

## JACKALS OR GIRAFFES?

*Erev Yom Kippur – Tuesday, September 22, 2015*

*Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, KS*

*Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff*

Three stories.

Story #1:

It was Rosh Hashanah morning, September 17, 2001. Six days after 9/11, it still was not clear who was responsible for this act of terrorism. We suspected it was Moslem fundamentalists who acted on the orders of Osama bin Laden. We suspected but we did not know.

Like every other rabbi in America, I had torn up my planned Rosh Hashanah sermon and struggled to find the right message to offer to my congregation in the wake of 9/11. My new sermon was not what my congregation expected. It ran against the prevailing emotions of the day, speaking about the rising rhetoric of Islamophobia.

The reaction was swift and vocal. The congregational president received several phone calls, calling for the Board of Trustees to fire me. Others wanted me to be publicly rebuked. That afternoon, during Leslie's and my annual Rosh Hashanah Open House, we noticed less people showed up. And some of those that did stop by had strong opinions on my sermon. It ranged from "how-dare-you" indignation to "what-was-your-thinking" interrogatory.

Story #2.

Earlier this summer, Rabbi Kirzane offered a sermon, focusing on the relationship in this country between blacks, policing, and incarceration statistics, in the wake of the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray, and others. He challenged us to see the inequity. He called upon us to acknowledge our societal prejudice.

When the service concluded, I went over to him and congratulated him. Others who approached him were far from complimentary. What right did he have to offer his opinion from the bimah? It is wrong to speak politics during services. Was he even old enough to have the right to be so strident? I stepped in to stop the conversation. I was equally rebuffed, being told that it wasn't my business. They continued to challenge with impunity.

Story #3.

One of the most divisive controversies facing the Jewish community in recent memory has been the just concluded Iran nuclear deal. There were fevered campaigns to get people to come out for or against the deal. After reading and listening and debating, I formed an opinion and signed my name – as a private individual – to a letter sent to

Congress by like-minded rabbis expressing our position. When the list of rabbis was made public, the reaction was swift and cutting. Comments I received included: "You are responsible for the coming Jewish bloodbath." "Shame on you." "I am reducing my contributions because of your complete lack of moral leadership." "I am resigning from the congregation."

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"Kol nidrei v'esarei v'chamei v'konamei v'kinuyei v'kinusei...All vows, promises, words that we speak and utter..."

We stood together at the beginning of tonight's service chanting Kol Nidrei. Our sifrei Torah were brought out of the Ark. We held them as silent and holy witnesses to our declaration that our words – our oaths – our promises – have tremendous power to influence the world in which we live...that we must be vigilant and defend the world and ourselves against our own utterances.

Kol nidrei...the power of our words.

Tonight, as we cross the threshold into the chamber of personal and communal introspection we call Yom Kippur, let us spend our few minutes together, focusing on the words we speak...how they are heard...how they harm...and how they can yet heal.

The three stories shared contain common elements, that serve as the foundation for our lesson. First, each involved someone articulating a potentially polarizing position on a controversial topic. Second, all three stories resulted in stirring strong

passions in others, believing the first person was egregiously wrong. And finally, in their zeal, those same folks made it personal...attacking and punishing for what was advocated.

Let me be clear. The three stories are far from life-shattering. No one was injured. No one was fired. To the best of my knowledge, no one resigned. At the same time, it is a limited data-set about rabbis from which to extrapolate. But is it so limited? Perhaps it points to a larger cancer that is creeping into our lives.

We all hear it. And – often like cancer – we refuse to name it, fearful that it will somehow attach itself to us...that we will be infected, as well.

"It" is how we speak to each other. We live in a world that has grown increasingly polarized. In order to be right, others **must** be wrong. No one is more emblematic of this new order of discourse than Donald Trump. He is the poster child for personally knowing what is absolutely right...and sparing no one who disagrees his scathing intimidation.

Donald Trump is a "Jackal," a term coined by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, the recently-deceased founder of Nonviolent Communication. As described by Rosenberg, "The jackal moves close to the ground. It is so preoccupied with getting its immediate needs met that it cannot see into the future. Similarly Jackal-thinking individuals believe that in quickly classifying or analyzing people, they understand them. Unhappy about what's going on, a Jackal will label the people involved, saying, "He's an idiot"

or “She’s bad” or “They’re culturally deprived.” [The] language [used] is from the head...classifying people into varying shades of good and bad, right and wrong. Ultimately, it provokes defensiveness, resistance, and counterattack.”<sup>1</sup>

However, Donald Trump does not own the concession for Jackal-talking. Just listen to speech on talk radio or television or read words online or in print. It seems whenever we speak about a controversial topic – politicians, climate change, reproductive rights, sexual orientation – the language we use is derisive and contemptuous. I was dismayed these last weeks listening to the debate on the Iran nuclear deal. The level of vitriolic accusations on both sides was shocking. Even while some voices urging mutual respect tried to rise above the fear-mongering din of those both against and for the deal, the overall tone was one filled with malicious assaults against people, not just their opinions. It has been Jackal-talk, through and through.

