

The Bitter and the Sweet

Rosh Hashanah am 1

Rabbi Amy Joy Small

Oy. What a year! Sometimes you just want to kvetch. The challenges facing our world can seem overwhelming. We are living in an unprecedented time, witnessing assaults on truth, on basic decency, on women, on the arts, on immigrants, on Muslims, on people of color, on Jews, and some say, even on American democracy itself.

The Psalmist declares, “I lift my eyes to the mountains, from where does my help come? My help comes from Adonai, Maker of Heaven and Earth”¹.

How fortunate we are to be here celebrating the New Year and its blessings of a new beginning, when that is just what we need. It is hard to read the headlines and not feel broken-hearted.

One recent headline announced, “**Neo-Nazis plan to march near Swedish synagogue on Yom Kippur**”² | “Jews in the Swedish city of Gothenburg are bracing for a neo-Nazi march scheduled to pass near the city’s main synagogue on Yom Kippur.” The article explains that “Swedish Jews face anti-Semitism both from the nationalist far right as well as the far left, whose strong criticism of Israel sometimes veers into anti-Semitism.” This in a community that was a haven for Holocaust survivors. The wounds from WWII can never be healed, but there was a measure of restored safety and wholeness in the years that have passed. Now that layer is scraped

¹ Psalm 121

² Neo-Nazis plan to march near Swedish synagogue on Yom Kippur”, Josefin Dolsten, JTA, 9/12/17

away. The head of the Jewish community observed, “One would have thought that World War II was an effective vaccination against anti-Semitism. But it didn’t last that long, now it’s back again. We have anti-Semitism here again like in the 1930s. We thought Europe had learned its lesson, but that’s apparently not the case.”

“Achat sha’alti me’eit Adonai, shivti b’veit Adonai kol y’mei chayay.

One thing have I asked of Gd, one goal do I pursue: to dwell in the Eternal’s house all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of Adonai, to visit in Gd’s holy dwelling.” {Psalm 27}

We are here, in Gd’s holy dwelling of our making -- a community gathered in the spirit of mutual support, caring, learning, prayer and passion for repairing the world, together. There are times in our lives when, as individuals, we feel greater need for community -- times when we are distressed or suffering, and times when celebration of our life moments calls for a sharing that elevates our lives to holiness. And then are times in the life of a community when our profound need for each other answers a resonant call for the support only a sacred community can provide. Those times, like this moment in time, can be frightening and confusing.

Such was the moment last year when the Jewish community of the small town of Whitefish, Montana, experienced horrifically threatening anti-Semitism. A colleague and friend of mine from New Jersey who took the bold step of leaving her senior rabbi position to enjoy a quieter life in Montana for her family, Rabbi Francine Roston, says that after what they have been through, their lives will never be the same. A recent headline in the Jewish press read, “After a year of terror, the Jews of Whitefish, Montana, look ahead.”³ It begins, “In a year when white supremacists have

³ Ron Kampeas, “After a year of terror, the Jews of Whitefish, Montana, look ahead.” JTA. 9/12/17

been ascendant, at least in their public profile, perhaps no community has been harder hit than the Jews in” Whitefish, Montana. It started with a well-known White Supremacist Richard Spencer. A discussion about selling property between Spencer’s mother, who lives in the town, and a realtor, who is Jewish, was misrepresented online by Spencer, depicting the realtor as pressuring Spencer’s mother to leave the town. The story was picked up by the neo-Nazi website *The Daily Stormer*, which urged its followers to harass the realtor and her family and the two rabbis who live in Whitefish, with their families. It went viral. This sparked an avalanche of hateful, threatening trolling attacks aimed at the 3 Jewish families, as well as mountains of hate mail threatening the children and the adults. Rabbi Francine Green Roston cared for her community even as her family was threatened. Her upstanding courage was a model for all of us. She reflected recently, “We’re continuing to be part of initiatives to promote strong community ties to fight hatred wherever it arises.”

The experience of the Jewish community of Whitefish reverberates around the country -- even here in VT, where responses to hate, and yes, it can happen here too, are measured against the risk of fueling evil people like Spencer and Anglin (of the *Daily Stormer*) who are looking for a fight. None of us want to go through what Rabbi Roston’s family went through. It has left us wiser, but also wary.

The Jewish community of Whitefish, traumatized and still reeling from those events, have also learned some good things from the experience. They were very grateful for the support of the national Jewish community, their local interfaith community, and their local civic community’s commitment to intensify diversity education. Those who rallied around

them have become their protectors, supporters and friends. It has been a note of sweetness in the midst of great bitterness.

