

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel
Temple Micah
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NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

We all get e-mail. If you think that you receive too much e-mail raise your hand. I know that I could have more than a full-time job responding to all my e-mails. I could have a very full schedule simply responding adequately to all of the e-mails that I receive from you—and I say this without a moment's hesitation, the e-mails that I receive from you are very important to me.

I have said many times—Bible scholars know more Bible. Theologians know more theology. Talmudists know more Talmud. I claim one expertise. I know my community. My area of true expertise is Temple Micah. Your e-mails are for me, therefore, a primary source.

When I am on vacation, I read e-mail rather haphazardly. This summer I did not take my computer away with me and at one point Louise by prior agreement held my smart phone for days. I wanted to be cut off. I very rarely respond to vacation e-mails.

This summer I received an e-mail from one of you that I read and could not shake. It seemed to capture so much.

It reads:

"I don't mean to disturb your vacation--and I certainly understand if this email doesn't get through while you are away. However, I might resend it when you are back because every day things get worse--everywhere.

The latest in the US is Trump's threat to strip officials who disagree with him of their security clearance. Also, the task force to denaturalize citizens. And, of course, saber-rattling with Iran.

But what has really depressed me is adoption of the new law in Israel demoting democracy in favor of Jewish identity (to be determined by the most conservative Orthodox rabbis who make it almost impossible for people without tons of proof of a Jewish mother to make Aliyah). I have always supported Israel and, in my heart, I continue to love Israel. But the Netanyahu government is making it harder and harder. Efforts like Hand in Hand and Givat Haviva are infinitesimally tiny, but

have provided some hope of eventual change. But even that hope has been cut off by what amounts to a constitutional order proclaiming discrimination as the law of the land.

Can anything be done? As American Jews are our hands completely tied? Yes, everything is very complicated. Israelis live surrounded by enemies and subject to terror at any moment. But does that have to mean the destruction of practically all Jewish values?

I don't expect an answer. Indeed, that's the problem. I doubt there is an answer for the next decades or century or millennium. But I wanted to share with you my despair...and hope for some of your natural optimism to cling to.

Best,
(Name withheld)"

America and Israel.

My natural optimism to cling to.

Huge questions. Huge challenges. How many of us here this morning resonate with the questions asked by my e-mail friend, the issues raised, the concerns and worries evidenced and articulated? How many of us have written similar words ourselves?

As we leave 5778 and enter 5779, I think that many of us, might I say most of us, do so with a kind of shudder. How do we respond?

"And God tested Abraham..." These are the words that begin the Torah saga that we read each Rosh Hashanah. God's test. The ancient rabbis describe ten tests that God gives Abraham. (*see note at end for RMBM list of ten*)

Do we not each feel tested as well? Is Democracy itself being put to the test? "These are the times that try men's souls." As if mirroring Abraham, Thomas Paine's words also echo through time.

We are numb but we know that we cannot afford to be numb. We are, after all, facing a test.

How many of us still cannot believe what we are experiencing? We face challenges in every conceivable direction.

In America we have endured:

What is effectively a Muslim ban on immigration

The grotesque, obscene separation of children from their families at our borders

Enemies lists in the White House

The utter disregard for science, learning or any sort of expertise

The mocking of the norms of democracy

An opioid crisis that goes unchecked

A gun crisis

A suicide epidemic

The destabilization of the post-WWII order

The shaking of the Western Alliance of liberal democracies

The encouragement of illiberal democracy and their utter disregard for minority rights

Tolerance and even encouragement of bigotry

The obscene attempts to strip American citizens of their very citizenship because they were born in the wrong place or the wrong ethnicity.

A partial list—add as you will.

Our minds are reeling.

And as Jews, these domestic problems are compounded by what is transpiring in Israel:

the ongoing attempt to muzzle dissent, the shrinking of a space for a two-state solution, the inexorable assault on ethical Zionism, the growing influence and with it the intolerance of the ultra-Orthodox, the growing intolerance towards Israel's Arab minority, the shrinking of regard for that fine line of what it means to be a Jewish\Democratic state.

Those of us who call ourselves liberal Zionists have perhaps the smallest space of all in which to think and comfortably move. Not only is this (double barreled situation) overwhelming to deal with in our daily lives, it is also too much to tackle in one sermon, so I will save Israel for next week—Kol Nidre.

This morning is simply to share my thoughts and deepest feelings about what it means to be a committed religious Reform Jew in America today. This morning I am speaking about what consumes me daily. I am trying to speak to this moment in time—a moment that continues to feel extraordinary in the most impossible of ways. In some sense can we each identify with Abraham, facing a barrage of daily tests?

