

Rosh Hashanah Day

Taos 2018

Nachman of Breslov, writing in 19th century Poland brings us the following tale:

The king's stargazer saw that the grain harvested that year was tainted. Anyone who would eat from it would become insane. "What can we do?" said the king. "It is not possible to destroy the crop for we do not have enough grain stored to feed the entire population."

"Perhaps," said the star gazer, "we should set aside enough grain for ourselves. At least that way we could maintain our sanity." The king replied, "If we do that, *we'll* be considered crazy. If everyone behaves one way and we behave differently, we'll be considered the insane ones".

"Rather," said the king, "I suggest that we too eat from the crop, like everyone else. However, to remind ourselves that we are not normal, (THIS IS NOT NORMAL) we will make a mark on our foreheads. Even if we are insane, whenever we look at each other, we will remember that we are insane!"

How can **we** remember that this current political situation is insanity, that this is *not* normal, and that there *is* another, saner reality?

The tainted grain is everywhere. It fuels our texting and our emails. It generates a world filled with constant motion and anxiety. There seems to be no escape from the tainted media flow that feeds us all. Fox News and MSNBC scream for our attention. A nibble at the Internet yields a feeding frenzy of hysteria. The wheel spins faster and faster as calamity tops calamity. But just as we are about to lose all perspective, a miracle happens. Perhaps it

is during moment of introspection on Rosh Hashanah, or in a rare quiet moment of meditation when we are out walking. We hear the still, small voice, which says, says: Stop! Remember! This is not all of reality. You have a mark on your forehead to remind you that you are only temporarily insane.

That is why we are here together on Rosh Hashanah. We look around at our community and know that we are not alone. We are here to remind ourselves, and each other of who we are meant to be. We are to remember that we are not the insanity that surrounds us, even if our only available nourishment is the tainted grain.

Rosh Hashanah is called Yom Hazikaron, the Day of Remembrance. To Re-Member we must first take ourselves apart, and “re-member” the essence of our being. We must look deep inside, and evaluate our own actions. Only then, can we remember that even our own insanity, whether it’s a news addiction or a total depressive disconnect, is only temporary.

Rosh Hashanah is the opportunity to experience sanity fully despite the world around us. Its principles have not changed for over 2,000 years. On Rosh Hashanah, we acknowledge that as Jews, we are guided by the moral foundations that uphold the world.

According to the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot(1:18)”. The world endures on three things: Justice, Truth and Peace. Speak truth, each to his fellow and render truth and judgments of peace in your gates”. The Talmud tells us that Truth is the third leg of the stool on which the world endures. That footstool has become quite shaky.

Even before the world was created, the ministering angels begged the Holy One to reconsider the project. While loving kindness said “Create, for they will do many acts of loving kindness,” the Angel of Truth said “No way, for they will all be liars.” God came down

on the side of Loving kindness, and brought the world into existence. The sources tell us that Truth was “Cast to the ground” and that the Angel of Truth has been struggling to get up ever since.(Bereshit Rabbah 8:5)

It hasn't gone well.

In this world of tainted grain, truth has now become a fungible concept. We now live in separate “silos”, where the grain is tainted by “fake news”, news that often has only a tangential relationship to facts. It turns out to have been quite easy for a foreign power to infiltrate the system, and stir up violence and hate. Truth has been thrown to the ground.

That is why we are here on this “ Day of Remembrance”. As Jews, we are “hard wired” evaluate our actions, and return to sanity at least once a year. We can not help but be influenced by the steady stream of untruths that circulate around us. But Yom Hazikaron, this Day of Remembrance gives us the opportunity to touch that mark on our foreheads, and return to what we know: that Justice, Truth and Peace are the foundation not only of our Jewish belief, but of the footstool that holds the world.

