

Kol Nidrei/Erev Yom Kippur 5778  
Fearful Days/Taking a Knee

Last year I took part in an annual interfaith program at a local high school. It was designed to be an opportunity for a broad range of religious leaders to meet with students and talk about the history and beliefs of their respective faiths. Last year the format was a panel discussion in the high school auditorium, with the leaders on the stage. The students posed questions, and then we went down the line: Catholics, Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, each responding from their own perspective. One student asked: ‘Have you ever faced discrimination because of your religion?’ We all gave answers that varied on the theme of being different and yet maintaining our faith and our dignity. When I was finished talking about anti-semitism, I handed the microphone to the evangelical pastor to my left, and he answered by saying ‘I am a straight, white, Christian man; when would I ever be discriminated against?’ As he passed the microphone on to the left, I leaned over to him and whispered “Just wait.”

Yom Kippur concludes the period known as the Yamim Nora'im, commonly translated as ‘The Days of Awe.’ But we could just as easily translate the phrase as ‘The Days of Fear,’ or ‘Fearful Days.’ Americans are living in what can justifiably be called fearful days, and not just for ten days in the fall. In so many areas – policing and race relations, refugees and security, immigration and job loss – the country is seized with anxiety. In my view, much of that anxiety can be traced to changes in our society, some many years coming, others breathtakingly rapid, that have left many Americans bewildered. In particular, I’m thinking of those who have always seen themselves as prototypically American: straight, white, Christian Americans. For someone from that background, seeing the country shift to a ‘majority-minority’ demographic, where

whites are quickly becoming the minority, and at a time when religious affiliation with churches is waning (it is not only synagogues that struggle with membership), and when many different kinds of sexuality and family structures are now considered normative, it's a nerve-wracking time. As the country becomes more diverse, their identity as 'regular Americans' must seem to them to be under siege; for them, these are fearful days.

To cite just the most recent illustration of white Americans' fearfulness: Over the past week or so we have been witness to the growing phenomenon of 'taking a knee.' Understand, my purpose today is not to either support or denigrate this symbolic act, but rather to talk about how differently various Americans understand it. It began with a single football player, who felt that until America deals with its issues of race and policing, the country will not live up to its own values. So he knelt during the national anthem before games as a symbol of unkept promises. For him, that silent demonstration was a means of expressing a conflicted American identity. To others, the act seemed simply disrespectful of country and flag, even disloyal. But what has been fascinating over recent days is to see - in the face of criticism of kneeling - how many NFL players, coaches and owners began to show support for the right to kneel during the anthem, and then to see the practice spreading to other sports, to entertainers, even members of Congress! What does it mean?

I'll suggest that what began as a very specific symbol of discontent has taken on a broader connotation. Kneeling now represents the very right to voice discontent, the right to difference. The broader controversy, I think, represents the anxiety, the fearfulness in America, that exists between those who recognize and accept that the country is irrevocably less white, less Christian, less straight than it once was, and those who feel uncomfortable, even threatened

by those changes. Taking a knee has been transformed into a test of how willing Americans are to embrace a changed and changing America.

I would be willing to bet that most American Jews don't feel threatened by such changes, or by those who take a knee, despite the fact that a majority of American Jews are white. The reason is obvious: For most of our history, we have been a tiny minority wherever we have lived. Jews are used to this kind of thing; we go through life making accommodations, small and large, to living in a culture different from our own. In some areas we fit right in; in others we have been careful to maintain distinctions in order to preserve Jewish customs and beliefs. That kind of balancing act is not just second nature to us; it is in large measure a basic component of our experience. Jews have gotten used to a kind of perpetual anxiety over their place in the larger society. It's going to take some time for our Christian friends to do the same. The Torah teaches that we should show love to strangers, for we know the experience of being strangers in a strange land. Many Americans are beginning to feel like strangers in their own land. One of the things Jews can do with and for Christians is to talk about and model how to achieve a balance between tradition and change. As we begin a new year, during fearful days, we should rededicate ourselves to acting as the mediators between white and black, Christian and Muslim, urban and rural Americans. The Jewish equivalent of taking a knee, of showing that we are different but prize that difference, is by sharing our experiences as strangers.

