

**Listen**  
Rosh Hashanah  
2018/5779  
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The late Elie Wiesel offered a parable for our times:

Man complained to God: “You have no idea how hard it is to be human — to live a life darkened by suffering and despair in a world filled with violence and destruction, to fear death and worry that nothing we do or create or dream matters. You have no idea how hard it is to be human!”

God responded, “You think it’s easy being God? I have a whole universe to run, a whole universe demanding constant vigilance. You think you could do that?”

“I’ll tell you what,” suggested the Man, “let’s switch places, for just a moment. For just a moment, You be Man, and I’ll be God, and that way we’ll see who has it harder.”

“For just a moment?” God considered, “Agreed.”

So Man and God switched places. Man sat upon God’s throne. And God descended to the earth. After a moment passed, God looked up and said, “OK, time to switch back.” But Man refused. Man refused to give up the throne of God.

Wiesel concludes his parable: “This is our world where Man plays God, and God is exiled.”

Rosh Hashanah 2018, I believe we will look back on this past year as a time of heightened turbulence and unrest. A nation wandering through a wilderness of unchartered territory, where holiness has been banished, where God has been exiled.

The national debate has become angry and coarse, compromise and conciliation a relic of the past. Arrogance and pride have vanquished any hope of collaboration or cooperation. Friendships have been sacrificed because of political allegiances, family gatherings have become battlegrounds over politics.

According to a recent gallop poll, two thirds of Americans would not want their daughter or son to marry someone from a different political party, that number is double what it was in the 1950s.

Exactly fifty years ago, a few of you of a certain age, I was barely a teenager then, may remember the summer of 1968, when our nation bruised and battered by two assassinations the previous spring, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. boiled over with anti-war sentiment as Americans continued to die in an unpopular war in Southeast Asia. There was widespread contempt for the government and disdain for the establishment.

In August, the Democratic National Convention met in Chicago and war broke out between the mostly young protesters and police in Grant Park. The Chicago cops, acting at the behest of then Mayor Richard Daley took action against the demonstrators, and without provocation, the police beat hundreds of marchers unconscious.

There was a national outcry as the faces of bloodied demonstrators, mostly kids, graphically flashed across America's television screens. The next day, Mayor Daley boldly, defiantly stood before the press and declared in one of his more famous statements, "The policeman isn't there to create disorder; the policeman is there to preserve disorder."

Historian John Meacham in his summer bestseller, *The Soul of America* writes, "We have come through darkness before. One need not become a candidate or a political addict hooked on every twist and every turn and every tweet. But the paying of attention, the expressing of opinion and the casting of ballots are foundational to living up to the obligations of citizenship in a republic."

John Meacham reminds us that we have been through this before. Our nation has been tested, more than a few times, and we have survived.

This is what Rosh Hashanah is all about. We Jews are forbidden to despair. Everything in our Rosh Hashanah liturgy urges us to be sanguine and optimistic. Confident in the promise of the New Year and a better future.

There is a family in Rhode Island, David Quiroa Sr, and David Quiroa, Jr., father and son, who are running for the same seat in the State House. David Sr. is a Trump supporting Republican. David Jr., an independent who supported Hillary Clinton in 2016. They are both running to unseat the incumbent, Rep. Marvin Abney.

When asked who Iris, David Sr.'s wife, David Jr.'s mother, was going to vote for, she emphatically responded, "Abney, the incumbent!"

Mrs. Quiroa has it right. We need to find the light, the places we can agree.

The issues that divide us are of serious consequence. I would never minimize or underestimate the passion and sincerity of those who either support or oppose the present administration. For others, the dramatic shift in policy in the last two years has left many Americans with a serious case of whiplash.

You may have heard that House Speaker Paul Ryan appeared on that very popular Public Television series, “Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates” (maybe you’ve seen it) and surprise, discovered that he’s 3% Jewish with Eastern European Ashkenazi roots. This is where the story gets a bit apocryphal: Although a life-time Catholic, the Speaker chooses to embrace his new-found Semitic heritage and decides to attend a Yom Kippur service at one of Washington’s well-known synagogues.

To his surprise, he is seated next to Senator Chuck Schumer. At first, few words are shared between them, but then comes the afternoon break, when taken by the spirit of the day, they greet each other warmly and actually embrace.

Chuck Schumer, one of the most partisan members of the Senate says to Ryan, “This is ridiculous. We should be able to work together. The senate and congress, democrats and republicans, the right and the left, if you and I can get along, just think what we can do for our country.”

Equally moved by his first-time experience in *shul*, House Speaker Ryan, his eyes glistening, agrees. “You and I want the same thing...the best for our constituents and our nation. I promise you, tomorrow morning I’m going to become more bipartisan, less one-sided.”

Chuck Schumer interjects, “And I promise not to be so shrill, and maybe I’ll do a few less of those inflammatory press conferences.”

The afternoon break ends...*neilah*, the final service begins, a couple of hours later the final blast of the *shofar* and the long Yom Kippur service concludes.

Together the two men walk out of the synagogue arm in arm and as they are about to part, each going his separate way, Speaker Ryan turns to Schumer and wishes him a sweet New Year, and says, “Chuck, I wish for you everything you wish for me.”

At which time Schumer responds with fire in his eyes, “Ah...there you go...already starting up with me again!”