It is customary, when saying the Shema, a declaration of God's unity, to make the sign of the letter shin with three fingers of one's right hand,(Justice, Truth Peace?) and place them in the middle of your forehead , the locus of the third eye. While preparing this sermon, I was gifted with a “chiddush”, an insight which is unexpected but rings true. Perhaps this custom is to remind us of the invisible mark on our foreheads, the mark that reminds us of what must be our foundation. I had a vision of all of us flashing three fingers touched to our forehead as a sign to others when the current political discourse veers into the land of lies, and discerning the truth seems impossible. (flash)A secret sign of sanity. Our mark!

Yom Hazikaron, the Day of remembrance” is not just about recognizing the tainted grain of the land in which we dwell, but about correcting the ways that we personally have strayed from our personal path of sanity. We examine our own lives, but confess our misdeeds in the plural, together as a community. We trust each other with the truth that we are all flawed beings, but each one of us can personally improve.

Ashamnu..bagadnu... it is traditional to pound our own chest as we seek the connection between these strange words and the ways each of us have strayed from truth’but the words we say are in the plural. We have sinned, We have betrayed, We have stolen, We have lied. “Al chet sh’hatanu l’fanecha” we chant, “For the wrong we did before You by lying and deceiving...For the wrong we did before You by scoffing and mocking...For the wrong we did before You by speaking ill of other people”...(Machzor p.283).“For all our wrongs, God of Forgiveness, forgive our temporary insanity, grant us atonement, let us return to who we really are.”

We look at the mark on each other’s forehead, and remember that we are held to a standard far different that what we see on the nightly news. It takes the support of the entire community to see our way to back to sanity and wholeness. We trust that what is said here tonight, and always within these walls, is true. Without that trust, there is no reason to join together on this Yom Hazikaron.

Which reminds me of another story...

Once upon a time, the Talmud tells us there was a town called Kushta. It was also called H’Emet which means, among other things, HA-Emet, the Truth. Who knows, maybe this town was located right here in the mountains of New Mexico. This town was known throughout the empire for its energy, vitality, and its spirit

of cooperation among neighbors. In fact, no one in this town ever seemed to grow old. No one knew exactly why this was so, but the townspeople were much too busy with their families and their community to give it much thought. They trusted each other completely, and everyone was filled with a youthful “can do” spirit. In truth, no one ever seemed to grow old.

One day the King’s messenger happened to lose his way, and wandered into this little town. When he returned to the King, he told him the most wonderful tale of a town where no one grows old. “Find out why!” demanded the King What’s their secret?

The messenger returned to H’emet and saw beautiful Gogi berries growing everywhere. Ha! That must be it. Gogi berries! He brought back bushels of ripe berries to the King. Great! I promise that will reward you handsomely, said the King, but first, a little snack. He locked himself in his room (no need to share this secret) and ate and ate until his stomach churned. After a few hours, he looked anxiously in the mirror, but saw that he was not any younger, only greener. He smashed the mirror and ordered the messenger put to death.

It wasn’t long before the King sent a new messenger to H’emet to uncover the secret. It was the rainy season when the messenger arrived, and there were barrels of water everywhere. Aha! He thought. Smartwater! Quickly, he filled a special barrel and brought it to the King. Great! I promise that will reward you, said the King. But first I must bathe in this water, so that I may become young again. Alas, when he stepped out of he water, he was no younger, just a little cleaner. Shaking with cold as well as anger, he had the second messenger put to death.

This time, I will go by myself, said the King. He ordered his carriage, and arrived in H’Emet carrying a large sack of gold. When he reached the town square, he held the bag aloft. “I promise

to give this bag of gold to anyone who can tell me why the people of H'Emet never grow old. What's your secret?" asked the King.

"It's no secret," someone replied. "We tell the truth here, and nothing else, so among us, there is perfect trust. Our businesses prosper, because this is a place of trust. I guess our faces show it to be true." Having told the truth, as usual, she reached for the bag of gold, but the King roughly pushed her hand away, saying "I am no fool. Why should I give them my gold for nothing? This is MY gold." He got on his horse and rode away.

