

The Magid of Dubnov had a special talent of making a point through parables. When he noticed people coming to synagogue to listen to the shofar, yet neglecting to pay attention to the rest of the holiday payers or to the world around them, he told this story¹:

Years ago, when a fire broke out in the village, all the people were terrified as it quickly would spread burning down the entire village in one fell swoop. And rebuilding was hard.

But once, when one of the villagers came to the big city, he suddenly heard bells ringing and horns blowing. Shocked he asked the watchman, "What is this noise?" His response, "Whenever there is a fire, we ring the bells and blow the horns to put out the fire." When the villager returned home, he told the elders about his great discovery. "From now on," they said, "whenever there is a fire, we too will blow horns and ring bells, like in the big city and this way put out the fire! Wait we don't have fancy bells or horns, but we do have many shofrot. So from now on whenever we see flames we will sound the shofar."

The next time there was a fire, the town elders started blowing their shofrot, but the fire only got worse. Before long, half the village was gone.

When the villager returned to the big city, he went straight to the watchman telling him what happened to the village and asking, "How come when we sounded our horns, the fire didn't go out?"

The watchman replied, "Do you really think that our bells and our horns put out the blaze? Silly man, they are only there to cry an alarm and alert the people. It is up to every one of us to extinguish the fire!"

And so it is for us in this season, the sounding of the shofar should echo in our ears and awaken us to put out the fires ablaze around us. America is on fire. It is not an unfair characterization to say that something is rapidly spreading, all-consuming, and very dangerous. I am frightened by the overwhelming anger, the slinging of anti-Semitic rhetoric (for more on anti-Semitism join us tomorrow morning for services), that being said, anti-Semitic and racist rhetoric spewed forth egging individuals towards violent reactions. The romanticizing of violence. The name calling, the lack of civility, not just by our Presidential candidates, but by each of us, one American citizen and resident to another. The fear mongering about foreigners, the notion that propagating gas lighting and fomenting distrust is acceptable.² The political climates significant lack of civility. The anxiety, distrust, and fear is rampant in our nation. Bringing me to the conclusion that our nation is on fire.

And, we, it is **our** duty to unite together to squelch the flames. Not sit idly, but be the water carriers. Yes, I know, there has already been extensive damage, and damage will be left behind, but we can do better, we can stop the spread, and begin to dampen the raging fires.

¹ *The Shofar Is Not Magic* author is unknown but found in Rosh Hashanah Readings in section called Tik'u Va-Chodesh Shofar: The Blowing of the Shofar on page 182. Rabbi Tom Alpert also used this story in his opening to Rosh Hashanah sermon for 5777. I found his sermon extraordinary and insightful.

² Inspired by Angela Buchdahl in the piece, "Election Nearing Anxiety Pulpit" Stewart Ain article at www.thejewishweek.com

When we live the words of our tradition, the words of our sage, Hillel, we **will** be water carriers. Bringing hope by cooling the internal fires within us. Hillel said “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I. And, *im lo achshav amatai*-- if not now, when?”³

We must fight against the notion that I am only for myself. That America should only be for herself. I do not believe our founding fathers wanted us to accept bigotry and persecution within our borders or for that matter outside of our borders. As a Jewish people we do not celebrate wealth or power, but rather morality and ethics.⁴ As a Jewish people, we live the legacy, “If I am only for myself, what am I?” We take action, speak out, and reach towards the other who is different from us. We embrace them. We do not blockade ourselves off, in attempts to protect our socio-economic status or our particular neighborhood. Rather, as Hillel instructs us we must be for ourselves **and** for others in a careful balance. Never to self-focused as to turn our backs on someone else in need.

And, the “if not now, when – *im lo achshav amatai*” portion of this statement, well that part is easy. Now, now, is exactly the time.

Have you heard the joke, “I remember when Halloween was the scariest night of the year. Now, it’s Election night.”⁵ This joke hurts a little. I don’t want it to be such a scary night for us. I do know that the only way to trodden down the fear is if we act, and each of us votes. If you are not registered to vote, the gates of teshuvah are not the only things closing soon. The ability to register ends on October 24th. If you are not registered, your son or daughter, your mother or father, **now** is the time to do so. Your voice matters not just with our Presidency, but for all 24 measures for our state and city.... This is the time to decide to go beyond our fears, stretch ourselves, and help our students, the thousands of individuals sleeping on our streets every night, criminals seeking teshuvah. **If**, we care about our country, about our future, NOW is exactly the time to step up to the plate and be active in determining the kind of city, state, and country we want to live in.

