

We've All Gone to Look for America, *Rabbi Eleanor Steinman*
2018 Rosh Hashanah Sermon

Last winter, I traveled to Washington, DC with six of our TBH teenagers to the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism's L'Taken Social Justice Seminar. It was a jam-packed weekend in which we celebrated Shabbat, learned about a variety of issues before Congress such as homelessness, bail reform, and foreign aid. There was also time to see some of the monuments and museums that make Washington, DC a special place.

Washington DC, as we all know, is where large marches and actions happen. While our little group was traveling across the country, the March for Life took place. If you don't know, the March for Life's purpose is to "end abortion by uniting, educating, and mobilizing pro-life people in the public square."^[i] Many groups support this annual event that includes a weekend filled with a variety of activities, especially for young people who are bused to town with their high schools and dioceses to participate.

Our students did not know that this event coincided with their L'Taken weekend until we arrived at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The 500 Reform Jewish teenagers who filled many yellow school buses were ready to go and experience this museum, fully aware that it might not be easy. I gathered my six teens together and gave them minimal directions and asked them to meet me in the Hall of Remembrance at the appointed time. I encouraged them to experience the museum in a way that felt comfortable for them.

I kept my eyes on my teens and made my way through the overwhelmingly crowded museum. And as I walked down through the permanent exhibits I was struck by the March for Life teens easily identified by their t-shirts that said, "unborn lives matter," or "March for Life," and red "Make America Great Again" hats, juxtaposed with our Reform Jewish teenagers, many wearing their women's march, youth group and NFTY t-shirts.

As I made my way to the Hall of Remembrance, soon followed by our teenagers, I had a bit of a mess on my hands. I expected some emotions at the powerful exhibits contained within the museum's permanent collection. What I could not have planned for was the shock and disbelief of our teens at the other teenagers visiting the museum. We moved to a more appropriate location and spent a few moments processing their encounter with such large numbers of teenagers whose political and religious views, based solely on the hats, t-shirts, and religious iconography they were wearing, differed so drastically from their own. Though they each knew one or two people whose opinions on political issues varied including family members, classmates, and family friends, they had never been around so many people whose views they did not share.

This is the reality of living in our blue bubble in Los Angeles, California. And as a result, in this age of hyper-connectivity, most of us are more disconnected than ever from our fellow Americans. It is no great secret that when we look at a map during any period of polling or following an election that Americans hold a variety of opinions on political issues and candidates. The challenge today is that the people who vote differently than we do, who support a differently political party, do not live anywhere near us. We don't run into them at the grocery store, on the ball field, at synagogue, or the mall.

In Los Angeles County, for the June 2018 primary election 83% of eligible voters registered to vote.^[ii] Of those 83% of voters, 51% registered democrats, 18% registered republican, 2% independent, and less than 1% registered to the Green Party.^[iii] In the last presidential election, 72% of LA County voters selected Hillary Clinton, 22.5% of voters selected Donald Trump.^[iv]

I share these statistics not because they are political. I present them to you to demonstrate the like-mindedness in voting in our country. And what happens here is precisely what is happening all over the country; places are becoming strongly red or blue. Purple, the blending of republicans and democrats leading to hotly contested elections between parties, is elusive on any election map.

In the 2008 book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing us Apart*, Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing deconstruct migration in American in the last several decades and the role that movement has had on many areas, especially elections. Bishop and Cushing found that:

As Americans have moved over the past three decades, they have clustered in communities of sameness, among people with similar ways of life, beliefs, and in the end, politics. ... Over the past thirty years, the United States has been sorting itself, sifting at the most microscopic levels of society, as people have packed children, CDs, and the family bound and moved. Between 4 and 5 percent of the population moves each year from one county to another—100 million Americans in the past decade. ... When people move they also make choices about who their neighbors will be and who will share their new lives. Those are now political decisions, and they are having a profound effect on the nation's public life. ... In 1976, less than a quarter of Americans lived in places where the presidential election was a landslide. By 2004, nearly half of all voters lived in landslide counties. [v]

Perhaps the great sages Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel said it best when they claimed, “we’ve all gone to look for America.” Communities of overwhelming sameness are not American. America is a country that thrives upon diversity of all kinds; race, religion, gender, views on foreign aid, big or small government, even sports team allegiance.