I want to take this moment to explore this because my feelings are somewhat of a mystery even to myself. I feel angst every day—emotional pain, a fear, a foreboding. It hits me when I wake up and my thoughts turn to what I will confront on the front pages of the paper and on NPR.

The day's news inevitably brings with it a kind of feeling of being scorned---even manipulated. It is as if our national leaders are no longer there to reassure me\us but to taunt me\us.

Even as I reassure myself about the hopelessly inadequate ethical standard of the source of this manipulation, I cannot escape its impact on some part of my being and my fear for what it is doing to the country that I love—that is right—the country that I love. I am not sure that I ever knew how much I loved and admired this country until now—I never knew how much I took the amazing things about this country for granted. For instance, I took it all for granted that differing forces in this country combined to create the greatest educational system that the world has ever known and how privileged I was to be the beneficiary of the amazing learning experiences that I have had—from my Jewish Day School to my Chicago Public High School, from my wonderful undergraduate education at one of the world's great universities in Providence, RI to my rabbinical school education in New York. The stunning and brilliant array of education available in this country is astounding. To think, as a small example, America has fostered the great advancement in Jewish scholarship. There is so much that I have taken for granted—so when I say that my love for this country has never been so great, it is a way of recognizing the vast array of those amazing institutions that feel so threatened and so vulnerable---our schools, universities, justice system, journalists, government workers all suffer almost daily attacks emanating from the most powerful source. I have come to learn anew that we never really know our values until they are tested.

Clearly, to some degree we all share in this feeling of a very different period of American history that is upon us. How many of us share, even a bit, of that which I am trying to express? How many of us are driven almost daily to try to understand that through which we are living? The economic theorists, the sociologists, the political analysts, the philosophers, the psychologists all offer compelling as well as competing theories. I find degrees of insight in all of them. Reading the Sunday Post or Times and/or any one of a number of journals and magazines has become an ever dizzying affair as so many/ too many (?) smart

people offer their theories as to what this moment is all about—its sources, causes, impacts and effects.

Personally, I have found wisdom as well as discomfort in the insights of Georgetown University scholar Michael Eric Dyson whose own exploration of our current national trauma brings him to delve into the challenge that the Obama presidency brought to a large segment of our nation. He writes, “For the first time, a black face was on the machinery that had worked hard to undermine black agency.” (p60) What a hard statement to read—this perception of American government, American power, American social structure—a machine that had served to undermine black freedom, black power, black rights.

I cannot challenge that perception.

For Dyson and perhaps many others, part of what we are enduring is the backlash resulting from our first African American presidency. We have all read similar accounts.

Dyson continues, “Obama offered the state legitimacy more than he offered black folks inclusion...Obama was a walking legitimization crisis...because it meant, by implication...that the blacks it had historically demeaned and excluded were now part of official American identity, were that much closer to being...full citizens. And so an equally powerful wind blew back.” (p61)

This is the wind of racism and prejudice now coursing through the American landscape.

Dyson continues: “...as bigotry resurfaces, symbolized in the events in Charlottesville in August 2017, the lie is put to the belief that ‘this is not American, this is not us,’ when, indeed it truly is. We do not want to acknowledge how true it is because it makes us look complicit in prejudice we thought we had gotten over...”

How uncomfortable to recognize that Dyson is speaking to us.

Dyson is underlining that which causes our daily, unrelenting emotional angst – *we now feel what it is to be a target.*

He writes that in the current situation, the leadership is “treating the nation...as white folk have treated black folk throughout our history. ----- is treating the entire nation as black. More particularly (the entire nation is being treated as

“the n-word). One of the reasons for the special outrage of many white Americans (today) is that (the rules have been discarded)...”

“(The) total lack of knowledge, and the enshrinement of ignorance as the basis of power and authority, is the personification of white supremacy and white arrogance.” (p 64)

So Dyson, in effect, says that our current feeling of outrage is akin to being the object of racism. As Jews we can say we are feeling the powerlessness of what generations of Jews before us have felt in unrelenting anti-Semitism from the seat of power.

To simply try to illustrate what Dyson is saying:

I painfully remember the conversation I had in November 2016, shortly after the election with a member of our community—an academic who was doing work at the Library of Congress. He related that as he and his white colleagues were so distraught at the election results, they were consoled by some of the library staff who were Black.

Dyson captures the deep truth and meaning behind that experience. I am glad that one of you shared your story with me. It gives the Dyson quote a small window of context.

