

ROSH HASHANAH MORNING 5783. LISTENING HEART, UNDERSTANDING MIND

“We’ve got the crisis in hand.” That was what the moderators of the private Facebook group of former Jeopardy! contestants posted for their 2800 members at exactly 11:00pm on April 27, 2021. They wanted to reassure this diverse group of individuals who share just one common experience that everything was taken care of. 11:00pm – the very moment that they could share the news without ruining the suspense of that evening’s show for their west coast audience.

By that time, it had been just over two hours since Kelly Donohue, a bank examiner in Massachusetts and one of that evening’s contestants, had been shown looping his forefinger and his thumb over his chest and holding the three other fingers of his right hand open across his chest, in a rather odd hand gesture. And within those couple of hours, the “crisis” had been dealt with. A public letter, condemning hate, had been written. The Anti-Defamation League had been contacted. A letter, asking the producers of the show why they hadn’t edited out the moment, had been written. That letter, which before long had 595 signatures from former contestants, stated the issue clearly: “We cannot stand up for hate. We cannot stand next to hate. We cannot stand onstage with something that looks like hate.”

The crisis was in hand. That is, until “Snopes,” a fact-checking website, did some digging and discovered that Mr. Donohue’s hand gesture was not actually a symbol of hate at all, but rather an awkward way of showing the number three, since he had won his third game of Jeopardy! When the fact-checkers looked back, they saw that it looked a lot like the hand gesture he had used when he won his second game. And the one he used when he won his first game.

My friends, we are entering this new year, 5783, facing a crisis that is most definitely not “in hand.” You do not need me to tell you that we are living in a time of information overload. Google and YouTube have answers to questions we don’t even know to ask, and social media algorithms provide fully curated opinions in the palms of our hands. Yet when rendering a judgment for all to see can be as simple as a signature on a letter that somebody else wrote, or as a “like” or “dislike” while we are lying in bed and scrolling through a feed, we end up casting judgment without using a crucial element of what it means to be human. Discernment. Wrote Jonathan Greenblatt, the CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, in response to being contacted by the former Jeopardy! contestants, “I wish people could ‘pause and fact-check’ before the storm erupts.”

Earlier this morning, some of our teens led us in *Nisim B’chol Yom*, the blessings for everyday miracles. These blessings are part of our morning liturgy each day, and each blessing symbolically marks one of the stages that we go through when we awaken and begin each day. The first of the 14 blessings in this series is, of all things, a reference to a rooster. A rooster that, with a loud and jarring ‘cockle doo da doo’, announces each new day. In using this language – for the rooster - the rabbis are asking us to call upon the same trait. Discernment.

Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher natan lasechvi vinah l'havchin bein yom uvein lailah.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, for giving the rooster the ability to distinguish day from night.

A rooster discerns between night and day and does everything in its power to ensure that anyone within earshot knows it. Our sages understood that in this way, we are a lot like roosters, for in Hebrew, the word for 'rooster,' *'sechvi,'* also translates as the 'human mind.'

How different would our world be if every human being not only began each day with the blessing of discerning between night and day, but if we, created in God's image, imbued with the God-given potential to discern, used that blessing all the time, 'pausing and fact-checking' before casting judgment?

Between the unspeakable number of lives lost from gun violence, the assault on reproductive rights and the never-ending litany of climate catastrophes in this past year alone, we have been smacked in the face once again with the reality that life is tenuous. Life is fragile. Life is sacred. And yet we stalemate in solving issues of life and death because time after time after time, critical judgments made hastily beat out those which result from thoughtful discernment.

In the Hebrew Bible, the person known for wisdom, above all, was Solomon. He built the first Temple in Jerusalem, he wrote three biblical books and he was the final sovereign ruler of the Kingdom of Israel. About King Solomon the wise one, it is written that God appeared to him in a dream by night, offering to grant him any wish.

Solomon's response:

"You dealt most graciously with Your servant, my father David, because he walked before You in faithfulness and righteousness and in integrity of heart. You have continued this great kindness to him by giving him a son to occupy his throne, as is now the case. And now, God, You have made Your servant king in place of my father David; but I am a young man with no experience in leadership... Grant me an understanding mind to judge Your people, to distinguish between good and bad; for who is capable of judging this vast people of Yours?"¹

King Solomon could have asked for anything. His wish? To be granted a *lev shomeiah* – a listening heart and an understanding mind.

