

Rabbi Mark Miller
Temple Beth El
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Members of the Tribe: The Politics of Unity

Gut Yontif!

You may know that our architect, Yamasaki, modeled this breathtaking room after the ancient Tent of Meeting from the Torah. People walk in here all the time to appreciate the design or gaze at the magnificence ... so it might be easy to forget that this Sanctuary wasn't built to be studied or toured ... it's here to be experienced.

When our community gathers for these High Holy Days, we do our best to focus on the traditional prayers, reflective meditations, and beautiful songs. But Yamasaki understood that sitting here, we would be transported to another time, thousands of years ago, when our ancestors wandered through the desert and carried their belongings with them. When their prayers for rain or fertility could mean the difference between life and death. And when your very existence was defined by your tribe.

This Sanctuary evokes our tribal instincts only to bring us right back, so that we notice the powerful thread connecting that Tent of Meeting with our own. We may get a sense of majesty by looking up, and a sense of the spiritual by looking down at our books ... but we can only get a sense of holiness by looking around. It is called a Tent of Meeting, because this is the place where our sacred community gathers together and draws inspiration from one another. The heart of this Temple is not the building and not the books ... it is our people.

Judaism has been incredibly successful for an incredibly long time. In fact, you might call us an historical anomaly. Mark Twain famously commented on this in 1899, when he marveled at our ability to contribute "to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning ... way out of proportion to the weakness of [our] numbers." Recognizing that everyone from Egyptians and Persians to Greeks and Romans has held their torch high and then burned out, he wondered: "All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

I wish I could speak to Twain myself, because I may have an answer ... community. From its earliest days, Judaism has endeavored to create strong communities. Not individuals and not families – they are the vital building blocks of healthy communities, but each of us will rise and fall based on the success of our community, not the other way around. And as Twain noticed, that notion has served us well.

This Sanctuary is a not-so-subtle reminder that we are best when we cling to that tribal mentality. When we support one another, guide one another, and our Judaism unites us

– even in the face of great difficulty. We have suffered through tremendous oppression, and we have survived, at least in part, due to our unwavering support for one another and a willingness to sacrifice on behalf of the community ... rather than simply meeting our own personal needs.

As a result of this community-centered approach, Judaism was often the primary factor in determining where we lived, where we worked, how we ate, who was in your Majj club, whom you married. We may not exist in the same historical circumstances, or feel the same need to protect ourselves by closing ranks ... but still, we are reminded that we share common heritage with our ancestors ... and common destiny with those who surround us today.

Ours is a large and vibrant Temple, and there would be no way for any of us to know all of our fellow congregants ... but it is the relationships between us that define our community, and will ultimately determine our future. So perhaps we should understand each other a little better?

What do we care about? How do we spend our time? What makes us who we are?

Who, exactly, are the people in our tribe?

Raise your hand if you are a teacher. Now if you are a lawyer. How about if you work online. Raise your hand if you work in one of the most important place of all ... at home!

OK, raise your hand if you are first-born. A middle child. If you are the baby of your family. Raise your hand if you cry during a good movie. How about if you think Game of Thrones is the best show in the history of television! Raise your hand if you've ever broken a bone. If you've been south of the equator. Or if you get nervous speaking in front of people. Raise your hand if you can name all four Beatles.

Raise your hand if you have become a Temple member within the last five years. If you are a 2nd generation member. How about if your family has been here for 3 or more generations. Raise your hand if you recognize the person 3 seats to your right. If you know the name of the person 2 rows in front of you.

We could go on and on, but allow me to ask one, final question ... raise your hand if you are interested in telling your neighbors this morning whether you are a Democrat or a Republican.

I don't mean to raise your pulse ... we are all unique, even as we share so much in common. So why should this question induce such a different reaction than all the rest? Let's put that on hold for a few moments.

We live at a fascinating time in history. Our American Jewish community is probably as safe and successful as we have ever been. In fact, we are doing so well, that we are loosening our grip on the tribal structure that sustained us for so long. We aren't forced to choose professions or social opportunities based only on being Jewish, so we are

expanding our horizons, getting more involved in secular causes, spending less time engrossed in recognizably Jewish activities. We're achieving what many Jewish generations could only dream of ... fitting in.