The bitter and the sweet. Naomi Shemer (of blessed memory), Israel's master of poetry and song, who wrote "Yerushalayim shel zahav" -- Jerusalem of Gold -- wrote a song that frames this moment:

Al Kol Eileh - On All This: The Bitter and the Sweet.

On the honey and the thistle, on the bitter and the sweet,
On our little baby daughter, blessing I entreat.
On the fire brightly burning, and the crystal waterfall,
Tired husband who's returning, heaven bless them all.

Grant them blessing, grant them blessing,
Peace and blessing I entreat.
Bless the honey and the thistle,
Bless the bitter and the sweet.

During these tumultuous times, there are silver linings all around us. They glimmer with the shining beauty of friendship across faith communities and organizations around our country, joining hands in solidarity, friendship, hard work and activism to repair the tears in the fabric of our country and our world. This awakening to each other, and the power it collects for goodness in the world, will transform the experience of the next generation.

We can remain scared and hold back from engaging, sitting alone with our pain from the state of the world. But we can't afford to do that. Our hope, our faith, and our future are seeds that require the fertile ground of engaging with others.

The bitter and the sweet. We hold all of it and find blessing in the prospects for renewal that arise.

The wonderful scholar and teacher Rabbi Shai Held⁴ of Mechon Hadar recently published a fantastic two volume set of Torah commentary, "The Heart of Torah." He commented recently in a post, "I think capaciousness is one of the most important spiritual virtues. Life is complex and often contradictory, and the religious life invites us to learn to hold seemingly antithetical truths and experiences simultaneously. The example I return to again and again is the capacity to hold gratitude and disappointment in one's heart at one and the same time. Many of our lives are filled with blessing and also with profound suffering. The truth of one does not cancel out the truth of the other. We learn, haltingly, non-linearly, to hold both this and that."

Admittedly, it is easier to celebrate blessings when we are safe, well-fed, sheltered, cared for, and many of us are enjoying more or less abundance. But amidst the blessings of our lives here, the edges of our good lives are tattered in today's world, and we are learning how much our insecurity and worries ignite the need for faith and community more than ever.

Why is the world such a mess? It's very complicated. Economic changes, war, population shifts, cultural trends -- oh so many factors. And then there is the internet and our not-too-smart phones -- feeding us news and views 24/7, distracting us away from real connections and real experiences. With insecurity of place, opportunity, future and power, a rigid insular group-think has settled over us. Too much of our culture has come to be about protecting our place within, and the rightfulness of, our group, such as our faith community, our political party, etc. We are segmented into groups that define and direct us in a swirl of identity politics. The divisive atmosphere spawns hate and fear. But it doesn't have to be this way. We do

⁴ (FB post 9/16/17) Rabbi Shai Held

have the power to be the change we seek.

From her hiding place in the midst of the worst evil the world has known, Anne Frank held onto hope. *“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before improving the world.”*

David Brooks, wrote recently in the NY Times⁵ about identity. He cited writer Amin Maalouf who pointed out that often other people pick our identity for us. “The anti-Semite elevates the Jewish consciousness in the Jew. The Sunni radical elevates Shiite consciousness in the Shiite.” ... This has been called, miniaturization. Think of it -- our identities are miniatures -- in this way we are not whole. Maybe that’s why we are so distressed in our world.

Brooks writes, “The odd thing is, people are often complicit in their own miniaturization. We live in an atomized, individualistic society in which most people have competing identities.” Our competing identities have bred a hostile environment. Brooks observed that he “had assumed that as society got more equal we would all share a measure of equal dignity. But it turns out that without an obvious social hierarchy we all get to feel equally powerless.”

It’s like we are all these little tiles in a mosaic without an obvious pattern to shape it together. How can we find the pattern? “Martin Luther King argued that ‘Love has within it a redemptive power, and there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals.’” It’s pretty hard to love people who espouse selfish views, especially when they have power and use it without regard to the pain they may be causing vast numbers of people or

⁵ David Brooks, *“In Praise of Equipose,”* NY Times, 9/17

world or our earth. It's nearly impossible to love people when they espouse hate, and threaten our safety. That's an order too tall. But what if, when we can, we are friendly to people different from ourselves who stretch and push our comfort zones? Can we imagine putting ourselves in the uncomfortable situation of listening compassionately to a person whose very existence seems to threaten our own? One little bit a time, it can be transformative.

