

Shanah tovah and Good Yuntif to everyone,

Jewish tradition is complex across a number of different dimensions, and this complexity can at times pose a challenge, both to our understanding of the nature of Jewish identity, and to our discernment of the values that should ideally influence our behavior. One aspect of this complexity lies in the difficulty of placing Judaism neatly into any sociological category, because in some ways, it looks like a religion, in others like an ethnicity and in still others, like a national group. Another aspect of our tradition's complexity, and it's this one I would like to focus on today, is the fact that from its inception, our people has laid a strong emphasis on both our own protection and survival, as well as on pursuing justice in the wider world beyond the boundaries of our community. These twin orientations have been given a number of different names over the years but are most well known as particularism and universalism, or as tribal and prophetic Judaism.

While both of these principles have always been present to one degree or another in Jewish life, there has never been agreement among Jewish thinkers on the ideal balance that should exist between them. It's also the case that specific historical circumstances have always played an important role in influencing the relative weight given to either one of them, as well as the extent to which they are seen to be fundamentally in tension with one another, or fundamentally complimentary.

I've always been intrigued by the fact that of all the holidays in our calendar, it is Rosh Hashannah that best exemplifies within Jewish life the blending and integration of these two principles. Nearly all the other sacred occasions of the Jewish calendar are explicitly tied to a particular agricultural or mythic-historical element of the ancient Israelite experience. These connections are well established for the three pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot. They are all grounded in the biblical narratives of liberation from Egypt and revelation at Mt. Sinai as well as the stages of planting and harvest in the ancient near east. Holidays that were established later, such as Purim and Hanukkah grew out of stories tied to specific historical challenges faced by the Jewish community. But Rosh Hashannah, while it appears in the Torah (albeit under a different name), is not described in any of these ways. It is simply called a day for sacred convocation and for the blast of the ram's horn at the outset of the 7th month, the month of Tishrei.

By the time of the early rabbis, Rosh Hashannah had evolved into an occasion that focused on communal re-dedication to Divine rulership and on the related notion of Divine judgment for all human actions. What is striking to me about this, is that this is clearly not only about Jewish community, but rather about how the Jewish community envisions the ideal relationship for all people with God. As part of seeing this day as one that renews the foundational moral and spiritual cycles of human life, the rabbis also imagined it as the commemoration of the creation of human beings at the culmination of the sixth day from the first chapter of Genesis.

To my mind, this makes Rosh Hashannah the perfect time in the Jewish year to consider the ways in which these two poles of Jewish value have been expressed in our people's past and our sense of the current state of balance and/or tension between them.

As we sift through the layers of Jewish history and civilization, we find a remarkable range of attitudes expressed regarding the inhabitants of the world beyond the boundaries of the Jewish people and messages about the nature of the relationship that the Jewish community ought to have with this world.

If we turn to the Torah, we find a small but significant collection of stories in which the Jewish people are clearly beneficiaries of wisdom and kindness emanating from individuals from another culture.

These examples include the midwives, Shifra and Puah, who are most likely Egyptian, and who risk their lives to save the male children that the Pharaoh has ordered them to kill. The Pharaoh's own daughter, who is unnamed in the Torah, but who is called Batyah-daughter of God- by the rabbis, is in this same category. There is also Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, a religious leader in his own Midianite culture, who serves as a mentor to Moses as he struggles to meet the ethical, material and spiritual needs of the newly freed slaves encamped in the wilderness of Sinai.

There is an equally small but significant set of stories about Jewish individuals who take action on behalf of others with whom they have no family or tribal connection. The first story that comes to mind is that of Abraham challenging God's decision to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, on the basis that there might be a small minority of righteous individuals living within the context of an otherwise evil community, who do not deserve to be punished along with everyone else. Whatever we may think of God's role in this story, there is no doubt that Abraham is going out on a limb for a group of people that he has no connection to besides the fact that they are fellow human beings.

Another important story in this category is that of the young Moses who is escaping from Egypt after having been discovered as the murderer of an Egyptian task master. As he heads out into the wilderness he encounters a situation in which a group of male shepherds are clearly bullying a group of their female counterparts who are attempting to water their animals. Moses, without a moment's hesitation, intervenes and chases the offending shepherds away.

All of these biblical texts attest to the potential for inter-group cooperation and mutual support which stands at the foundation of the universal pole of the Jewish value spectrum.

There is of course another, larger set of stories and laws that contain warnings about the threats posed by non-Jewish individuals and groups to the survival of the Jewish people on both a physical and spiritual level. These texts include the story of the Pharaoh in Egypt who refused, until forced by the cumulative force of the 10 plagues, to let the Hebrew slaves go, as well as that of the Amalekite tribe that attacked the weakest members of the former slaves just as they are settling in to their new found freedom. We can add to this list the Philistines and the 7 nations of Canaan, all of which were seen as representing world views that were inherently destructive to the newly developing Jewish culture, not to mention their possession of military power that was capable of doing the same. This category of biblical texts inculcates an awareness of the dangers to Jewish life that exist in the world and reinforces the importance of the particularistic pole of Jewish thought and of putting our own collective safety and security at the top of our agenda.

