

## Rabbi Steve Segar's Rosh Hashanah Message 5766

### When Holy Months Overlap

*Shanah Tovah* and *Gut Yontif* to everyone. It is personally very gratifying and uplifting for me to be here with all of you today as together we begin our collective journey into our new sacred year of 5766. May it bring blessings to us all.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Days of Awe — Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the days between — is that they aim explicitly at levels of human experience that are generally much more in the background at other times of the year.

Nearly every other major Jewish holiday operates most powerfully on the level of Jewish peoplehood. Whether we look at the three pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot, or at the historically later celebrations of Hanukah and Purim, we find holidays that commemorate or claim to commemorate some important event in our people's history. Not so for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; they are completely different in feel and orientation.

While they clearly have roots dating back to the biblical period, over the course of the past 2,000 years they have evolved into days that focus us much more on our individual journeys through life on one hand and on the other, on our identities as part of the global human community. One of our Rosh Hashanah readings described them as *holy days*, rather than *holidays*.

Rosh Hashanah as a commemoration of the creation of the universe is an important theme for this holy day. Yet all too often the other important themes of this day - Judgment and Repentance - seem to push aside the theme of Creation.

We find this Creation theme in our prayer book at several critical and dramatic moments in our worship service. In the texts immediately following each of the three sets of Shofar calls in the Musaf service we read "Today the world is born. Today shall stand before you all the beings of the cosmos as one community, to do your will with a perfect heart, to be renewed with their creator in the universal sacredness of life." We find other examples in the Amidah section of the service and elsewhere.

This explicit and powerful use of universalistic language within a prayer context stands out as exceptional in comparison to the liturgies of the other holidays and even that of Shabbat.

Clearly one dimension of our reflection during these days should be the nature of our relationship to the human community as a whole, as well as our people's place in the global family of nations and cultures.

This year there is an additional reason, generated from beyond the boundaries of our community, for us to examine the universal theme built into this Holy Day. It is a rare calendric coincidence. Let me explain.

Our Jewish calendar uses a combination of solar and lunar principles. Holiday observances, while they shift somewhat back and forth from year to year, remain tied to the same seasons over time. Thus, Passover always comes in early to mid Spring; Sukkot always arrives during the Fall harvest.

The Muslim calendar also employs the lunar cycle to mark the beginning and end of months. But it does not make use of the solar cycle to correct for the calendrical drift that naturally takes place otherwise. For this reason, over the years the holy month of Ramadan moves from one season to the next, regressing about 11 days each year.

For the first time in 30 years, our Holy month of Tishri coincides with the Muslim Holy month of Ramadan. We are now beginning a three year cycle of overlap that will not recur until 2028. I stand with others in the Jewish world who see this overlap of Jewish and Muslim holy time as a three year window of opportunity for increased understanding and dialogue. It is a chance we must not squander.

Built into our High Holy Day liturgy is a stimulus for talking about the relationships between Muslims and Jews. It is in the readings from the Torah that the ancient rabbis assigned to the two days of Rosh Hashanah. How striking that on the first day of Rosh Hashanah we read about the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's camp in Genesis chapter 21, and on the second day the well known story of the binding of Isaac in chapter 22.

The mythic ancestors of Muslims and Jews respectively are the sons of Abraham - Ishmael and Isaac. On these Holy Days, while we do not read the entire narrative, it is nevertheless evoked by the presence of these two chapters. Two other significant events from this text deserve our attention here. The first occurs a few chapters later as Ishmael and Isaac come together for the first time since Ishmael's expulsion, to bury their shared father Abraham. Our scripture holds the message that only through shared grief and pain can these two individuals, and perhaps their communities, find a path to reconciliation.

But the text goes beyond this assertion as it describes Isaac's decision to take up residence following his father's burial at a place called "*Be'er the Chai Roi*", which roughly translates to "the well of the living One who sees me." This location is the same one that Hagar escaped to when she was chased out of Abraham's camp for the first time, as told in Genesis chapter 16. This verse contains a stunning implication: namely that the experience of sharing grief and a sense of responsibility with his half brother, and perhaps the fear and pain he carries within him from his near sacrifice at the hands of his father, has opened up within Isaac the potential for radical identification with someone who had been his sworn enemy.