And the second lesson we gain this evening from our sage Hillel, is the story of how Hillel and Shammai, our two great sages, rarely agreed on anything. From them we are taught that there are two kinds of arguments. One that is for the sake of heaven and the other which is not. Engaged often in heavy debate, rarely determining that Jewish law should be observed in the same way, these two never demonized the other. Civility mattered, and their arguments were said to be all for the sake of heaven. In fact they went out of their way to maintain a bridge, peaceful relationships between their families: allowing their daughters to marry into the other’s family even though they had different Jewish observance styles.⁶

Even though both had opinions, both from separate parties so to speak, separate tribes almost, our rabbis say their words were like that of the living God. Why? Because, they manage to maintain peaceful relationships. Respecting one another and knowing that that law was **not** about them personally, but for the entire society around them. Two men at opposite ends of the spectrum, putting ego aside, and seeking a better society.

³ M. Avot 1:14

⁴ Rabbi David Kaufman, “Rabbi’s Reasons” Monday, Oct. 3, 2016 Personal Blog; “Why I am a Jew”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ M. Avot 5:17, Eruvim 13b, Yevamot 14b

Civic solidarity, national pride and community before self. As I believe our founding fathers also desired for our country. The preamble to our Constitution, “We the people, we the people, of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our prosperity, do ordain and establish this Constitution....⁷” But it was, “**We** the people” who do so. The authority of government comes from us, “**we**,” not one person, and not one party. Society is not about the individual need. “We” means a coherent entity, a human collective, a group sharing common values and belonging to a moral bond.⁸ And our founding fathers sought to balance the individual pursuit of liberty – individual dreams and aspiration- alongside of the communal. Just as with Hillel and Shammai: rights are balanced with responsibility to the community and for self.

Rabbi Eddie Feinstein shared with me last summer while in a discussion on the upcoming election season. He said, “Without the bonds that hold us together, we lose the communal resolve to solve our problems. Without a collective sense of national responsibility, government might compel us to obey the law, but it is unable to summon us to **higher purposes**. Without a sense of **shared** destiny, our leaders are incapable of rallying us to sacrifice for the common good. We turn into a bickering, squabbling mass of special interests politicking for our share of the collective resources. Without civic values, we get political campaigns filled with empty promises and ugly attack ads. We get a divisive, mean-spirited politics of futility.⁹” His prediction so appropriate. Oh how far we have gone down this road. Our common purpose lacking. But, you and I we can change this.

As we continue to learn from our sage Hillel. One might wonder, why if both were considered to be uttering words of the living God, meaning both peoples arguments had merit and truth...why did the rabbis always take Hillel’s opinion, as the way halacha – the way Jewish law should be observed?

It is not because he was smarter or because he was nicer. But, his step towards civility went further. Our texts teach that in Shammai’s house of study only the theories of Shammai were taught, but in Hillel’s house of study, one would hear the theories of both teachers. We learn that in the course of argument, the House of Hillel would **listen** to the arguments of Shammai and sometimes change their minds, and even adopt the point of view of Shammai. This never once happened in the house of Shammai. So, halacha goes with Hillel, because he was willing to LISTEN.

Halacha goes with Hillel, not because he was always right, but because he was not trapped in his own views. He listened, kept an open mind, and was willing to change.¹⁰

In our world today, we are too much like Shammai. Only hearing one side of the argument. We aren’t dealing with the same facts as each other. We literally aren’t even hearing the same news. We stay locked in our positions scanning our Facebook feeds mostly hearing from people who share

⁷ Preamble Constitution of the United States and Bill of Rights

⁸ Notes from Sermon Seminar led by Rabbi Edward Feinstein at Shalom Hartman Institute Rabbinic Seminar Summer 2016.

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ From the Gemarah on Eruvim 13b. Shared in a lecture by Micah Goodman at Shalom Hartman Rabbinic Leadership Seminar Summer 2016.

our views. We listen to MSNBC **OR** FoxNews staying in the leftleft land or the rightright land¹¹. Listening to the demonizing, the ugly attack ads, name calling, “fact checking” and the bashing of the other side.

Sadly, I don't think many of us are acting like Hillel, truly taking the time to understand the people who live as our neighbors, but are simply standing on the other side of the fence from us. Civility is failing and violence erupts in its path. You can witness this every day at political rallies, in local news reports where students are name calling other students for the racial backgrounds, where we see images of graffitied swastikas on Jewish graves- rabbis houses, where deputy mayors are being shouted at in the streets to “Go home to China.” When civility fades, it is replaced by violence.

Friends I encourage each of one us to be more like Hillel, especially in this season. To be listeners of another person's thoughts and opinions, to block out rhetoric, open our hearts, and not be so stubborn and unwilling to change an opinion. And, we like Hillel must think of the greater community. Lowering our protective boundaries, our artificial walls built up to protect our self-interest, be a part of the “**we**” in our communal bond. We are greater together as a nation, then when we are apart.