Clearly, the bible as a whole does not speak with one voice, or give a single clear answer when it comes to the question of how to negotiate this critical balance between the tribal and the prophetic orientation within our culture. If we were to examine, at this same level of detail, texts that come from later layers of Jewish civilization, such as writings of the Talmudic sages, or of the philosophers and the kabbalists of the middle ages, we would find a similar spread of perspectives vis a vis the possibility of mutual understanding and common cause with people from outside of the Jewish sphere. It is the case that during this period of history, there is definitely an overall tilt within Jewish thought towards the tribal and away from the prophetic orientation, which can be traced in part to the widespread experience of persecution that Jewish communities tended to encounter at the hands of Christian and Muslim majority cultures, the golden age of Spain notwithstanding.

It is only with the advent of the modern period, in the last two hundred or so, that we see the fullest expression of the universalistic orientation within the Jewish world. In this period, there is a hugely disproportionate Jewish presence across a wide range of progressive political initiatives in Eastern and Western Europe and in the United States that is reflective of this new level of engagement with the prophetic aspect of our tradition. And with the founding of the state of Israel, there is a fascinating combination of a deep emphasis on both the universal and the particular orientations simultaneously.

So, as we all stand here together at the threshold of a new year in our people's sacred calendar, on a day that is perhaps the purest embodiment of this essential polarity within our tradition, how are we to discern, in this complicated, frightening and painful time, the proper emphasis to give to each end of this value spectrum?

In my own effort to find an answer, I lean towards embracing what may be the most well known rabbinic statement on this question, or on any other question for that matter, which comes to us from the sage known as Hillel, via the Mishnah tractate ethics of the ancestors in which he says the following, "Im ain ani li, mi li (if I am not for myself, who will be for me), ukshani l'atmi, mah ani (and if I am only for myself what am I?) v'im lo achshav, eimatai (and if not now, when?). From Hillel I learn that, everything else being equal, the Jewish community is at its healthiest when we are firmly grounded in, and engaged with both sides of this polarity of the universal and the particular. Yet, it is well known that when a system comes under stress, it becomes much more difficult to maintain a healthy level of functioning.

This past summer was one of those times when the system we know as the Jewish people experienced a significant amount of stress; The two major sources of this stress being the conflict with Hamas in Gaza and, in parallel with that, the escalation of anti-semitic rhetoric and activity in many different parts of the world, but most notably and most disturbingly, in major cities in Western Europe. Under these kinds of circumstances, we tend to lose our individual and collective capacity to stay connected to both our particular and our universal commitments and, in the words of Los Angeles Rabbi Ed Feinstein, "we exchange an active and healthy tension for a severe polarization.

Under the duress of events such as those we saw this summer, different parts of our community become identified with only one end of the polarity. This polarization has at least two negative manifestations for us. On one hand, we tend to see the world through only one lens which can both distort our understanding of what's actually taking place as well as blinding us to important events and information that we would respond to more readily under healthier circumstances. The other major negative impact for our community is that individuals who have aligned themselves with one end of the polarity or the other find it nearly impossible to communicate with, or even understand others who have managed to remain connected, to any degree, with the opposite pole.

When this dynamic is operative, it both weakens our community internally and undermines our ability to address the real challenges we are facing from a position of strength and wisdom. The internal weakening comes about as a result of our inability to tolerate the presence of both poles of the spectrum in one place. Some people even take the radical step of cutting long standing ties to a synagogue or other organization because that organization makes room for both the prophetic and the tribal, the universal and the particular.

There have been numerous stories in the media over the course of the summer that have documented this phenomenon at levels that have never been seen before within the Jewish community.

People who find themselves wholly at the universal end of the spectrum and who take offence at the tribal concern expressed for the welfare of Israel and her citizens. Or people who hold a fundamentally tribal orientation and find it difficult to tolerate a universalistic expression of sympathy for the Palestinian families who suffered casualties in the conflict.

The choice to walk away in these kinds of situations is one that weakens our community at both ends of the value spectrum.

When it comes to responding to some of the most brazen and public expressions of anti-Semitism that our world has seen for a long time, this tendency to polarize has a negative impact as well. Those who lean heavily toward the universal or prophetic end of the spectrum may well attempt to downplay the significance of these expressions and argue that the situations faced by other communities are relatively more serious and more deserving our concern. On the other hand, those who lean toward the tribal or particular pole may tend to jump very quickly into believing that these anti-Semitic outbursts are the true representation of what most of the world actually thinks and mistakenly conclude that the Jewish community is completely on its own in its efforts to combat this still dangerous threat to our well-being. In both instances, the polarized response is much less effective and less helpful to ourselves and to the world than would be the case otherwise.

There is no doubt that, as we enter the year 5775, we are living through some very challenging times, here in the United States, in the middle east, in Africa and in many other parts of the world. We in the Jewish community, as well as the members of other faith, ethnic and national groups will need to call upon our deepest resources in order to be able to respond to these challenges with resilience and wisdom. May we take inspiration from the teaching embedded within the very structure of the holy day in which we find ourselves, and resolve to draw from the entirety of our spiritual inheritance. to remain committed to the well being of our own people, and to simultaneously maintain our connection to our fellow human beings of other traditions and backgrounds, as we recognize that ultimately, the achievement of those two goals are deeply intertwined with one another.