Is there something wrong with such attacks, especially if they are true? When we are right, how is it permissible to allow misinformation or ignorance to lead to disastrous results? While it’s nice to be nice, isn’t it more important to have “right” win?

To frame an answer, let us listen to two statements – both Jewish sources. One comes from our ancient tradition; one, more modern.

Beresheit Rabbah, written around the fourth century, CE, teaches us that, “If you desire the world to endure, there can be no absolute justice...Unless you

forget a little, the world cannot survive.”<sup>2</sup> From this midrashic compendium on the book of Genesis, we learn that truth and justice – while true and just – are too harsh to allow this world to endure. We require – as the text explains – some forgetting. The language of the Jackal – the language of certitude and unwavering conviction – is that of demands. Our relationships – our world – cannot withstand such a withering approach.

Jumping forward 1500 years, consider a poem by the Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai. It is called, “The Place Where We Are Right.” It is not accidental that one reads this poem upon leaving the Yitzhak Rabin Center, in Tel Aviv, as though to underscore the idea that on the road to peace, one must compromise.

“From the place where we are right  
Flowers will never grow  
In the spring.  
The place where we are right  
Is hard and trampled  
Like a yard.  
But doubts and loves  
Dig up the world  
Like a mole, a plow.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
Where the ruined  
House once stood.”<sup>3</sup>

We **know** we are right in many of our conversations. It happens to me. While I do not say it, I do sometimes think, “What is wrong with you? Don’t you see it the way I do? Are you stupid, or what?” Amichai cautions us that such attitudes create a relationship landscape that is “hard and trampled,” a place where “flowers will not grow.” Rather, it is doubt and love that permit the soil

to be plowed, giving it the air and nutrients needed to thrive...a place where "a whisper can be heard" instead of certitude and shouting. How might things change if we began our political and personally-difficult conversations not from the place where we are right, but from our "doubts and loves?"

Yes, often we differ on what ought to be done, whether it is about terrorism, policing, or a nuclear deal with Iran. Or even about a child's choice, a loved one's attitude, or a friend's political perspective – who should be President, when is a fetus a person, what is considered marriage. But what if instead of insisting that where **we** are – the way **we** see the world – the place where **we** are right – we instead began by sharing our loves and doubts? I suspect that all of our conversations would be much more productive because they would proceed from common ground.

It is in this spirit that Marshall Rosenberg articulated another approach to our words. Instead of attacking like a Jackal, perhaps we could enter our conversations like a Giraffe. He explained: "The Giraffe has the largest heart of any land animal, is tall enough to look into the future, and lives its life with gentility and strength. Likewise, Giraffe[-talk] bids us to speak from the heart, to talk about what is going on **for us** – without judging others. In this [manner]...people have an opportunity to say yes, although you respect no for an answer. Giraffe is a language of requests...It is language of the heart, a form of interacting that promotes the well-being of ourselves and other people [now and in the future]."<sup>4</sup>

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Kol Nidrei challenges us...all words that we speak from this Yom Kippur to the next: What will they be? How will we utter them? Will we approach our conversations – whether political or personal – as Jackals or Giraffes? Will we be right, but destroy the relationships around us? That is what Beresheit Rabbah warns. If we are left alone on a deserted island, we can be right as often as we want, with unbridled stridency and passion. We can be – to paraphrase Marshall Rosenberg- an alpha-Jackal. However, what makes our lives meaningful in the world are those with whom we interact. We are social beings. If we want to live with others, we must recognize that our words have power to harm them or to heal them.. We can continue to believe with passion in our causes and our values. But we approach our conversations as a Giraffe, to be strong but gentle...to speak from the heart...to speak with words of doubt and love. Is it by accident that Jewish tradition calls giraffes one of God's most precious creatures?

Kol Nidrei...the words we speak and write in every moment of our lives have power to influence the world in which we live...to sustain it or to destroy it...to trample it or to nourish it. When we gather a year from tonight – parenthetically exactly 4 weeks before Election Day – what will we say about the words we spoke and wrote? Will we stand with our sifrei Torah as Jackals...or as Giraffes?

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<sup>1</sup> *"Compassionate Communication,"* Marshall Rosenberg; *Miracle Magazine*, No. 11; Autumn, 1995

<sup>2</sup> Beresheit Rabbah 39:6

<sup>3</sup> *"The Place Where We Are Right,"* Yehuda

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Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, edited and translated from the Hebrew by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell; University of California Press, 1996

<sup>4</sup> Op. Cit., *"Compassionate Communication"*