And yet, identity matters. We make decisions in life based on how we see ourselves, and how we assess the people around us. Take personal relationships as an example. We enjoy stories about how "opposites attract," and some of us can relate. But the truth is, that almost never happens. We just convince ourselves by focusing on a particular characteristic. For example, my dear Rachel Ann can tell you not only when we received every object in our home, but who gave it to us, and for what occasion ... I consider it a victory when I don't give someone the same gift twice ... See? Proof, opposites attract! Except that specific skill represents only the tiniest fraction of who we are.

Relationships tend to work because we find people who are similar to us – those with whom we share a similar background, education, worldview, and fundamental values.

So as we spend more time "fitting in" with those who are like us in other ways, if we no longer self-identify first and foremost as Jews, how do we define ourselves?

In the year 1960, polls showed that less than 5% of Americans would be upset if their children married someone from the "other" political party. By 2010, the number had shot up to nearly 25%. Today, less than a decade later, the number is inching toward 50%. (<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/09/really-would-you-let-your-daughter-marry-a-democrat/262959/>) Taking it further, a pair of scientists analyzed a massive amount of data about marriage in the United States just last year. Out of more than 18 million married couples they looked at, 6% were Republican men marrying a Democratic woman, and 3% were Republican women marrying a Democratic man. (<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-many-republicans-marry-democrats/>)

Assuming we are similar to most Americans, when it comes to deciding what is most important about ourselves and others, political party is becoming the primary gauge. Even if this doesn't describe you personally, I have a feeling we can all see it happening around us. But remember, for all this talk about partisanship, that's not really the topic at hand. This isn't a question of politics at all, but about unity vs discord, about the relationships in this Sanctuary, about the nature of our tribe. It is about how we maintain the sacred connections that have nurtured us for so long, in a world that feels increasingly divisive.

Popular issues have always inflamed passions in America, so why do things feel so different today?

Shanto Iyengar, director of Stanford's political communications lab, has been studying this phenomenon for more than a decade. His research shows that this polarization is not actually about disagreement ... we are witnessing the "transformation of political affiliation into a form of personal identity." (*Political identity is fair game for hatred: How Republicans and Democrats discriminate*, *Vox*, December 7, 2015.)

And in the past few years, a group of scholars has been inquiring into the root causes of our nation's intense political divide. They argue that partisans on both sides believe different facts, use different economic theories, and hold differing views of history. But more to the point, they conclude that "liberals and conservatives in the same country think as if they were from different cultures."

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/28/opinion/how-did-politics-get-so-personal.html>)

Different cultures?! What does that mean for all of us?

We are all sitting in this Sanctuary specifically because we share culture. The way we make decisions, what is important to us, how we relate to others – those similarities are the source of our ability not only to succeed, but to do good in the world. So if many of us are looking at fellow Temple members as if they are effectively from a different culture ... well, you can see the problem.

When I asked if you would tell your neighbor if you are a Republican or a Democrat, my goal wasn't to enter politics at all. It was a way of teasing out the fault lines that are showing up in our community, and what that means for our sense of solidarity. It didn't matter if I asked about politics or restaurants or whether Michigan or Michigan State is better ... the real question was ... are there external limits to our ability to share the various facets of our lives as one, unified Temple family?

It's no secret that across the country, Jewish religious practices are declining. Less people are lighting Shabbat candles or coming to services, fewer kids are getting confirmed – just look at the photos on the walls of any Temple. And yet, I believe that our community is deeply committed to our Jewish identity. We care about it. We take pride in it. If people weren't still seeking meaningful Jewish experiences, we wouldn't witness such a steady increase in participation right here at Temple.

But as a rabbi, I become concerned when we raise the following question – what happens when religious observance continues to erode, and the cultural bonds of community that have kept us active start to wither? All those generations when our ancestors clung to one another, to their tribe ... will it be for naught?

I remember visiting the Golan Heights when I was 13. They took us to a hillside, where we could look across to another hillside that was in Syria – the border ran right down the middle, where a Druze village had been separated by the new border. Since there was no border crossing and no telephone service, the only way families who had been split apart could communicate was by shouting across the valley to each other. And so it became known as the Valley of Shouting.

