

Rosh Hashanah
Rabbi Robert Goldstein
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Do you remember the story about the fellow who was repelling down the side of a very steep cliff? Somehow the rope came loose and he began to plummet down the side of the mountain. Miraculously he was able to grab a branch that was fortuitously protruding from the rocks. He held on for dear life, but for how long? His hands began to tire, and his grip loosened. He feared the worst.

Suddenly he heard a deep and resonate voice booming forth from the sky:

“Do you believe?”

“I believe, I believe!” he cried.

“Do you have faith?”

“Yes, I have faith!”

“Then let go...”

He paused for a moment, looked up to the heavens and asked, “Is there anyone else up there I can talk to?”

Since last we gathered for these holidays, much has changed in our lives, in our country and in our world. Many have felt like the poor fellow in the story, in a free fall down the side of a cliff, desperately grasping for a life line, hoping to find something to grab on to, to give us a sense of the security, safety, and reassurance we crave in the midst of our alarmingly fast-moving and unpredictable world.

We have witnessed time-honored political conventions erode. The tone of public discourse has become crass. The press, on both the right and the left is held up to ridicule, its objectivity questioned, its integrity doubted. And political opponents vilify each other in a manner that demeans and degrades the offices they occupy and the principles they swore to uphold.

This last year has seen its share of natural as well as man-made disasters and disruption: the catastrophic hurricanes in Texas and Florida, the violence and its aftermath in Charlottesville; the volatile and unpredictable situation in North Korea,

the never ending conflict in Afghanistan now entering its seventeenth year. And those who follow the news in Israel know that peace talks are stalled without any hope of a settlement on the horizon.

People are unsettled; the anxiety felt by so many is real.

A recent essay in the New England Journal of Medicine reflects this unease. The article calls on health care providers to be sensitive to and treat the increased anxiety felt by many segments of the American population. Certain racial and ethnic groups, including immigrants have expressed fears of being stigmatized. Others are uneasy about potential reductions in health and human services.

These are uncertain and worrisome times.

It is the custom among some traditional Jews in the days leading up to the High Holy Days to read verses from Book of Psalms, among them chapter 27. To paraphrase:

“When evil and anxiety assail me...
When those whom I fear gather against me...
I will show no fright.
I will be strong and take courage.”

I find the Psalmist’s words comforting, for in my heart, I am an optimist.

By the way, you do know the differences among a pessimist, an optimist and a realist? The pessimist sees a dark tunnel. An optimist sees light at the end of the tunnel; a realist sees a train coming. And the train conductor sees three *meshuganehs* standing on the tracks.

I may be an optimist, but I am not naïve. I obsess like many of you—typically around 3:00 am in the morning—about the many fears on my worry list. But then comes Rosh Hashanah, when we celebrate the creation of the world. “*Hayom harat olam,*” when, as the sages teach, the world is reborn with all the hope and promise of a new beginning. During these days of repentance and return, we are reminded that we are all founders, creators with new opportunities to make it better.

And then I think of the extraordinary good fortune of my nationality, of living where I do, enjoying the freedoms and safety of living in America, **and** the blessing of having a faith which embraces the liberal values of tolerance, compassion and charity

On a snowy day in January 1961 President John F. Kennedy gave his famous inaugural address. Most people remember the “ask not what your country can do for you...” catchphrase. But it was in the beginning paragraphs that the young president powerfully described what it means to be an American *and* a person of faith.

“We observe today not a victory of a party, but a celebration of freedom—symbolizing an end as well as a beginning—signifying renewal as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forbearers prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago.”

Sociologist Robert Bellah describes how our nation exists where the sacred texts of our American democracy (the Constitution and the Bill of Rights), *and* the teachings of liberal faith traditions meet. He does not deny the particularism of Judaism or Christianity or any other faith; rather he draws attention to the intersection of democracy and liberal religion.

We Jews have thrived on the values of patriotism, tolerance, self-sacrifice and a willingness to admit past sins in order to more broadly advance the ideals of tolerance. Charity and altruism and a mechanism and willingness to move forward, to make it better by being self-critical, are principles that are both American and Jewish, they are ageless and impervious to political fashions, or the stewardship of one administration or another.

The first American and Jewish virtues is charity, the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*. This is a value that endures, is permanent and sustains us even during our most uncertain times.

Natural and man-made disasters tend to draw us together. Who wasn't inspired by the generous outpouring after Hurricanes Harvey and Irma? Truckloads of donated food, water and clothes...fundraisers, and even our politicians put aside their petty disagreements and found the money to send much-needed assistance.

