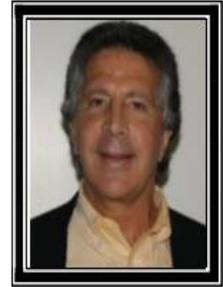


Lach L'Chai

By Rabbi Howard Mandell



Dear Congregants and Friends:

This has been an especially challenging summer, so far, in many places across the world, including our own country, with the following words, spoken by the biblical prophet Amos, appearing, at times, to be little more than a utopian yearning:

Let love and justice flow like a mighty stream.
Let peace fill the earth as the waters fill the sea.

This past *erev Shabbat*, at CBI's "Shabbat Chai on The Road", I noted, in speaking of the recent spate of killings and violence in Israel, Iraq, Turkey, and Paris, and in our own country, in Louisiana, Minnesota, and Dallas, that the Jewish Tradition calls upon us to remain strong, never giving up hope that the day will come, "when a great peace will embrace the whole world."

Yet, within just the next 36 hours, over 80 innocent people were murdered in an act of terrorism in Nice, France, and 3 police officers were assassinated in Baton Rouge, La. How am I; how are any of us to respond to these continuing senseless acts of violence and hatred?

With my being somewhat of a Bruce Springsteen fan, my thoughts were initially drawn to the title words of one of his songs, "We Take Care of Our Own". As a Jewish American, I believe that it is incumbent upon us to support, to protect, and to keep safe our fellow Americans and Jews here in the States, in Israel, and across the world. This particularistic approach clearly has much appeal and merit, especially at times like the present, when there is so much social unrest and upheaval in the world.

Looking at the world through only a particularistic lens, however, can also have a dark side, creating a fractured and divided, rather than a cohesive and cohesive, community. For example, who is to be included, when we say that we need to "take care of our own"? All Americans; only members of the African American community and of other disadvantaged communities, who have been and continue to be discriminated against and treated unfairly; or perhaps only law enforcement, including the 8 slain police officers, who risk their lives each day to protect us, should be included? In the same way, does "taking care of our own" also include members of the Muslim faith; or only members of the Christian faith for those who are Christian; or of the Jewish faith for us Jews?

The wisest and more salutary approach, I believe, the approach taken by the truly great leaders in our society and in the world, integrates and strikes an appropriate balance between the particularistic and the universal, an approach more likely to result in the creation of an "I/Thou", rather than a "We/They", community. The challenge confronting each of us in integrating these 2 approaches is well described in Hillel's famous quote: "If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

For many of us, this summer has been made even more difficult by the death of one of America's, the world's, most respected and beloved leaders, Elie Wiesel. Having survived the killing camps of Poland during the Shoah, he became a strong supporter of Israel, of Soviet Jewry, of everything Jewish, exposing and fighting anti-Semitism whenever and wherever it reared its ugly head.

Yet, his tireless defense of and concern for the Jewish people did not, alone, make him the universally admired figure that he was and result in his being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. No, it was his ability to also see life through a more universal lens, standing witness to and fighting

intolerance, prejudice, and genocide wherever in the world it occurred.

Serving as a role model for those of us, today, who are asking, “how do we respond to the distrust, hate, and prejudice in our country and in the world,” Dr. Wiesel made clear that we Jews have 2 distinct responsibilities. Our first is to be a *mamlechet kohanim*, a strong and cohesive “nation of priests”, forever vigilant against those, who might seek to harm the Jewish People or threaten the security of the State of Israel.

He was equally emphatic, however, that this particularistic approach needed to be combined with a more universal one, for our sacred texts teach that we Jews are also called upon to be a “light unto the nations”, serving as God’s partner in bringing peace, justice, and healing to the world, regardless of a person’s race, religion, gender preference, or nationality. “The opposite of love”, he noted, “is not hate; it is indifference!”

“May his memory be for a blessing!” Our Tradition teaches that whether this prayer becomes a reality, or remains little more than a “utopian yearning”, is something over which we have control.

What better way to show our gratitude to Dr. Wiesel and make his memory be for a blessing, while at the same time serving as a “light unto the nations”, than by making it a point to try to treat everyone we meet with respect and dignity, or by becoming a member of the synagogue’s social justice committee, which seeks to bring peace and healing to the world in myriad ways. How you do these things is up to you.

I close with more guidance from Hillel, who after telling the pagan man, who has come to see him expressing a desire to convert, that the essence of Judaism is “to not do unto others what you would not want them to do to you”, [that is, “to love your neighbor as yourself”], and after telling him that he is now converted, instructs him to now go out and “do it!”

Sending peace and blessing!

Rabbi Mandell

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