Amy Cuddy, a social psychologist and professor at Harvard uses the metaphor of “dropping the anchor.” She suggests that when engaged in a debate with someone whose views are different from yours you should never begin by dropping an anchor, or...to use another metaphor, drawing a line in the sand, asserting a position and refusing to budge. “You need to state your position,” she advises, “and **listen** when your opponent states theirs.”

Do you know the one High Holy Day *mitzvah* the tradition teaches that you cannot ignore? It is not fasting on Yom Kippur. If you are sick, or old, or pregnant, you can eat on Yom Kippur. If you cannot get to synagogue on the holidays, you can pray at home.

The one commandment you must fulfill is hearing the sound of the Shofar. We are not commanded to blow the *shofar* just hear it! The tradition teaches:

*“Ein ha’shome’a yotze ela im hitkaven la’tzei”*

“The person hearing the blast of the shofar only fulfills the mitzvah if he intensely listens to its sound, with the sole purpose of hearing the notes. We are challenged to listen just for the sake of listening, without any distractions.”

The cornerstone of Jewish prayer, often referred to as the “watchword of our faith” is the *shema*. It is the first prayer a child learns, and the last prayer on our lips when death approaches. “Hear, oh Israel...listen you people, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” We are bidden only to listen...with all of our heart, with our strength, and our soul.

Some of you are here today out of a sense of obligation; others compelled by emotion, or nostalgia, maybe even a little Jewish guilt. Mostly, I think we chose to be here because we believe there are many lessons in our Jewish tradition that are not obsolete, some maybe even more relevant today than ever before.

Our faith prohibits indifference. We are forbidden from cowering on the sidelines, and withdrawing from the debate. The Talmud, one of the most sacred Jewish texts, records generations of rabbis zealously arguing over their interpretation of law. Their disputes, though passionate are rarely angry. They do not denigrate their opponents, nor threaten them...the thread of the argument, can be partisan, but it remains focused on the issue at hand.

As American Jews, it is our obligation to bring Talmudic bearing to the debate. The goal is not unanimity of thought. That is unrealistic, it is bad for democracy, in fact, it is corrupting. Arguing is in our genes; questioning almost everything is in our Jewish DNA. We understand that debates lead to clarity. Clarity to truth.

The challenge? To disagree with respect, tolerance, decency.

The marriage between Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and her husband Marty was one of the great love stories of all time. And one of the most unlikely friendships ever was between Ruth Bader Ginsberg and the late Justice Anthony Scalia. There could not have been two more polar opposites when it came to ideology and judicial outlook. Scalia the archconservative; Ginsberg a dyed-in-the-wool liberal. But they were very close friends, bonding over a love for opera. Though they disagreed on how to achieve their goal, they shared a passion: to make America a better place.

When Ruth Ginsberg's husband Martin died, it was during the busiest time on the Supreme Court calendar. According to Bader Ginsberg's biographers, the court was in session the day after her husband's funeral. She had an opinion on an important discrimination case, and so she was there. She sat stoically, that sad day after burying her beloved Marty, a black ribbon in her hair. The session began with Chief Justice Roberts reading a brief tribute to Marty.

When he finished, all that could be heard in the hush of the courtroom was the gentle weeping of Justice Anton Scalia, Ruth Bader Ginsberg's staunch adversary on the bench. Scalia and Ginsberg were judicial foes, but the love between their families, the respect they had for each other overcame their differences.

It may feel as if grace and dignity have disappeared from the national debate; magnanimity, generosity of spirit may be absent in the conversations we have with the family and friends with whom we disagree.

As the late Margaret Chase Smith, Maine's Republican Senator famously said, "Among the most basic principles of Americanism: The right to criticize; the right to hold unpopular beliefs; the right to protest; the right of independent thought." And we can engage in that debate with civility and respect.

I doubt that old blue-blooded Mainer from Skowhegan knew it, but she was channeling a fundamental teaching of our Jewish tradition.

King David in one of the more unusual verses in Psalms declared:

אַשְׁרֵי הָעַם יֹדְעֵי תְרוּעָה

“Happy are those who know the sound of the Shofar.”

He intentionally used a powerful word in Hebrew יֹדְעֵי to *know* the sound. In his wisdom, he understood that people hear things differently; people have diverse opinions and viewpoints. He urged his listeners to internalize the message of the shofar, to learn to listen with empathy, to communicate respectfully, to be honest and fair-minded.

Rosh Hashanah 2018, 5779 an uncertain time in our history, but not a reason to despair.

In his final public statement, Senator John McCain, left us with these words, “We have always had so much more in common with each other than disagreement. If only we remember that, and give each other the benefit of the presumption that we all love our country, we will get through these challenging times.”

I have faith in the resilience of our democracy, confidence in the integrity of our institutions, and I believe in the virtue of the American people. *We will* recapture a sense of decency, integrity, and honor, truthfulness in our exchanges, and rectitude and deference in our interactions with those with whom we disagree.

The poet W H Auden wrote, “In the deserts of the heart. Let the healing fountain start.”

I pray this New Year brings us redemption from the exile we feel from each other; let frayed relationships be mended. May hurtful and sharp bursts of bitterness be replaced by voices that are respectful, positive and hopeful.

May we each find a renewed appreciation for the gift of our lives, gratitude for the freedoms we cherish. May we transform the values of our faith into action as we recommit ourselves, each of us, to use our voice to bring healing and harmony, understanding and peace to the land we love.

*Kain ye-be ratzone*  
Amen