Isaac's connection to Hagar through his choice to settle in the very spot whose name she had chosen grounds the notion of a positive Jewish-Muslim dynamic in the very earliest memories that we have of one another.

As we dig more deeply into the prospects for invigorating a contemporary Jewish-Muslim conversation, another important source to explore is the history of Jewish communities living under Islamic rule in Spain, the Middle East and North Africa.

The cultural connections that were forged between our two religious communities from the very advent of Islam, and then reinforced throughout the medieval period, are still clearly discernible by anyone who studies our traditions side by side today. They range from parallels in language and terminology, to a shared view of sacred scripture as a source of law and from the joint need to deal with the competing influences of philosophy and mysticism, to commonalities in dietary and other kinds of ritual observances.

Yes, there is much that is ambiguous and difficult in our historical relationship with the Muslim world. Yet it is also clear that we can find much that supports the assertion that our two peoples are ethnic and spiritual cousins. Our communities can enrich each other as we create new avenues for communication and cooperation.

If we want to get a fully rounded picture of the challenges and possibilities of increased Jewish-Muslim contact, we cannot ignore recent history. Our times have seen the emergence of the greatest tension between Jews and Muslims, the result of the large scale return of Jews to Palestine, the founding of the State of Israel and the establishment of Jewish sovereignty in a historically Muslim dominated part of the world.

A recent book by an American-Israeli Journalist, Yossi Klein-Halevi, presents a compelling treatment of this tension and its impact on the interfaith encounter between Jews and Muslims. In his book, entitled *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden*, Halevi describes a journey he takes into the religious worlds of Islam and Christianity.

He writes that the Oslo peace process, by ignoring the religious dimension of the conflict, drew its main support from the most secularized elites on both the Palestinian and Israeli sides. A traditionally oriented Jew, Halevi believes that the prospects for a long term peace in the Middle East are tied to an open and respectful encounter between and among all of the religious traditions that see the Land of Israel in general, and Jerusalem in particular, as sacred space.

On Halevi's moving and troubling journey he finds many in the Muslim community who do

not have room in their world view for a non-Muslim religious voice. This is in accord with traditional Muslim belief that the Koran represents a purified and corrected perspective on Monotheism, in contrast to the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity which are viewed as coming from an authentic Divine source, but as having been corrupted by human error over time.

However, Halevi also meets individuals, mostly from the Sufi or mystical branch of Islam, who are able to view the Jewish-Muslim divide in what Rabbi Yitz Greenberg calls a truly pluralistic way. This means it is possible to ascribe validity to multiple faith traditions even where there exist contradictions between them.

On the basis of these encounters, HaLevi communicates a challenging, but not hopeless view of contemporary Jewish Muslim relations.

What are his sources of hope?

One has to do with his recognition that as a global religious community, Islam is just coming to grips with modernity in all its complexity and ambiguity. He notes that this is a process that we as Jews have somewhere between a one and two century head start on and with which Christians have even more experience. He imagines that a generation from now the social and religious topography of Islam will look a lot more like today's Judaism and Christianity than is true at present.

Another source of hope is the precedent of the radical shift in the relationship between the Jewish community and the Roman Catholic church. Halevi argues compellingly that no one could have predicted the openness and conciliatory stance towards Judaism and the State of Israel that Vatican II engendered, less than 50 years ago. A transformation this profound enables him to imagine a parallel change taking place between Judaism and Islam as well, even when there is very little concrete evidence that such a change may be in the making.

A third reason not to despair, writes Halevi, are the subtle yet identifiable points of religious change that are taking place in some parts of the Muslim community. He singles out American Muslims as a potentially powerful force in the transformation of global Islam. He strongly encourages those of us in the American Jewish context to seize the opportunity to foster greater tolerance and understanding between our communities; an opportunity that is inherent in the greater openness and democratic orientation of American Muslims.