I have been there, through a number of interfaith projects and programs, nationally and internationally. It's difficult, but it is transformative.

Brooks opines that "the second step is to weave connections. The more vibrant attachments a person has, the more likely she will find some commonality with every other person on earth." It's true, we have more in common than our differences. But I would add this -- only in true, authentic interpersonal connection can we find these connections. Social media offers a weak, inadequate and potentially dangerous illusion of connection. We need to get back to finding ways to ensure person-to-person connections across cultural and ideological lines.

Brooks concludes, "The final step is to practice ***equipoise***. This is the trait we should be looking for in leaders. It's the ability to move gracefully through your identities — to have the passions, blessings and hurts of one balanced by the passions, blessings and hurts of several others. The person with equipoise doesn't feel attachments less powerfully but weaves several deep allegiances into one symphony."

Nelson Mandela observed, *“No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”*

Multiple viewpoints, differences of opinion and ideology, with respect for difference are part of our Jewish DNA. The Talmud records disagreement and listening, sometimes clumsily, to one another from a kaleidoscope of vantage points. It is a beautiful picture. My colleague Rabbi Leon Morris cites a passage from the Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 115ab with a discussion about saving books from a fire on Shabbat. The rabbis consider, *“if your home is on fire, may you carry out your books? The Talmud’s answer is, yes, you may carry out a book.”* What does this say about the rabbinic idea? Our books, our learning, are so important that one can break Shabbat to save them. Morris observes, *“Part of why the world is on fire is divisiveness and demonizing those with whom we disagree.”* Imagine learning from people who are different from ourselves, even radically different. Our tradition values diverse and new perspectives -- and has given us tools to facilitate the exchange.⁶

“We spend way too much time listening with the intent to respond, or argue, or repute. Try listening with the intent to change your mind. This is truly listening; listening to agree with another point of view. If you want to stand in another person’s shoes, listen with the intent to change your mind.”⁷

We have come to be afraid of each other; afraid of difference, afraid of

⁶ Rabbi Leon Morris, *“Saving Books from the Fire,”* eJewish Philanthropy 9.2017

⁷ From Cathy Graham. <https://cathygrahamcoaching.me/tag/third-entity-exercise/>

change, and afraid of any conflict -- even when conflict is needed for a healthy resolution of an issue. My greater fear is that our world is tearing apart into atomized, miniaturized, self-protective individuals and groups. We need to engage -- with each other and with the world. We don't have the luxury of time to wait this out, and we *needn't* despair. There is work to be done! We hold the power to address division and hatred in our hands.

Last year we lost a *gadol hador*, a giant of his generation, Shimon Peres, a fighter who embraced the path of peace. This year we lost another *gadol hador*, Elie Wiesel, a light to the whole world. Both of them had the courage and temerity to speak truth to power. We loved them for it, for they reminded us what our rabbis taught us -- you must call out ignorance and hate when you see it. And they modeled for us that there is a way to do it: with consciousness for the consequences of your words and care to express them with righteousness, not self-righteousness.

Wiesel's son Elisha is devoted to keeping his father's message alive. He recently wrote⁸, "What was my father's message?" He recounted Isaiah's teaching: "For the sake of Zion, I will not be silent, and for the sake of Jerusalem I will not rest, until her righteousness comes out like brilliance, and her salvation burns like a torch." The message is, "Not to be silent... not to rest." Wiesel reminds us that this is evident in those of us standing up for DACA Dreamers, or refusing to accept false moral equivalence in Charlottesville, or demanding the world's recognition of the Jewish State of Israel's right to exist. This evokes the presence of his late father. Elisha Wiesel points out, "His message is a manifestation of Kant's categorical imperative: That every action you take should be an action you would want repeated the world over. This is how my father lived his life. He treated others as he would have wanted to be treated. With gentleness. It is my

⁸ "Remembering My Father Elie Wiesel on the Eve of Rosh Hashanah", The Forward, September 19, 2017

belief that in this sense, the messenger was the message.”

This we can learn -- to not be afraid to stand up to evil, but to model righteousness in the process. The bitter and the sweet -- the honey and the thistle, as Rabbi Roston modeled, as we learn when we step beyond our comfortable, atomized place.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr wrote, *“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter. Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase. The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”*

We end as we began, with OY. This is not going to be easy. Our world is in trouble and it needs our help. We can do it. We needn't despair. It *will* get better -- this is the lesson of our past and our faith. With our hands joining together, we can change the world. May it be so.