There is no valley here, and nobody has built a fortified border between us. But we are definitely shouting at each other ... and often not out of love or affection or a yearning to pull together.

Don't get me wrong – walking into Temple these days feels really good. There is so much going on, so much excitement, so many kids running around. I don't want to diminish

all the joy here. But there is an undercurrent that isn't as obvious, and it is wreaking havoc on us. The studies I just mentioned don't only apply to our neighbors. Politics has become personal and painful, and it is affecting how we behave as a community.

Some of us may be familiar with a term to identify fellow Jews, MOT – member of the tribe. Today, though, sitting in our symbolic Tent of Meeting ... what, exactly, is our "tribe"? We are having a harder and harder time talking with each other about the real issues that affect all of us. We are suspicious. We grow angry. We say or write or post things that veer into being abusive. In more than 24 years of working at large and successful Temples, including ours, I have never witnessed such hostility among members of a Temple family, or within the Jewish community.

I was at a baby naming a few weeks ago, when a Temple member explained that his wife has been distraught and anxious about the constant news alerts she would receive. Aside from feeling overwhelmed, she is actually fearful about saying the wrong thing to the wrong person.

I had a breakfast meeting recently at the Gallery, and bumped into another Temple member who wanted to talk to me about how she just can't handle it any more. Given everything happening in the world, and her friends' disturbing reactions to it, she simply wants to disengage. Stop talking to people. Otherwise, she just feels worse every day.

Another member sat in my office just days ago and said, I can't understand why people are so angry. Why are we treating each other this way? Isn't it a Jewish value to treat people with respect? And another called me to ask if I would come to her defense, as she feels like she has been unreasonably attacked – not for her views, but as a person.

That is not how members of a tribe operate. The Talmud teaches us, "one who shames another in public, it is as if that person shed blood." (Baba Metzia 58b) It is as if we are killing another person's soul. Clearly, our tradition wants that sort of behavior to be off-limits, but we have lost sight of some of our most fundamental values.

If we are devolving into "tribes" based on our politics, what does that mean for the shared identity that supposedly brings us all to Temple on this holy day?

We are human beings, with all sorts of facets and stories and beliefs. Raising your hands wasn't just an exercise. I am a Jewish man, a father, a husband. I like to read adventure books and I enjoy letting puppy dogs lick my face. I love the mountains, I love to laugh with my wife, and I love playing basketball with our boys. Like everyone in this Sanctuary, I embody the words of the brilliant American poet Walt Whitman ... "I am vast, I contain multitudes." ("Song of Myself" in Leaves of Grass.)

How did we descend to a place where a person's political party becomes not only the first thing people seem to care about, but in some cases, the only thing? What about all those qualities you raised your hands for a few minutes ago?

Rosh Hashanah is not about wringing our hands, it is about charting the course for our community over the next year, and determining what Jewish values will inform and support our choices. At the risk of repeating myself – without a unified Jewish community, without a caring Temple family, our future is bleak. We cannot control what happens out there, and that's not solely our responsibility, but we *can* decide what happens in here.

Let me suggest that our guiding inspiration come from a powerful Midrash. The Rabbis ask ... why did God begin the world by creating just one human being? The answer is filled with wisdom ... So that no person may say to another, my father is greater than yours. (Mishna, Sanhedrin 4:5) So simple, so elegant, so crucial. One of the ways we create durable community is by recognizing that no person is inherently better than another. We may be different, we certainly have divergent opinions – but none is superior. That insight dictates how we are supposed to treat one another, view one another, work and play and rejoice with one another. And it is most decidedly not about putting the person next to us into a category and automatically deciding that we are enemies.

If each of us can promise to remember that we are fundamentally equal, I'd like to humbly suggest three courses of action at the dawn of another New Year.

My primary plea today is that we will place a higher value on all that we share in common than we do on whatever divides us. I'm not asking everyone to agree on political issues – we know how many opinions you get when you put two Jews in a room. But the good of the community must be more important than whatever those issues are. When you feel the emotion rising, when you are absolutely sure that this other person is crazy or heartless or worse ... recall that they, just like you, were created in the image of God.

