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Congregation Beth Israel
Yom Kippur Sermon 5778

Good yontiff.

I would like to begin with a quiz for you all. It is multiple choice. Winners get to eat Susan Kerman's famous lox kugel at the end of the fast. Losers do, too. There are two questions. Here is the first.

Who said the following:

"They came here - the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened... They made a covenant with this land.

Under this covenant of justice, liberty, and union we have become a nation-- prosperous, great, and mighty. And we have kept our freedom. But we have no promise from God that our greatness will endure. We have been allowed by Him to seek greatness with the sweat of our hands and the strength of our spirit."

Was it A) Moses in the book of Deuteronomy? or

Was it B) President Lyndon B Johnson in his 1965 Inaugural Address? or

Was this C) Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" Speech

Ok, second question:

"...From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. ... no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation . . . History has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty."

Was it A) Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy

Was it B) President George W. Bush, in his 2005 Inaugural Address

Was this C) Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" Speech

So the correct answer here, both times, goes to the Texas presidents.

But, if you guessed Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy either time, you would not be too far off.

Johnson used the word covenant to describe a binding promise between America and all its people. So, too, in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses describes a covenant, a binding promise between God and the Jewish people.

In Johnson's covenant, America brings the promise of justice, liberty, and union - if we promise to do the work to keep them. In the Torah's version, God promises to care for Israel - if Israel promises to walk in God's ways – the ways of justice.

And Bush spoke of America having a 'history with a visible direction'.

Indeed, that is a very Jewish way of understanding history – for we describe ourselves as having been a rag-tag group of slaves under Pharaoh, transformed through the covenant into a unified band of tribes who, in liberty, take responsibility for the dignity and value of each other.

Our task, in both covenants, then, is to participate in moving our history in the direction of justice.

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And back to the quiz for a moment, you would also not be too far off if you guessed Dr. King, either time. Reverend Dr. King, steeped in theology as a minister, also drew on the Torah's idea of covenant. In 'I Have A Dream' he reminds us of America's promise to all:

"When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

And in 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail' he reminds us of our responsibility to carry out that promise for one another:

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

And so, when our American leaders including Johnson, Bush, King, even back to the Founding Fathers, and even all the way back to the Puritans - have inspired us to live by the highest ideals of our nation – even though they themselves sometimes failed to uphold these ideals – they have drawn upon the Torah’s notion of Covenant to describe their vision.

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Today is Yom Kippur and it is perhaps not naturally a time to be delving deeply into the rhetoric of our body politic. For today is a Jewish day, after all, and we come to the synagogue to reflect on how we can be better Jews.

Yom Kippur calls us to take stock of the past year, and to make our best intentions for the next. We pray that we will live more closely to our highest ideals.

We do this in many ways, by fasting, by praying, by asking forgiveness of the people we have hurt.

But today we also read from the Torah, about receiving the covenant.

We read, from Deuteronomy, Chapter 29:9, *Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem lifnei Adonai eloheichem...*

“You stand this day, all of you, in the presence of the Eternal God- your tribal heads, elders, and officials; every man, woman, and child of Israel, and the stranger in the midst of your camp; from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water – to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God...”

And we read later in Chapter 30:15, *Re’eh natati lifanecha hayom...*

“Behold, this day I place before you life and well-being, death and hardship, in that I command you this day to love the Eternal God and walk in the ways of your God.”

On previous Yom Kippurs, I have read this passage as a call to lift us toward our highest ideals as Jews. But on this Yom Kippur, I read it from another very important piece of my identity, I read it as an American. And I ask, what is the Torah asking me to do as an American?

So by now you probably have an inkling of where I am going with this, that I mean to talk about America, and what I believe to be the important contributions that we as Jews will need to make to our society in the coming days, months, and years. But since I have raised the specter of politics, before I talk about what I think the Torah is asking us to do as Americans, please allow me to tell a joke - if for no other reason than to just dissipate the tension.

The joke is about 'where we stand':

A new rabbi comes to a well-established congregation. Every week on Shabbat, a fight erupts during the service. When it comes time to recite the Shema Yisrael, half of the congregation stands and the other half sits. The half who stand argue, "Of course we stand for the Shema Yisrael - it's the most important prayer." The half who remain seated argue, "No. According to the Shulkhan Arukh [the code of Jewish law], if you are seated when you come to the Shema, you remain seated."

In services, the people who are standing yell at the people who are sitting, "Stand up!" while the people who are sitting yell at the people who are standing, "Sit down!" It's driving the new rabbi crazy.

Finally, the rabbi learns that at a nearby retirement home is a ninety-eight-year-old man who was a founding member of the congregation. So, in accordance with Talmudic tradition, the rabbi appoints a delegation of three, one who stands for the Shema, one who sits, and the rabbi himself, to go interview the man.

They enter his room, and the man who stands for the Shema rushes over to the old man and says, "Wasn't it the tradition in our synagogue to stand for the Shema?" "No," the old man answers in a weak voice. "That wasn't the tradition."