The townspeople were shocked. No one had ever broken their trust before. They were angry, very angry with the king, but truth be known, they soon began to get angry at each other as well. Once lied to, were no longer so trusting. Business did not go well- employees feared their bosses were hiding profits and denying raises, and employers suspected that workers were altering their books in an effort to steal. Everyone blamed everyone else, and soon, there were signs of aging everywhere. Truth has it that if a traveler were to stop in Hemet today, he would hardly find it different from any other town. (Based on a story in Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 97a)

When the bonds of trust that hold a relationship or a community or nation together have been broken, it is difficult not to come apart at the seams. The Talmud tells us that the fate of Noah's generation of the flood was sealed only because of theft, which caused a breakdown of trust. "And the earth was filled with chamas", violence, as there was no respect for truth. God was willing to wipe out an entire generation and start over - He promised over a rainbow never to do that again- at least not by flood, if only we would seek a world founded on Justice, Truth and Peace.

What is true for small communities like our fictional H'emet is unfortunately true for nations as well. In her book "The Origins of Totalitarianism," Hannah Arendt states that "the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist."(Repeat)

We live in an era where "facts" have little meaning, and outright lies in the highest office in the land don't even bear comment. Often, we shrug our shoulders in despair. How can we know what is the truth? Our youthful enthusiasm for justice, for "Tikkun Olam" -repair of the world, quickly fades. We disengage. We quickly become old.

It is very easy for communities to disintegrate once trust has been eroded. I am so proud to see all of you here tonight, various pockets of this Taos community joining together to seek a deeper, truer reading of the reality of our lives. Many of us gravitated to Taos because we felt that there IS another reality, one not as consumed by the society around us. Despite all of the hardships of living here, we know that we live in a magical valley. Much as in that mythical town of H'emet, our bodies may age, but our spirits remain youthful. It is that "can do" spirit that brings this entire service, put together by volunteers, here this evening.

It is all too easy, however, to rupture those bonds, and we can age overnight. Any perceived slight, or deception can pull a community apart, and without the process of justice and truth based on mutual trust, resentments can linger for years, leading to disastrous consequences..

For example:

In the Talmud, in tractate Gittin, a story is told of the Jewish community in Jerusalem in the time when the Romans ruled. A certain man (we never know his name) had a friend named Mr Kamza and an enemy named Mr. Bar Kamza. (Think Goldstein/Goldberg)The certain man once threw a party, and said to his servant “Go and invite my friend Mr. Kamza to the party.” The servant went to the wrong house, and by accident, he invited Mr Bar Kamza to the event. When the host opened the door, there was his enemy, Mr. Bar Kamza. “You, he said. “You have been telling tales about me all over town. Get out” Mr. Bar Kamza was quite embarrassed at the mistake-did he think the invitation was a gesture of peace? -But he said to the host “Since I am here, let me stay, and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink”. “No”, replied the host. “Then let me pay for half the cost of the party” Bar Kamza said. “No” was the answer. “Then let me pay for the whole party”. The host still refused, took him by the hand, and pushed him out the door!

Mr. Bar Kamza, having been humiliated, is now filled with rage, and vows revenge. Bar Kamza decides to go to the Roman authorities and inform against those who have humiliated him. “The Jews” he tells the Emperor, are rebelling against you!” The story slides into fake news from there, and eventually the Romans strike out against the Jews, who are all seen as a threat to the Roman Empire, and ultimately the Holy Temple is destroyed, all because of resentment and anger over a misinformed party invitation. The Jews were forced into exile, and did not return for over 2000 years. Talk about trouble in a community.

Today, on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Hazikaron, we are here to remember- to remember that we are one community, dedicated to supporting each other with honesty and compassion. Despite the waves of insanity that seep into all of our lives, we know the truth- that by holding tight to the bonds of community, and forging a

sacred space based trust, truth and respect, sanity in this world of tainted grain is possible.

Raise fingers to forehead
Recite Shema

May we be blessed with a world of Justice, Truth and Peace.
Amen