

Daniel G. Zemel
Temple Micah
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A THREE STRAND ROPE IS NOT EASILY BROKEN

A simple question-

Please raise your hand if you have had the experience of sitting down at a table in a restaurant and finding it wobble. The restaurant staff brings a match book or some bent cardboard and the four legged table is stabilized.

This is why the rabbis wrote

Al shloscha devarim—

On three legs the world stands—a three legged table can never wobble. Three points make a plane

Ecclesiastes reinforces—or we might say even begins this Jewish geometric wisdom with its own:

!החוט הַמְּשֻׁלָּשׁ לֹא בְּמַהֲרָה יִנָּתֵק:

“A three strand rope is not easily broken.”

Last week, on Rosh Hashanah, I shared with you what I thought I had learned about the three pillars of Jewish life—our threefold cord of God, Torah and Israel. This week as we enter the most sacred day of our most sacred season. I turn my thoughts to this land that we love so much that it pains us to read the newspapers each day and the stories about those who would trade our birthright of democracy for their own power, fortune or fame. These are the biblical Esaus of our time, who, you will remember, sold his own birthright for a bowl of red lentil porridge.

On what three pillars does American democracy stand—I ask myself. What, at its core, are we about as nation? When I read our American story through a Jewish lens, what is my takeaway?

Do we have a threefold cord or a three legged stool?

My answers come easily to me—and they cohere seamlessly with my Jewish understanding of the human story.

Our nation stands firmly when we stand on the three pillars of:

- 1.-Dedication to a proposition
- 2.-Enlightenment commitments
- 3.-A sense of the future

Today—our three legged American stool somehow wobbles, our three fold cord is frayed.

America, as Abraham Lincoln put it, is a nation “dedicated to a proposition that all men are created equal.” Lincoln’s great words quoting the Declaration of Independence. This equality of all humans, of course is a proposition. It is not a full truth.

In one of my family’s favorite works of American fiction, Harper Lee’s, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch, the fictional lawyer we all want to have were we ever in trouble, critiques this idea of full equality in his plea as he defends Tom Robinson, who stands not a chance before the all-white southern jury:

“One more thing, gentlemen, before I quit,” Atticus says as he concludes his defense. “Thomas Jefferson once said that all men are created equal,” and then. “We know all men are not created equal in the sense some people would have us believe—some people are smarter than others, some people have more opportunity because they are born with it, some men make more money than others, some ladies make better cakes than others---some people are born gifted beyond the normal scope of most men.”

He goes on...

“But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal—there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein, and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution, gentlemen, is a court. It can be the Supreme Court of the United States or the humblest ...court in the land....in this country our courts are the great levelers, and in our courts all men are created equal.”

With these words Harper Lee captures Torah's admonition as Leviticus states clearly:

"You shall not render an unfair decision: do not ...show deference to the rich; judge your kin fairly."

The framers of the Bible understood how wealth and power can pervert justice.

Rashi goes to unusual lengths to emphasize what the Torah is saying:

"This teaches us that the judge who perverts judgment is called an "unjust person" (לֹאֲדָן), hateful and detested...an abomination."

Leviticus and then Rashi are so adamant about this because it is the very essence of the entire Bible—all humanity is created in the image of God. Not one of us is more valuable than another.

Jewish law is quite clear on this. If a group is kidnapped and the kidnappers threaten to kill one person at a time until the ransom is paid, those in the group cannot select who is to be killed first. We can never be the judges of "whose blood is redder" to use the language of the Talmud.

This principle of total equality as a reality, as Harper Lee notes is universally unachievable. Atticus Finch, her mythic hero see the courts as a bulwark. Today, in the eyes of many, our American courts are not seen as a "great leveler." What we have seen in recent years is what the Bible would term an abominable rollback of steps taken towards equality. This bastion of strength that we look to for equality, the courts—including our highest court, has become a partner in this abomination—to deliberately use a biblical word.

We are all weaker and poorer for it.