The other man jumps in excitedly. "Wasn't it the tradition in our synagogue to sit for the Shema?" "No," the old man says. "That wasn't the tradition."

At this point, the rabbi cannot control himself. He cuts in angrily. "I don't care what the tradition was! Just tell them one or the other. Do you know what goes on in services every week - the people who are standing yell at the people who are sitting, the people who are sitting yell at the people who are standing ..."

"That was the tradition," the old man says.¹

¹ Rabbi David Zauderer, in <https://shroudstory.com/2011/10/26/two-jews-three-opinions-and-the-shroud-of-turin/>

I love this story because it reminds us that to be Jewish is to live with the idea that when there are two Jews there are three opinions. In a funny way. But also in a profound way. It teaches that the tradition that we must cultivate is not necessarily to stand here or to sit there, but rather to be invested forcefully in the life of the community. It teaches that persons on both sides of the argument are still part of fulfilling the purpose. This type of arguing even has a name in rabbinic tradition, *machloket l'shem shamayim*, an argument for the sake of heaven. *Machloket l'shem shamayim* arises in all sorts of ways, from the ancient rabbis Hillel and Shammai arguing about how best to light the Chanukkah candles from 1 to 8 or from 8 to 1; to Abraham arguing with God about saving Sodom and Gemorrah for the sake of even 10 good people.

It is indeed what I think the Torah was talking about when it described who was standing there receiving the covenant. The Torah could have used the word *culchem*, all of you, were standing there, and left it at that. But instead it enumerates the different types of people. The different societal classes – leaders, elders, women, children, strangers, ie. the non-Jew, or resident alien. They were all part of the covenant. And they all had different ways of looking at that covenant. But they were all standing there – even if they were sitting.

It is in our *kishkes* to say what we think as Jews, and trust that the other person will stand their ground, but with a sense of shared purpose. It makes for a strong synagogue and a strong society. It makes it possible to bind disparate elements. It fulfills what it means to be part of a covenant – that we are in relationship to one another, we have a responsibility to one another even when and perhaps especially when, we disagree. We may be tribal, but ultimately, we are a nation.

Machloket l'shem shamayim is a gift we need to bring to America today.

Eric Liu, founder of Citizen University, is devoted to empowering citizens to participate in civil society. He writes,

“Remember: America doesn’t just have arguments; America *is* an argument— between Federalist and Anti-Federalist world views, strong national government and local control, liberty and equality, individual rights and collective responsibility, color-blindness and color-consciousness, *Pluribus* and *Unum*.”²

And so, I believe that we as Jews have a responsibility to make it known to others where we stand. And believe me, our opinions differ. Look around. Look into the

² Eric Liu, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/post-election-reconciliation/506027/>

faces of your neighbors here and you will see someone who disagrees with you. We may disagree, but we will not be cowed into believing that our differences are immutable. We will not be cowed into believing that because we have differences we can't share in a vision for our country.

So -- can we be brave enough to bring up tough subjects with our fellow Jews? Can we be brave enough to heed the voice of the 98-year-old man who said, "that was the tradition"? Can we be brave enough to do that when we leave this space of our worship and re-enter the space of our nation?

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Here's a pair of stories, about patriotism:

I'm from St. Paul, Minnesota. I remember the first time, as a child, that I was allowed to celebrate the 4th of July at the State Capital of Minnesota. It was a big deal. I could finally stay up late enough to see the fireworks, and finally be trusted not to get lost amongst the families, groups of teens, a few rowdy drinkers, and the host of other people, and lots of mosquitos as well, that gathered on the big green lawn of our capital. We were there to see the best fireworks the state had to offer, and to hear the Minnesota Orchestra play grand patriotic music like Tschaikovsky's 1812 Overture complete with real cannon fire. I think it was the music that did it. Even as a 9-year-old, the music told me that 'we the people' were there for a reason, for a purpose. I don't think I realized what that purpose was in any concrete way, but I could tell that it had something to do with all of the Minnesotans, being there together, affirming that our glorious monumental capital building, with its copper dome and its four golden horses, somehow represented us, and protected us. I felt patriotic, I think for the first time.

A little more than eight months ago, I found myself standing at another state capital, the state capital of Texas. I stood with a group of women clergy members. We were Muslim, Jewish, and Christian. We prayed for strength because we were about to be leading the women's march in Austin. We were the first to walk, we carried the banner, with the cameras in our faces.

I have always been inspired by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with Dr. King way back when, because of course it was the right thing to do. But I had not thought before that day, about why clergy are called to walk in the front. We as clergy represent peace and unity, we represent divine Power, but we also say, in those types of situations, 'may the people behind us be protected by our bodies.'

We marched around a few city blocks downtown with a multitude pressing behind us. When we got up to the capital, we gave the invocation. Each of us was given exactly 15 seconds. Our group had chosen to focus on those famous words from the Declaration of Independence -- “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.”