One way to do that is to share our own immigration stories. With the exception of Native Americans, who came to the land tens of thousands of years ago, most Americans are of more recent provenance. We all came from somewhere else, or our ancestors did, and so we are all immigrants or the descendants of immigrants. Multiple waves of millions of Jews from

Amsterdam, Germany, and then from Poland and Russia, have made America a true home, benefitting tremendously from the opportunities given to us, and helping in turn to add to the richness of American life in business, law, education and the arts. That is the immigrant story: One generation comes, lives frugally and works hard, their children become middle class and their grandchildren enter elite schools and occupations. When it comes to immigration, there is no 'them'; since we are all immigrants, we are them! If we can share those stories – at seders, at interfaith events, in social gatherings with non-Jews of all kinds – and then give ear to the stories that others bring, we can play a role in building bridges between faiths and cultures. As a permanent minority, we are perhaps the best qualified to do the job. We must show love for our neighbors, the new strangers, by showing ourselves to have a common experience as immigrants.

That is one of the roles that Jews have played in a multicultural world for centuries. In many of the places that we have lived, Jews have served as political, cultural and business mediators between larger, more dominant groups. For centuries many Jews spoke multiple languages, out of necessity. They spoke Yiddish or Ladino amongst themselves; in order to pray, they needed to know some Hebrew; in order to do even minimal business or interact with non-Jews they also had to know one or two local languages. Because of their facility with languages and their half-in, half-out status in society, Jews often served as international ambassadors, nowhere totally at home, but comfortable moving among different kinds of people everywhere. In fearful days, American Jews need to become a kind of intra-national ambassadors, translating the hopes and dreams of fellow citizens for each other, mentoring new immigrants in how to succeed in America just as we have and standing up for immigrants who seek better lives for their families, just as we have. We must show love for the new strangers by

connecting disparate groups and points of view to one another, forging connections that create bonds of friendship.

That is not only the case for those who seek a home here to better their lives. It is especially so for those fleeing violence in their home countries. If there is a nation in history who knows that experience better than Jews, I would be very interested to hear about them. That history has become a deep part of who we are, of what being a Jew means. And so we have a special obligation to push our leaders to accept refugees from anywhere that threatens their lives, either as a temporary shelter or as a permanent home. From a Jewish perspective, the journey to safety in America should be one that we help facilitate, not frustrate. We must show love to the stranger by building the home for them that we would have wanted for our families during our own journeys.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about the Jewish value of civil disagreement. Our tradition insists that logical argumentation is a path to truth and that holding our intellectual opponents in high regard, and treasuring what they bring to the discussion, is a path of righteousness. At a time when we feel drowned in negativity, Jews have a role in providing a positive counterexample. Regardless of political party or the issue at stake, it is a Jewish religious value to maintain our own dignity, as well as that of our opponents. We must show love for the stranger by respecting different views and affirming the humanity of those who hold them.

For too many people these are fearful days. These Yamim Nora'im our task is to be agents of change, bridge builders. We must find ways to transform days of fear into days of awe, when we are truly aware of the potential of every human being to love, to build and to sanctify

life. By shepherding other Americans to a new era in our shared history we can create a new positive culture of a shared past and a shared destiny. We need to see ourselves as having a special role in the emerging America of multiple faiths and multiple backgrounds, affirming the energy and invention that that mix of cultures creates. We came up out of Egypt a mixed multitude, and we have many times since benefitted from the influence of our neighbors, as they have from us. We must continue to build on that tradition, and on our identity as the most experienced minority in history.

If we share our stories, act as mediators between cultures, advocate for refugees and assert the value of civil discourse, we will have not only helped to heal this great country. We will also have transformed how we see our place in it, which is to say we will have done a great deal of *teshuvah*.

G'mar hatimah tovah; may you be sealed for a good year in the Book of Life.