When reflecting upon the writers that influenced him, the late Philip Roth beautifully reflected on America of the 20th century. He wrote:

The writers who shaped and expanded my sense of America were mainly small-town Midwesterners and Southerners. None were Jews. What had shaped them was not the mass immigration of 1880-1910, which had severed my family from the Old Country constraints of a ghetto existence... but the overtaking of the farm and the farmer's indigenous village values by the pervasive business culture and its profit-oriented pursuits. These were writers shaped by the industrialization of agrarian America ... which, by providing jobs for that horde of cheap unskilled immigrants, expedited the immigrant absorption into society and the Americanization, largely by way of the public-school system, of the immigrant offspring. ... They were made, in short, by the force that has been at the heart of the national experience since the country's inception, and that drives the national legend still: relentless, destabilizing change and the bewildering conditions that come in its wake—change on the American scale and at the American speed. Radical impermanence as an enduring tradition. [vi]

Roth is describing his personal influences, and simultaneously, he identifies a story that many Ashkenazi Jews will find paralleled in our own families. The experience of our ancestors' immigration whether we like it or not, is the foundation of our American experience today for we are their inheritors. Instead of doing what they did, adapting to change, we 21st century Americans live with relentless change by closing ourselves off. We isolate ourselves and seek out people with whom we agree. We keep people around who are more and more 'like us.'

Sameness and uniformity of opinion are not Jewish values. We value healthy debate, discussion, and a multiplicity of opinions! In Mishnah Avot we learn, “every argument for the sake of heaven's name is destined to endure. But, if it is not for the sake of heaven's name—it is not destined to endure.” [vii] A disagreement of this type, known as *machloket l'shem shamayim*, disputes for the sake of Heaven, are best exemplified in our tradition by the schools of Hillel and Shammai whose disputes over matters of law are preserved in the Mishnah and Talmud.

For three years, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai argued. One said, ‘The halakha [the Jewish legal ruling] is like us,’ and the other said, ‘The halakha is like us.’ A heavenly voice spoke: “These and these are the words of the living God, and the halakha is like the House of Hillel.” A question was raised: Since the heavenly voice declared: “Both these and those are the words of the Living God,” why was the halakha established to follow the opinion of Hillel? It is because the students of Hillel were kind and gracious. [How were they kind and gracious?] They taught their own ideas as well as the ideas from the students of Shammai. Not only for this reason, but they went so far as to teach Shammai’s opinions first.^[viii]

Imagine! Two parties disagree over a vital societal issue who are well versed in Jewish law yet they can still disagree productively AND function in society together. It is like the classic rivalry between any two schools. In my family we joke that my parents had a mixed marriage. They both grew up in Los Angeles and my dad attended LA High and my mom went to Fairfax High and yet they created a beautiful home and family. The ancient world of Hillel and Shammai was no different. We learn in the Talmud:

Beit Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from Beit Hillel, nor did Beit Hillel [refrain from marrying women] from Beit Shammai. [With regard to] purity and impurity where these ruled [a matter] pure and these ruled [it] impure, they did not refrain from using [utensils] the other deemed pure.^[ix]

Hillel and Shammai’s students weren’t enemies. They were *mishpacha*, family! They sat at yontif dinner together and did not argue over whether or not the plates were kosher, how Chanukah candles were lit, or the mezuzah was hung the correct way on the door.

I think the nation that we want to live in, the America we want to know is not monolithic. It is multi-faceted, filled with differences that are respected, and replete with a shared patriotism that is enriched by diversity.