Neil Postman, one of my favorite thinkers of all time gives Dyson a larger context. Many of you have heard of him from me and more recently Rabbi Beraha, many times-

Postman is interested in how we come to understand the world through a concept he calls narratives. He devotes an entire chapter fittingly called, “Narratives” to this idea in his book, Building a Bridge to the 18th Century. Many of you have heard me address this concept before. Postman writes:

“I mean by “narrative” a story. But not any kind of story. I refer to big stories – stories that are sufficiently profound and complex to offer explanations of the origins and future of a people; stories that construct ideals, prescribe rules of conduct, specify sources of authority, and, in doing all this, provide a sense of community and purpose.... What is important about narratives is that human beings cannot live without them. We are burdened with a kind of consciousness that insists on our having a purpose. Purposefulness requires a moral context, and

moral context is what I mean by narrative. The construction of narratives is, therefore, a major business of our species; certainly, no group of humans has ever been found that did not have a story that defined for them how they ought to behave and why. That is the reason why there is nothing more disconcerting, to put it mildly, than to have one's story mocked, contradicted, refuted, held in contempt, or made to appear trivial. To do so is to rob a people of their reason for being...." (p101)

Narratives root our lives. They shape and define our sense of the world and create the borders of common community.

I believe that Dyson and now Postman have captured a critical reason for our travail. We now live in a world where our "narrative" is daily mocked, contradicted, refuted, held in contempt and made to appear trivial. The very root of the way we understand the world and the very purpose and dream of America we hold dear is scorned daily-- and for us, to make matters even a tad more unbearable—there are fellow-Jews involved in this contempt. Jews near the seat of power forging these sins. In my darker moments, or perhaps my more lucid ones, I dream of excommunication for those who like Esau live lives in defiance of the birthright they have inherited.

Dyson gives us all reason to pause. Reading Dyson through the wisdom offered by Postman, we come to see that the Obama presidency represented a similar mocking for a significant segment of our country—the mocking of a very different American narrative--something to which we dare not be blind.

We live with a symptom of a larger story which Dyson and Postman illuminate.

We live yet beside a persistent racist American narrative.

We have two competing, clashing American narratives. We can go back and consider Abraham Lincoln's house divided against itself. There is a narrative of America as the nation founded on the principles of the Enlightenment –life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—certainly imperfectly adopted from the very beginning. A nation which must work tirelessly to overcome the relentless stains of the past—genocide of native peoples, enslavement of Africans. These are –just that—stains—which will never disappear from the record---but the record must be explicitly, patiently, sorrowfully and painfully taught and not denied and then we must collectively find means for restitution and reconciliation. This narrative views America as a nation of immigrants built on the great experiment of

representative democracy and government of, by and for the people, an ever expanding understanding of what the principles of Enlightenment truly mean for all of us.

There is a competing counter-narrative—one that Dyson and others call Whiteness. It can be tied closely to certain interpretations of a segregationist Christianity. It has fostered such movements as John Birch, America First, and the Moral Majority. Through the internet, it has reared its head again in the form of White Supremacist and Neo-Nazi web sites. It is there and it tells a different American story—one of closed borders. It is racist. It is anti-Semitic. It is homophobic. It is misogynist.

Two American narratives in conflict.

How then do we proceed?

How do we respond to this test?

What are our tools?

I refer for just a moment now to my Vine letter of this season when I asked the question, what is the response to these times offered by a tradition that knows "there is nothing new under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

I referred in that letter to the most pivotal and darkest time in Jewish history prior to the twentieth century, the years 66-135 C.E. in the land of Israel. Those were the years of two failed rebellions against Roman rule and the destruction of Jerusalem that resulted in the end of a Jewish way of life that had sustained our people for more than 600 years.

When the Romans put down the second revolt, that of the Bar Kochba rebellion and executed its spiritual leader, Rabbi Akiva, in their torture chamber, some Jewish leaders realized their way of life was gone -- possibly forever.

We in this sanctuary this morning are the heirs of their Jewish response. It is the very Judaism we live and breathe. Jewish resistance, which had included war and bloodshed, eventually took the form of preservation, memory and a great body of philosophical and literary creativity -- our corpus of classic rabbinic literature. The Pharisaic revolution, those forerunners of the ancient rabbis, created a Judaism that was centered on table fellowship, elaborate, rigorous debate and the relentless pursuit of a moral code dedicated to both justice and mercy—justice

AND mercy. The struggle for political autonomy was, for the moment, put to the side.

I think there is something to learn here that bears remembering and repeating—if I dare be so bold. Perhaps the Jewish religious role in our time is to passionately model a decent society within our own communities, even as decency, tolerance and the pillars of the Enlightenment seem to disappear around us.