Finally, and perhaps most movingly, Halevi speaks of the beauty and depth that he, a religious Jew seeking greater understanding of his spiritual cousins, has personally encountered in Islam. He experienced enough to become convinced that our two traditions could teach some significant things to one another if we can ever get past the mutual distrust and alienation that plague our contemporary relationship.

Now I imagine, even after all of this exploration, that there are many who might ask why we should extend ourselves to the Muslim community given the tensions that exist between us and their apparent lack of interest in extending themselves toward us.

I believe that there are some good answers to that question that draw from both pragmatic and moral considerations.

First, Jews and Muslims are both small religious minorities within American society. As such, we have significantly overlapping domestic political agendas that include protecting our religious rights as well as defending the separation of church and state. We both face the common challenge of passing on an ancient culture to the next generation, a culture grounded in a sacred language and embracing a commitment to core religious values often at odds with the general culture of American society. In facing these challenges, both communities have much to gain from figuring out how to collaborate with one another.

Besides these shared areas of concern, I believe that the combination of our tradition's values and our own historical experience of prejudice and oppression call on us to show support to our Muslim neighbors for whom life in post 9-11 America has been filled with the threat and sometimes the reality of bigotry, violence and discrimination. Unfortunately we know all too well what it is like to live in such an inhospitable environment. We also occupy a unique niche in

American society as an identifiable minority group that has achieved widespread success, acceptance and integration. We are thus well positioned to help bridge the gap between American Muslims and the more Western segments of American society.

Seen from this angle, we would both be living up to the best that is in our tradition, as well as serving our own long term communal interests, if we could muster the courage to speak out when we see that Islam as a whole is being unfairly vilified, or when the Muslim community at large is being smeared with the broad brush of implied terrorist connections.

Nothing would go further towards the goal of disabusing our Muslim neighbors of the mistaken and fear-based perceptions many of them may have of us than to be confronted with explicit and public acts by members of the Jewish community on behalf of American Muslims.

Beyond this, we owe it to ourselves and to the forces for democracy and modernity within Islam to pay attention to the subtle but positive processes that are unfolding within the Islamic world itself and also, in some cases between Jews and Muslims.

Our mainstream news media works hard to assure that we will always know when there is bad news in the world. But we cannot rely on those sources to keep us informed about the full range of developments in this or any other arena. Here are just a few examples of some unpublicized stories that are worth knowing about:

Item: The parents of murdered Israeli-American journalist Daniel Pearl have created an organization in their son's memory whose sole purpose is to foster intercultural understanding, with a special focus on Jewish-Muslim relations.

Item: King Abdullah II of Jordan, in his recent visit to Washington DC, had an unprecedented meeting with 60 leading American rabbis. He underscored the many ways the Islam and Judaism are connected and called for unity between our peoples in the face of extremist distortions of religion and the violence that flows from it.

Item: Several newly formed organizations of progressive Muslims in the United States and Great Britain, through their websites, have been calling for the development of a new Islamic constitution whose articles establish freedom of speech, freedom of religion, gender equality and the right to democratic representation. They support all of these rights with verses from the Koran.

I do not present this information to convince anyone that there are no problems to deal with, but do assert that the dynamics of the Muslim world are more complex and more hopeful than some commentators would claim. And I do put before you the suggestion that we in the Jewish community should educate ourselves about those complexities and encourage the progressive forces that are already in play.

One of my prayers for the coming year is that we will be able to bring about and participate in opportunities to establish the barest sense of trust and recognition between Jews and Muslims.

A Muslim leader Yossi Klein HaLevi interviewed for his book, asked what could be done to move forward the relationship between our communities, gave this simple yet powerful reply. "Be seen together in public. Get used to occupying the same public space for a common purpose."

One such event is planned here in Cleveland for Sunday November 13th, when a group of Jews, Christians and Muslims will gather together under the auspices of InterAct (a) to discuss and compare the teachings and practices of our respective holy seasons.

May our prayers for peace and friendship between all cultures and peoples of the world be strengthened by taking these simple steps towards human connection.

***Shana Tovah umutukah*** to us all.

***Rabbi Steve***

(a) InterAct Cleveland is an interfaith ministry — a coalition of more than 65 faith-based communities, campus groups and community organizations.