This account, recorded in the First Book of Kings, reminds us just how central a listening heart and an understanding mind have always been to the Jewish mindset:

"Because you asked for this [God responded] - you did not ask for long life, you did not ask for riches, you did not ask for the life of your enemies, but you asked for discernment in dispensing justice – I now do as you have spoken. I grant you a wise and discerning mind; there has never been anyone like you before, nor will anyone like you arise again."²

¹ I Kings 3:6-9

² I Kings 3:11-12

For the great King Solomon, discernment, the tool that he knew was necessary to dispense judgment, came from the thoughtfulness to appreciate what he knew and the humility to know what he did not. For us, who live in a society in which colossal rifts continue to grow at warp-speed, the wisdom of Solomon clearly has not been matched. But I refuse to give up on the notion that his wish – to have a *lev shomeiah*, a listening heart and an understanding mind – can someday be our reality. If only we too can slow down, ask questions and have the humility to *shomeiah* – *shema* – to hear the answers.

Rosh HaShanah, this day, is known by another name, as well: Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment. This moniker takes root in the Talmud, where it is written that on Rosh HaShanah, God sits in judgment of all creation. And then, of course, this imagery is articulated more fully in the haunting words and melodies of the Unetane Tokef prayer. God, with the Book of Life open, actually sits in judgment on this day, we are taught - who will live and who will die in the coming year. No matter how disturbing you may find this imagery to be, the reality is that Unetane Tokef is central to this day and to this season precisely because true judgment – rooted in thoughtful discernment – has always been central to the Jewish mindset. And never for a moment was it taken lightly. In judging us, God’s power to determine our fate is on full display. This power, so awesome, that Unetane Tokef tells us, even the angels were terrified.

Before the days of the Talmud, when the 2nd Temple stood in Jerusalem, there was imagery put forth about God judging on “the” day of judgment. The single day – the big one. But when Unetane Tokef was penned in the Middle Ages, the sages invited God’s judgment to be a regular part of our lives. In the words of Rabbi Elsie Stern, “What our pre-rabbinic ancestors envisioned happening once as part of apocalypse, we are going to reenact each year.”

And why? Because God demonstrates for us what it is to take the power of judgment seriously. God models what it is to care enough to judge with intention and to judge with discernment. And then, to stay in relationship with us through the process of *teshuvah*, making ourselves more whole. Shouldn’t we, then, who share homes and communities and countries and a planet with one another care enough to do the same?

Once, many years ago, I was called for jury duty and put into a jury pool. When the judge called me forward to question me as part of the *voir dire* process of jury selection, he noted my profession. “I see that you are a rabbi,” he said, “I am guessing that since your job is to care for people, making a difficult judgment in this case could be an extra challenge for you.”

“With all due respect, judge,” I responded, “it is *because* I am a rabbi that I care enough to make a difficult judgment.” And with that, the next two weeks of my life were spent in a jury box. You see, what that judge did not understand is that the Jewish people have never shied away from thoughtful, discerning judgment; Even when it is hard. Especially when it is hard.

It is not an accident that Rosh HaShanah has not one, but two nicknames. *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgment. Also, *Yom Harat HaOlam*, the Day of the world's creation. It is, in many regards, the birthday of the world. These two names may have emerged from different time periods and different prooftexts, but given the reality of our world today, they are most definitely connected.

It is not an exaggeration to say that in preparation for each of the High Holy Day seasons I have served as your rabbi, I have either shared with you statistics about the fact that the preceding summer had brought record-breaking temperatures and wildfires and hurricanes and floods, or I have gathered said statistics in consideration of sharing them with you. So in the aftermath of the recent temperatures, power outages and water restrictions that felt eerily like THE day of judgment that was written about during the 2nd Temple period, here, on this 5783 day of commemorating the creation of the world, is a bit of a reality check: *This summer, in the United States alone, more than 7,000 daily temperature records were smashed*³.

7,000. Need I say more? *HaYom Harat HaOlam*; on this day when the world was created, it is upon every one of us to heed the call of *Yom HaDin*, to take a long, honest, humbling and discerning look at the state of creation and our place within it, and then to do something about it. Just as the early rabbis invited God's judgment on a regular basis, today, we, as a congregation, invite your participation in a congregational effort to discern our own impact on the environment.

In partnership with RAC-CA, the California arm of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and in conjunction with the launching of their two-year Climate Tzedek Campaign to address climate change on both the local and the statewide levels, we at Temple Menorah are establishing our own Green Team. We will examine best practices for sustainable living, we will support one another through an environmental audit of our own homes and, yes, of our synagogue, and we will engage in honest dialogue about how we can do better. We will work together to help raise awareness of the real impact of our actions on the warming climate in which we live and, when the time comes, for those who are interested, we will advocate here, in Los Angeles and in Sacramento, with members of other Reform congregations, who are doing the same. The conversations will not always be easy. But they will be thoughtful, and they will allow us to come together for the common good. I hope that you will join me in this effort.

To embody a heart that truly listens and a mind that is open to understanding is not easy, but it is our sacred obligation. On this day of judgment, this day of creation, let us judge with discernment our own role in the development of creation. We, human beings modeled in God's image, cannot shy away from it. Even when it is difficult. Especially when it is difficult.

³ Washington Post, September 13, 2022