Preparing for that 15 seconds was tough. What I finally realized was that that part of the Declaration of Independence was a restatement of one of the terms of the Torah’s covenant – that all people are created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, and that I had faith – I have faith – that we the people will be able to work towards that truth. So I yelled that out. This time, at the capital, I felt fiercely patriotic but this time I knew exactly why – because America is called to affirm the truth of *b’tzelem Elohim*, and in that moment I had been called to voice that truth.

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The Torah reading today says, “Behold, this day I place before you life and well-being, death and hardship, in that I command you this day to love the Eternal God and walk in the ways of your God.”

Sometimes, to walk in the ways of your God means you have to march, with humility and purpose. It means you have to stand in the street or sit in the crosswalk, especially when it is less risky for you than for someone else who might not have as much protection as you do in our society. It might mean to sit on the phone with your elected official’s office, until you get someone live answering. It might very well mean not to stand, but to take a knee.

We as Jews, each of us, owe that to America, to walk in God’s ways.

Not only that but we owe it to ourselves. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin relates a folktale:

There once was a man who lived in Sodom, who used to protest each day against the evil perpetrated there. A child said to him, “No one listens to you, no one repents. Why do you keep shouting?” The man answered, “At first I protested because I hoped to change them. Now I protest because if I don’t, they will change me.”

So can we be strong enough to walk when we need to? Can we be strong enough to walk for our own rights and dignity, and also for others? Can we be strong

enough to say with our voices and with our bodies, that sometimes, there **is** one side that needs to be affirmed, not many sides?

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A last story, about taking a walk.

In August of 2016, a black woman named Heather McGhee, who runs a think tank focused on strengthening our democracy, was being interviewed on a live C-Span show, when she received an unplanned call from a white man living in North Carolina. You may have seen the video of their ensuing conversation – it went viral with 8 million views. On live television, the man, Garry, talks about how he fears black people. He sees on the news that they commit crimes, and are involved in drugs. He says that he is prejudiced. But then he says something remarkable. He says that he does not want to be prejudiced. He says, “What can I do to change? You know, to be a better American?”

Also remarkably, Heather McGhee responds, by saying, “Thank you for being honest.” She continues by praising his ability to admit his prejudices, because in America, she says, we all have them, but we find it so difficult to admit them. Yet we need to, because we are a multi-ethnic, multi-racial democracy trying to contend with the consequences of living together with real differences. She invites him to get to know black families, and to read about United States history.

But the story does not stop there. Garry found Heather on Twitter, and after corresponding, she went to visit him in North Carolina. A year later, she said, “we have become friends ... Garry has taken what he calls ‘a walk’ to really understand how it is that we got to this place in this country.”

He has taken a walk. With the help of Heather McGhee, but initiated from his own call to make that first call, his own desire to be a better American, he has moved from one place to another.

He has walked in God’s ways, in a profound way. Can we have that courage, to walk to a really different place, towards more understanding? Ourselves? Not the courage to try to get someone else to walk, but can we have the courage to walk ourselves? Where would that walk take us?

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As a community we will have the opportunity to each take a walk on the subject of immigration. Mark your calendars now, because this coming Martin Luther

King weekend, January 12-14, we will be exploring this topic in our temple community. In a weekend we're calling Welcoming the Stranger, we will be hearing from a variety of presenters, including Rabbi David Segal from the new Texas branch of the Religious Action Center, the Reform Movement's Social Justice arm; Julian Aguilar, a Texas Tribune journalist who helped to produce their award-winning project on Border Security; academic and professional experts on immigration, including Dr. Robert Abzug, the former director of the Schusterman Center at UT; adults who have themselves experienced being refugees, and Austin teens who made a film about their fears of their parents being deported. It will be our opportunity – no matter where we are on the political spectrum - to take a walk of understanding on this critical issue with which we are contending as a nation. Please plan on joining us, and if you are interested in helping, please be in touch.

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Torah teaches: “You stand this day, all of you, in the presence of the Eternal God- your tribal heads, elders, and officials; every man, woman, and child of Israel, and the stranger in the midst of your camp; from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water – to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God.

Behold, this day I place before you life and well-being... in that I command you this day to ... walk in the ways of your God...so you may live and flourish, blessed by Adonai your God in the land...”

And so we ask, this Yom Kippur – what does America stand for? What do we stand for, as Americans who are Jews? Where is America going? Will we walk with her, and if so, how and in what ways?

May we walk in the ways of God – strongly, with purpose.

May we walk in the ways of God- humbly, towards greater understanding.

May our walking advance our history in the direction of justice.

May we stand in covenant – as we have arguments for the sake of heaven – each of us, the exile, the stranger, brave but frightened, upholding the dignity and matchless value of the other.

Neither master nor slave; may we uphold our national promise to one another, always remembering we are tied in a single garment of destiny. It is what the Torah commands and this Yom Kippur - it is what our country requires.