The sacred has been polluted because in a democracy, as our highest court does not seem to understand, if the right to vote is not sacred, then nothing is sacred. Everything simply becomes a matter of power—the fear that drove Nietzsche to insanity.

This is where we sit today. That the very ability to vote has become a political battleground is sin.

Lincoln's proposition--his restatement of Jefferson--- thus hangs in the balance. One strand of our rope is frayed. A leg of our democracy wobbles.

My second leg of the American stool sees our nation as a product of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment meant more than the proposition of equality. The *more* is crucial to our American story.

It has been written so many times that I hesitate to repeat it now— America is an experiment. Lincoln saw this when he asked “whether a nation so conceived and so dedicated could long endure.” Moreover, the American experience is an Enlightenment experiment because we know that the Enlightenment itself is flawed. It condoned slavery. It created colonial empires that distorted the world.

Yet, we are bound together by our commitment to ideas and ideals—we are not a nation of blood and soil. We rest on certain principles of the Enlightenment. One, of course, is paramount—one of many—not yet achieved --the equality of Human Beings.

The European Enlightenment also brought us
the search for scientific truths,
a belief in human reasoning to solve problems,
a commitment to freedom for all people,
a drive for human understanding through tolerance of and respect for difference,
and
a vision of human moral progress.

These values interconnect and overlap. Democracy, public education, and the separation of church and state are all impossible without the constellation of values and ideas and discoveries of what we call the Enlightenment.

And for us—it is much more and we cannot say it enough.

The very Judaism that we share and cherish, the Judaism that defines us is impossible without the Enlightenment. It simply does not exist. Just as the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the 1st century gave Judaism the opportunity to re-create itself in the rabbinic period—a Judaism that shed itself

not only of animal sacrifice but also of slavery, capital punishment, punishment by flogging and so much more—

so the Enlightenment recreated or reformed our own Judaism.

We too often take this for granted when we should actually give thanks for it whenever we gather.

Our Enlightenment Judaism inspired us to re-write prayers that cast dispersions on those of other faiths.

We created new theologies that reflect our beliefs about the way God does or does not act in history and our own lives.

We cleansed our Judaism of superstitions and prejudices

We see science and the advancement of knowledge as the way to a deeper understanding of our world

We see our Faith as a path to a moral life

We came to understand with clear eyes that there was no authentic Judaism that was not rooted in a universal morality that espoused equality for all creation.

I am so proud of our Judaism that it brings me to tears. Yes—we did that. If it is not moral, if it is not truth—it is not Jewish. That is ours.

Our Judaism is in an ongoing conversation with the Enlightenment—just as the true Enlightenment is an ongoing conversation and deliberation about science and truth and equality.

We understand the need for more voices in the conversation—that objectivity is sometimes impossible to achieve but –and this last is critical as well- we do not deny that there is such a thing as truth—both scientific truth, historical truth, moral truth.

We know that it is absolutely impossible to live in a world where each of us does what is right in our own eyes. We are a religious people with a faith that is hard to define but we know that there is such a thing as a sacred, moral core to creation. We cannot abide the belief that the human moral order is up for grabs — that I do what is right for me and you do what is right for you. Hitler did what was right for Hitler and so on.

We know the reality of Evil—and we oppose it with every fiber of our being.

When science is questioned, when equality is under attack, when respect for others is diminished, when tolerance is in short supply and when a dominating and narrow religious belief make invisible the separation of church and state, we are all in trouble.

In this regard, I wish to add one important note. There is a difference between minority rights and minority rule. There are some that seem to have the two confused.

Minority rights are the safeguards provided by our constitution. We, for example who are part of a minority group can worship freely as we wish. Those with minority views on any social issue can publish opinions freely. We all have the right to vote—at least theoretically. We flourish as a nation when our many minority groups be they ethnic, religious, socially self-formed—you name it, can live as they like free from harassment or government intervention.

Minority rule is when a minority imposes its choices, its beliefs, on the public at large.