The Mishnah, written during this period of our history, teaches, "When no one behaves like a human being, you strive to be one." We dare not lose our mooring to the norms of civil society. We are challenged to be relentlessly passionate about the pillars of the Enlightenment: education, reason, equality and freedom. I remember writing these words in a lecture as an undergraduate—what was the Enlightenment? I didn't really understand the importance of these words—their power. What nineteen year old can?

Education

Reason

Equality

Freedom

These are the very underpinnings of our Reform Judaism—itsself a product of the Enlightenment.

Living these values is our contemporary way of embodying the mandate of the Mishnah. We must remember — this is not the first time we have gazed in horror at our world — and it won't be the last.

When would we rather be alive?

One thousand years ago we were living at the dawn of the murderous Crusades.

Five hundred years ago—we were living in the shadow of the Inquisition.

One hundred years ago, we were living on the edge of the dawn of the worst crime in all human history aimed squarely at our people.

What era does not have its crises?

This remains a great time to be alive—if we hold fast to who we are.

The words with which we began our service, the very prayerbook that we hold in our hands offers us, I believe both the inspiration and the guidance that we seek.

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HAYOM TI-AM-TZEINU

HAYOM-T'VAR-CHEINU

HAYOM T'GAD-LEINU

THIS DAY GIVE US STRENGTH
THIS DAY, BLESS US
THIS DAY ENLARGE US

We are challenged in this time to hold fast to our ideals, to not quit the scene, check out, turn inward, retire, pass the baton to someone else.

In this day, we need the strength to stay the course, dig deeper and remain truer and firmer to that which we believe--now more than ever.

I recall the great scene in the Churchill movie DARKEST HOUR, when the prime minister is told that rescuing the army from Dunkirk is a lost cause. "Lost causes are the only ones worth fighting for," is the ferocious response. We can never compromise on that which we believe. The bottom line purpose of Jewish life is to reinforce within each one of us, what to love and sacrifice for and what to oppose and fight against.

On this day especially, we pray HAYOM TIMATZEINU- THIS DAY MAKE US STRONG.

We then say--HAYOM TIVARCHEINU-- THIS DAY BLESS US.

We seek God's blessing. But we can ask--what does this mean. How do we fashion this sense of blessing. We tend to hear the word BARUCH when we are gathered for a ritual purpose.

We say BARUCH ATAH ADONAI--over the fruit of the vine, over candles, over challah.

We say these blessings with family and friends.

In these days--we are strengthened and we are blessed when we gather with each other and hold the ones we love close and share with each other our resolve, our wisdom, our courage. This is the very purpose of Temple Micah and the banners of welcome that we fly aloft outside our synagogue building.

WE SAY WELCOME--ENTER HERE-- DRINK FROM OUR WISDOM, BE FORTIFIED IN OUR COURAGE-- FEEL OUR BLESSING.

FINALLY--HAYOM TIGADLEINU--MAKE US LARGE. We return to Abraham with whom I began these remarks. Remember when God first calls to Abraham, God says--I will make you into a great nation (Goy Gadol) and make your name great (A-gad-lah shemecha)--literally enlarge your name? There is a midrash (BR 39:11) that teaches that the enlarging of the name was when God changed the name

from Abram to Abraham--adding the Hebrew letter HEY--the letter of God's name. When we pray--HAYOM TIGADLEINU--MAKE US LARGE--perhaps we might pray-- add your name to our work--Dear God, help us know that our work is sacred. In standing for justice, we stand for your name.

We ask for courage, we ask for blessing and we ask for the dedication that comes in knowing that in defending, decency, knowledge, democracy, minorities, immigrants, refugees, the homeless, women's rights, --in defending an expanding enlightenment --we are adding God's name to our own name.

We do God's work.

Abraham passed ten tests.

We are called to pass this one in this moment of time.

Thousands of years ago, Micah asked: What does God require of me? His answer echoes with clear and inspiring wisdom today: "Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God."

We have our mandate.

May we together, pass this test in this coming year and beyond.

Shanah Tovah-

*(Abraham's Ten Tests as recorded by Maimonides)

1. God tells Abraham to leave his homeland for the land of Canaan.
2. Immediately after his arrival in the Promised Land, he encounters a famine.
3. The Egyptians seize his wife, Sarah, and bring her to Pharaoh.
4. Abraham faces incredible odds in the battle of the four and five kings.
5. He marries Hagar after not being able to have children with Sarah.
6. God tells him to circumcise himself at an old age.
7. The king of Gerar captures Sarah, intending to take her for himself.
8. God tells him to send Hagar away after having a child with her.
9. His son, Ishmael, becomes estranged.
10. God tells him to sacrifice his son Isaac.