You remember the so-called Cajun Flotilla, hundreds of men and women from New Orleans spontaneously appeared with their rowboats and canoes to rescue the people of Houston and Beaumont? Our own Reform Jewish Greene Family Camp in Texas reopened after the summer camp season ended and offered food and housing regardless of faith or ethnicity to those displaced by the hurricane, each a heartening and reassuring affirmation of the American and Jewish principles of generosity, *tzedakah*.

When we are at our best and able to put our differences aside, we are indeed a benevolent people.

The second and perhaps most important American and Jewish value we share is a willingness to be self-critical. Whether it is the Talmudic tradition of argument, disputation and debate or one of the most sacred of our American liberties, the right to protest, these principles strengthen our society.

It was the ancient Israelite prophets, bold and confident men like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Nathan, and others who fearlessly stood up to power. It was their lone voices that in difficult times proved to be the prophetic inspiration for the confession of past sins and acts of national atonement that ultimately led to a more just society.

In 1942, two months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt, against his wife Eleanor's wishes, signed into law "Executive Order 9066," ordering over 100,000 Japanese American into internment camps.

Sadly, with the exception of three justices, the Supreme Court upheld the directive. In spite of this shameful act, the honor of our nation was redeemed by the eloquent dissension of Justice Frank Murphy whose words still ring true, "the broad provisions of the Bill of Rights are not suspended by the mere existence of a state of war."

It is ironic that we pride ourselves on being a nation of immigrants, but we also suffer from a persistent national amnesia. Somehow it was always different for our ancestors who came here either because of religious persecution or in search of a better life. We are far less sympathetic to those contemporary immigrants who want the same opportunities for their children. We tend to be suspicious of the intentions or fitness of those who arrived most recently.

But to our credit, there are ongoing debates in the halls of congress and impassioned demonstrations on the streets of our cities, arguing about who deserves an opportunity to come to our country, and who already here, may remain. The debate may be boisterous and unruly, and at times even ugly, but it is ongoing, and I have confidence the national dialogue will continue and the harsh measures and punitive consequences directed against some of the most vulnerable immigrants among us will ultimately be rejected.

The fact is that the political institutions in our country remain sound. Though occasionally we stray from the high ideals envisioned by our founders, it is a time-

honored American—*and Jewish*—tradition to question the judgment of the president, the decisions of the legislature or even the findings of the courts.

From Eleanor Roosevelt to Justice Murphy, to those who fought for civil rights, women's rights, the men and women who marched in Washington last January, and those who stood up to bigotry and hate in Charlottesville this summer, it is a fundamental principle of our American way of life to question, to protest and debate. It is at these rallies and marches that our freedoms are sustained, our values reinforced, and the future of our democracy assured.

This has been a trying year: political upheaval, a divided country. There were also ominously destructive natural occurrences: record heat in the southwest, hurricanes, floods and tornadoes. I keep worrying I'm going to hear a deep resonant voice booming from the heavens...time to build an ark!

But with all of these troubles, there were times this last year of sublime beauty and reassuring civility.

On a Monday afternoon in late summer, if for just an instant, there was a moment of rare national harmony. Whether you could see the moon blocking the sun or not, people came outside, or peered out of their windows to view the eclipse.

On busy downtown streets, diners came out of restaurants and customers emerged from shops. People passed around those funny dark glasses so everyone could take a look. Even the president and first lady stepped out on the balcony of the White House, revealing a rare moment of humility and innocence as they shared the experience with their young son.

As columnist Peggy Noonan wrote, "They were not fighting in the streets with scarfs covering their faces. They were not marching and chanting anti-Semitic or racist slogans...they were normal, regular people. They were who we are, a great nation founded on great beliefs and though things are troubled, we tend to hash it out and make it work."

On Rosh Hashanah we celebrate the grandeur of creation and our role as God's partners. We can make it better as long as we hold fast to all that makes us great: our natural generosity and benevolence, not always expressed, but at the core of our being. If we have the courage to be self-critical, recognize our failings, break with old habits and renew and affirm the highest values we claim as our own, if we remain loyal to the principles of good citizenship, of gratitude, charity, informed by our own

timeless Jewish code of justice, of *tzedakah*...if we are committed and faithful stewards of the American dream, a vision that has continually sustained us during trouble and travail, as well as at times of prosperity and triumph, we can begin this new year with optimism and hope.

This is a Rosh Hashanah in the midst of turbulence; but we need not despair. As the Psalmist wrote:

חֹזֵק וְיִאֲמָץ לַבָּיִת

“When anxiety assails me...
I will show no fright
I will be strong and take courage.”

For 240 years America has been sustained by the vision and prudence of our founders. And for more than a few thousand years, our people have been guided by the wisdom of our Jewish traditions as interpreted by our rabbis and sages. Together these two great birthrights will sustain us through times of tranquility and tribulation.

May we never forget how blessed we are to be Americans and Jews.

Amen