The constitution, to be sure, is there to also protect minorities against what can be the tyranny of majority rule. In sum, it is my conviction that the America we cherish, just as the Judaism we affirm, stands on a leg of the Enlightenment and its commitment to truth and tolerance, freedom and education, and an inclusive moral vision.

This leg wobbles—this cord too, is frayed.

Finally, the third pillar of American democracy, a sense of the future. This country from the outset has imbibed a deeply Jewish lesson—a strong sense of the future, a sense of possibility and opportunity. The Jewish story is always ongoing brimming with anticipation. It is embedded in our master narrative. Moses dies at the end of the Torah but the Israelites are already looking on to the next generation under Joshua's leadership and their entrance to the Promised Land. The Jewish understanding of messianism—looking to a glorious climax of human history that we know will never come--pushes us as a people relentlessly forward.

The very heart of our passion for social justice is to leave the world better than we found it. Our collective concern always for our grandchildren's grandchildren. What is the story that they will tell about the past? If you ever think that all religions are the same—just consider that particular Jewish emphasis. We live so that our grandchildren's grandchildren may live in a flourishing world.

We know the Jewish story of the old man planting a tree and is told that the messiah has appeared at the gate of the city. He finishes planting the tree!!!

The American story likewise has a forward thrust. Our national narrative is scattered throughout with inventors (Whitney, Edison, Orville and Frank Wright), explorers (Peary, Shepard, Glenn, Armstrong) and discoverers (Franklin, Salk, Oppenheimer). All heroes who looked to the future.

Some of us remember a president who urged us toward a "New Frontier." Today, in too many circles, we have become a nation fixated on an idealized and bigoted vision of a non-existent exclusive past.

There is a Jewish version of this also—this longing for the past--a recording of a great conversation of Yavneh when some of the sages gathered there in the late years of the first century and looked through a romantic lens to their past. "Oh, the greatness and piety of the earlier years," they cried. "How will we live without our Temple?"

Until a student comes along and jolts them out of their reveries reminding them of the idolatry of the Golden Calf and the corruption of the Temple priests. Dickens had it correct. All times can be the best of times and the worst of times. The early rabbis were revolutionaries who knew that the Jewish story meant looking to the future. To dwell in the past is the equivalent of defeat.

Od lo advada Tikvateinu—We have not lost our hope. The Jewish way is to create a new future.

America too needs to re-learn how to look to our future.

Our third leg wobbles—our third cord frays.

Where do we stand?

There is one great lesson that Jewish wisdom could offer to the current American climate—and it is a lesson made for consideration on our Day of Atonement—a day where we contemplate the misdeeds of our past and look for our better angel to forgive those around us.

On Yom Kippur we acknowledge that we are flawed—all of us flawed.

It is a great Jewish game—one person names a hero—the next has to name his\her flaws.

One of the geniuses of Judaism is the understanding that our moral posture mirrors our biological one.

Our biology is fragile, prone to illness and needs regular upkeep. Physically, we learn to live within ourselves. We adapt. When we are cold, we put on a sweater. Too hot? Take it off and roll up your sleeves.

We are likewise morally fallible and prone to err. The sweet, comforting beauty of our Genesis heroes implicitly confirms our need to forgive. With Adam and Eve we see error knit into our very DNA. Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph are all riddled with sin and error.

We are a forgiving people because the human experience gives us no choice. Our very nation has a long way to go in this respect. The political extremes of the Left and the Right seem to seize upon errors of speech, judgement, and mistakes of youth. There are purity tests no one can withstand. We have forgotten second chances in so many ways. Why can't an ex-convict who has served prison time vote in some states? That is unconscionable. The rabbinic wisdom might well guide us to this day.

מְקוֹם שֶׁבַעֲלֵי תְּשׁוּבָה עוֹמְדִין — צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרִים אֵינָם עוֹמְדִין

“In the place where repentant sinner stands, even the fully righteous cannot stand.” (Berachot 34b)

In too many quarters this has been lost. Tolerance is at a low and it threatens our future.