Today, Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world, the beginning of humanity. That’s right; it is the celebration of our humanness, not our Jewishness. In this new year, the challenge for us is to seek out the humanness in other people, especially those with whom we might disagree. In his final statement to his fellow citizens, Senator John McCain wrote:

We weaken our greatness when we confuse our patriotism with tribal rivalries that have sown resentment and hatred and violence in all the corners of the globe. We weaken it when we hide behind walls, rather than tear them down, when we doubt the power of our ideals, rather than trust them to be the great force for change they have always been. We are three-hundred-and-twenty-five million opinionated, vociferous individuals. We argue and compete and sometimes even vilify each other in our raucous public debates. But we have always had so much more in common with each other than in disagreement. If only we remember that and give each other the benefit of the presumption that we all love our country we will get through these challenging times. We will come through them stronger than before. We always do.^[x]

We are living in uncertain times. If we want our country back we need to realize that the people with whom we disagree are adversaries not enemies. When we make them enemies we dehumanize them and create unending cycles of hate.

In *The Opposite of Hate: A Field Guide to Repairing our Humanity*, Sally Kohn writes:

...what neuroscientists have been learning through a massive volume of research in the last few decades—is that like a computer, our brains are made up of hardware and software. The amygdala is part of our hardware and performs the same basic functions in all of us—like a processor or memory card in a computer we all buy from the same store. But

what each of our particular amygdalae learns to fear or even hate, that's what therapist Athena Staik calls "soft-wired" information—specific coding written by our lives and the society around us. Which means it can be reprogrammed. Doing so starts with awareness. [xi]

Sally Kohn's book talks about growing our brains. Here at Temple Beth Hillel we help grow hearts. We shape hearts when we are open to innovation and ideas. Open to God or the possibility of God, or comfortable sitting next to someone whose belief in God seems so meaningful to them. We shape hearts when we embrace families of all shapes, sizes, colors, and political leanings. We shape hearts when we use the Jewish values we teach here, to lead us to action in arenas big and small to create the world that we want to see. We shape hearts when we seek first to understand, listening deeply before we rush to judgment in the hallway, the parking lot and the board room. We shape hearts when we prioritize Jewish over convenient.

Our teenagers' hearts were shaped that sunny January day in Washington, DC inside the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. I know this because they took all of the emotions they experienced and translated them into passionate advocacy speeches they delivered to Representative Brad Sherman, Senator Dianne Feinstein, and Senator Kamala Harris on separation of church and state, reproductive choice, and immigration reform. These speeches made a targeted request of our representatives to take a specific action on pending legislation rooted in Jewish values while being polite and professional. It is my hope more of our 8th-12th graders will travel with me this winter to the American South on a special Civil Rights journey so that we can continue forming hearts as we challenge their minds. Please see me after the holiday to find out more or if you are interested in helping to support our teen travel experiences.

May this Rosh Hashanah Day, the first day of this New Year, be the first of a year filled with potential for what will be. May we work and be invigorated in creating the America that we want to have. May we turn our political enemies into adversaries so, though we may never agree, we always remember they were created in the image of God just like we were. May we work tirelessly to grow our hearts and our minds. May we recognize the humanity in every person that we encounter every single time.

Ken y'hi ratzon. May this be God's will.

[i] <http://marchforlife.org/about-us/>

[ii] <http://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/ror/15day-stwddirprim-2018/county.pdf>

[iii] <http://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/ror/15day-stwddirprim-2018/county.pdf>

[iv] <http://graphics.latimes.com/la-na-pol-2016-election-results-california/>

[v] Bishop, Bill and Robert G. Cushing. *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded Americans is Tearing us Apart.* p 5.

[vi][vi] Roth, Philip. (2017, June 5) I Have Fallen In Love with American Name. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/05/i-have-fallen-in-love-with-american-names>.

[vii] Avot. 5:17

[viii] Eruvin 13b

[ix] Misnah Yevamot 1:4

[x] <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/08/john-mccains-final-letter-to-america/568669/>. August 29, 2018

[xi] Kohn, Sally. *The Opposite of Hate: A Field Guide to Repairing our Humanity.* P. 149.