happened on THIS day... we read a to be able to face one another...we can’t just kick one another out the minute we feel a little discomfort. Instead we have to model ourselves after God, who could hear the cry of the young Ishmael “ba’asher hu sham.”--- as he was right there. We need to listen to one another AS THEY ARE...not as we want them to be, but AS THEY ARE, WHERE THEY ARE. No matter what.

The Talmud offers examples of this kind of openness. Let's be clear, there were some serious rivalries in the Talmud, and not everyone was always kind to one another. But one of the most frequent phrases in the Talmud is the question that appears at the end of a disproved theory. "Mah Salka Daatach?" What was going through his mind?

What if we were to ask this ourselves, about that perfect villain we have hated in the news, or about the guy at work with whom we always disagree, or the family member who gets under our skin: "What was going through his mind?" Not "What was he thinking?!!" but "what might be his perspective?" "How could I understand her point of view?" How could that change the way we function in the world?

I probably could have told more jokes in this sermon, but I really don't believe that's my job. Instead, I want to challenge you... to challenge US... to not just hide in our cozy little caves. Those caves may feel comfortable for a moment, but it is hard to come out of them. This year, let's be willing to risk feeling uncomfortable. Let's be willing to face the discomfort of hearing others' viewpoints and to think before we jump to condemnation. Let's challenge ourselves to think differently about the way we THINK in the world, about the way we respond to those who disagree with us. "These and these are the words of the living God..." If we ACTED as though we really BELIEVED that, we could model a world that could be a lot less scary. It won't be easy...but it will certainly be worth it. *Elohai Netzor Leshoni Mera...* God, keep my tongue from evil... for I will surely need Your help. Amen.