Richard Rorty, in what for me was his brilliant book, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America*, writes these words:

“Those who hope to persuade a nation to exert itself need to remind their country of what it can take pride in as well as what it should be ashamed of. They must tell inspiring stories about episodes and figures in the nation’s past...”

Rorty goes on-

“In America at the end of the twentieth century, few inspiring images and stories are being proffered. The only version of national pride being encouraged by American popular culture is a simple minded militaristic chauvinism...”

Rorty’s words have proven to be prophetic into the 21st century as well. This is where we stand today.

We are caught in a cycle of endless argument as statues are fought over, roads and schools renamed, museum exhibits redone while others are simply cancelled.

The controversies are endless.

We, are a people who knows that all heroes are flawed and perfection is reserved for bad fiction.

Remember the Talmudic wisdom on Noah who the Bible calls “righteous for his generation.”

Why, the later sages asked, does the Torah include the modifier “for his generation?”

Because what is deemed righteous for one generation may not meet the standards of another.

Was Noah simply the best of a bad lot or was he a towering figure? The point is—we will never know.

No human endeavor can long sustain itself without heroes to look to. This is why we have Halls of Fame, history museums, holidays and monuments.

How do we decide who belongs?

We need to create a new way of telling the American story.

We – America’s Jews have more at stake than most in the continued vitality of our American Democratic Experiment. This land has been a flourishing haven for us like no other in our 2000 year exile history.

There is also more than a little self-interest here.

Former Micah member, Rabbi Michael Holzman recently wrote these words—and I am so proud to quote him here-

“For American Jews the disappearance of liberal democracy would be a disaster. Since Washington wrote a letter to the Touro synagogue, we have flourished under the shelter of the principles behind the First Amendment, and we have been protected by the absolute belief in the rule of law. Without these, Jews, start packing suitcases.”

A time to pause—

I reached this point in this sermon and was not sure where to turn. I racked my brain on this for weeks.

Where do we go from here?

If there is a Jewish message for our time it is to support our great experiment with every fiber of our being.

That much is clear with all of our hearts, with all of our souls with all of our resources.

We can learn a lot from the words of the Shma and V’ahavata—when we pay attention.

We also need to teach our children and grandchildren diligently—when we lie down and when we rise up the values embedded in what I have termed our three fold cord. If we are really good at anything—we are supremely gifted at remembering, teaching, and transmitting.

Finally-we need to seek out and support those who seek to weave a new American story even when the task seems daunting. Even as we teach the values of the past—we forge ahead seeking a new future. In other words, we have to moor ourselves firmly to our inherited values. We cannot blow with the winds.

To end then with one of my favorite Talmudic stories—so many of you have heard it before. It just seemed to fit.

The ancient rabbis under Roman rule were near unanimity for their disgust and disdain for the gladiator games. Who here is not disgusted with our current politics—the attacks, the screams, the taunts—the endless negativity.

In the ancient coliseum—and you can see them in the ruins in Israel in Caesarea and Tziporri—the gladiator would turn to the crowd.

Shall I let my vanquished opponent live or should I end his life now with a final blow of my sword?

The rabbis, nearly unanimously advised to never go to the games.

There was of course an exception to this—Rabbi Shimon taught his disciples to go to the games. If you ever have a chance to save a life—even a small chance—you take it. It is a mandate. It is not even a choice.

No matter how unseemly the forum

How the odds are against you

How bloodthirsty or vulgar the surroundings

It is the Jewish obligation to always go into the fray and vote for life.

This is who we are.

We are the disciples of Rabbi Shimon—even when the crowds are hateful—even when the noise is deafening—we are God’s champions for life—for a good life for everyone.

The really great thing about being Jewish is this—it is all real—as real as our very history.

We don’t take no for an answer.

We do everything we can to repair our three-strand American cord— to build back better the three pillars upon which we stand.

Jews don’t despair.

Od lo avda tikvateinu. We don't lose hope.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah

Have a wonderful year.