And our last teaching from our great sage Hillel which was shared some two thousand years ago, “*Bamakom she'ein anashim, hishtadel l'hiyot ish*-In a place where no one is human, strive to be a human being.”¹² We might understand this statement to mean, if everyone is being uncivil, we must be the exact opposite. It's our job to be a mensch. To be moral. To be the human being, when there is no other. To be the light to nations around us, to the people around us.

Just a few short days ago, Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, of Central Synagogue, entreated, “Is it **not** our job to be a light to the nations?” She then spoke about a Gallup survey of whether America should open its doors to 10,000 refugee children-innocents caught in the crossfires of war.

Ask yourself: Would you let them in? Innocent children from war torn countries...witnesses to bombings, death, destruction, parentless, starving and suffering? Would you let them in?

The answer: more than two-thirds of Americans polled by Gallup said: ‘No, we should keep them out.’

But this poll was not regarding Syrian refugee children whose images flood past us every day for YEARS now. No, this Gallup poll was taken in 1939, and those 10,000 children seeking refuge on our shores were mostly Jews. We were the other.

When we hear people demonizing the ‘Other,’ in our everyday discourse, in our social media, is it not our moral obligation to **be** the mensch and **be** that voice who stands up and acts as the world's conscience?”¹³ This is exactly our job. To dispel lies. To spread love. And, to embrace those who need embracing.

¹¹ George Saunders, “Who Are All These Trump Supporters?” *New Yorker*, June 11 and 18, 2016.

¹² M Avot 2:5 Both Rabbi David Kaufman and Rabbi Thomas Alpert shared beautiful thoughts on how this quote relates to the current election season.

¹³ Angela Buchdahl in the piece, “Election Nearing Anxiety Pulpit” Stewart Ain article at www.thejewishweek.com

It remains our moral obligation to not sit idly by. On many a Saturday morning minyan, we chant the words of French Jewish writer, Edmund Fleg:

I am a Jew because in every place there is suffering the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew because in every age when the cry of despair is heard, the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew because above human beings, the image of the divine unity, Israel places the unity which is divine.¹⁴

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks interprets this statement by adding his own:

I am a Jew because, our ancestors were the first to see that the world is driven by a moral purpose...teaching for the first time that human life is sacred, that the individual may never be sacrificed for the mass, and that rich and poor, great and small, are all equal before God.¹⁵

I am a Jew because, we are the people who weep when others weep, we are the moral torch bearers, bringing the light when times are the darkest-- spreading hope around us. We are the bucket fillers, willing to head to the front line to drown the fires. And, we are the people who know being united, being together, being civil, this is truly bringing divinity into our world.

On this day of Yom Kippur, this time of making amends, of turning inward and determining the individual I would like to be in the year 5777, we must decide. We must decide: how will we take action, how will our attitudes be, and how we will interact with others. When society is not acting like human beings, Hillel said we must be the human being.

Let us ask ourselves what kind of human being do we choose to be in 5777.

In her book, Accidental Saints, Nadia Bolz-Weber shares this true story: Nearly, a hundred years ago, a man looked in the morning newspaper and, to his surprise and horror, read his name in the obituary column. The newspaper had reported his death quite by mistake. His first response was shock. "Am I alive or dead?" he wondered.

After regaining his composure, his second thought was to find out what people had said about him. The obituary's title read, "Dynamite King Dies." And in the text, "he was a merchant of death."

Turns out this man was the inventor of dynamite and when he read the words, "merchant of death" he asked himself a question: "Is this how I am going to be remembered?"

So, he got in touch with his feelings and decided this was **not, in fact**, the legacy he wanted to leave behind. From that day on, he started working toward **peace**.

You might know of this man, for his name was Alfred Nobel. And today he is remembered for the great Noble Prize named in his honor¹⁶.

¹⁴ Edmund Fleg, "I am A Jew Because" 1927. Page 85 in Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur for Shabbat

¹⁵ <http://www.rabbisacks.org/why-i-am-a-jew/>

¹⁶ Excerpt from Accidental Saints: Finding God In All The Wrong People. Nadia Bolz-Weber; Random House: 2015.

Just as Alfred Nobel got in touch with his feelings and redefined his values, we too must step back and do exactly the same. Our world is crying out to us: “If not now, when?”¹⁷ What is our answer?

“In a place where no one is human, strive to be a human being.”¹⁸ If our neighbor is not being a human being, strive to be the mensch.

And in a room where we do not agree, we aim higher and be like Hillel, allowing for both voices to be heard at the table. **And**, we should be like Shammai, who along with Hillel brought their families together, to eat, to pray, and even to marry. For we may have differences of opinion, but we are all created in the divine image, each person holy.

Let us ask ourselves: What is the legacy we wish to create in this year ahead, the legacy we wish to leave behind? Shall we be remembered as a source of destruction- a raging fire or will we head the call of the shofar and be a source of peace- taking action and mending our world. It is up to us to direct our journeys.

¹⁷ M. Avot 1:14

¹⁸ M. Avot 2:5