We have overcome brutal challenges before, and our sense of community has always triumphed over concerns about physical safety or financial security. Today, it is political divisiveness threatening to tear us apart – let's not let it.

Am I saying that the substance of these political issues doesn't matter? Of course not. But while political debate will never end, when we enter these sacred halls, I submit that we would be breaking with 4,000 years of Jewish wisdom if politics becomes more important than the people in your tribe.

Second, when we think our politics are too much to ignore, remember that we have bigger issues that should concern all of us equally. For anyone who may not have noticed, there have been Nazis marching in the streets of American cities! I'm fairly certain that is more important than whatever issue is being debated on Capitol Hill or in Lansing.

We have all been startled by the recent wave of anti-Semitic incidents. From bomb threats to cemetery desecration to swastikas at local schools (and just a few days ago in Royal Oak) ... to the madness of Charlottesville ... with the bizarre and frightening chant, "Jews will not replace us." Honestly, I have no idea what that is supposed to mean.

There are 15-16 million Jews in this country, a solid but shrinking 2.5%. And I just don't envision replacing those "concerned citizens" with a wave of Jewish migration to Montana! But the sentiment is clear.

At the same time, we would do well not to make more of it than it actually is. I was heartened to learn, as part of my role on the ADL Regional Board, that while anti-Semitic incidents have risen dramatically – and FBI numbers show that anti-Semitism remains the overwhelming majority of hate crimes in America – that anti-Semitic sentiments have not increased. In other words, our neighbors are not growing more anti-Semitic in their attitudes, and America is not turning on Jews. But those who already hold these views have been emboldened.

That truth is borne out in poll after poll, year after year. Jews remain the most cherished religious group in America. (<http://www.pewforum.org/2017/02/15/americans-express-increasingly-warm-feelings-toward-religious-groups/>)

This is not 1930s Germany, or 1880s Lithuania, or 1490s Spain. Really, it's not. But that doesn't mean we should leave it alone. If history has taught us anything, it is that even nascent anti-Semitism can turn into a grave problem when ignored.

Let us commit to saying out loud, whenever and wherever we need to, that anti-Semitism has no place in America. And let us encourage our political leaders to do the same. There are no sides here – just resolve in the face of evil.

Beyond that, we should commit ourselves to reinforcing the one thing that infuriates anti-Semites the most ... a strong and united community, building holy relationships and living a positive Jewish life. My colleague and teacher, Rabbi David Stern, who is currently President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, pointed out that after one bomb threat at a Jewish school, the students stopped on their way outside to grab a Torah ... they spread out a few jackets, put it down on a car hood, and spent the time they had to be evacuated immersed in learning and celebrating Torah. That, says Rabbi Stern, is how Judaism thrives in the face of hostility.

Which is my third recommendation. Each one of us can take concrete steps that will re-kindle your Jewish soul. Rabbi Brudney spoke beautifully last night about how important it is to "own your Judaism," and there is not just one way to do so. You can count on lots of opportunities here at Temple ... come have some Sushi in the Sukkah on October 4th, shake the lulav, and have a few drinks with friends ... take a class, watch for our Adult Purim festival in March, or come for Shabbat on a Friday night to spend an hour enjoying the music and the spirit, surrounded by a community of joy and serenity before heading out to dinner.

But it could be other things. Give money to Federation. Read a Jewish book. Go to Israel. Say the Shema with your kids when you put them to sleep. Explore a local synagogue whenever you travel someplace new. Serve on a Board, or volunteer with a Jewish organization.

Your Jewish soul can be ignited in a multitude of ways. We are a diverse congregation, each of us with a story and a perspective that matters. And through these individual choices, I pray that on this Rosh Hashanah we will step back from the brink, refuse to let another's political choices obscure your view of their soul, remember that we have always been stronger together, and pledge to re-capture our sense of unity, our sense of tribe.

When we do, this Sanctuary will become more than a Tent of Meeting ... it will grow into a Tent of Meaning, a Tent of Connection, a Tent of Resilience ... a Tent of Peace.

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May this be God's will!

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