

## Choosing Chesed & Community

Rosh Hashanah: Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker, Mount Zion Temple  
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Today is eighteen days after 9/11, chai days of life since remembering a day of darkness.

Ten years ago--when many of us gathered here for Rosh Hashanah--it was a Monday, seven days after the World Trade Center disintegrated before our eyes.

I began my sermon with these words: “We have become a nation of mourners, but tonight our period of *shiva* ends. Seven days ago, it felt like our souls were ripped from our bodies as planes descended in terror into New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. We know the details too well; the pictures seared into our collective consciousness. Some of us are engulfed in a deep sadness, for others anger scorches like a burning coal inside, still others have moved on, contextualizing the dangers and finding refuge in routine, some are numb from the hours of commentary and others are philosophical—students of history—knowing the deplorable depths to which humanity can sink—and yet the heights to which the human spirit, even still, can soar.”

Ten years later we have perspective and a host of questions: After two wars, and a decade without major attacks within America, are we really safer? What news in this world still gives us hope? How do we acknowledge our fears, based on real threats, but not let our fear dictate our lives? How can organized religion which seems so culpable in the annals of history be a force for good? After all, on 9/11 it was to the cries of “God is Great,” that human, ignoble ingenuity ripped away life from the face of the earth. How can God be great?

But this is not a sermon about where was God on 9/11. It is also not about how some people can so falsely speak in the name of God. Today is about where we go from here. It is about why we need more people in love with the potential for goodness that God has given us. It is about creating a narrative that aims toward the good not despite religion but because of religion.

Judaism has wisdom in the face of tragedy. Over the millennia we have developed strategies for coping, for preserving our values even while trying to protect ourselves. There is a traditional Jewish response I want to highlight because it is often misunderstood. In trying to grapple with the destruction of the first and second Temples comes this statement:

R. Johanan ben Torta said: Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because of idolatry, immorality, and murder. But in the days of the Second Temple, they were earnest about the Torah, and careful about tithes! Why, then, did that destruction come about? Because they loved [material things], and hated one another... *Tosefta Menahot, 3:22*

In this passage, there is no mention of the Babylonians or the Romans who actually did the ravaging and expulsion. No mention of the actual enemies of the Jews. Instead, Rabbi

Johanan seems to be blaming the Jews themselves. This is why this response has been so misunderstood. For the destruction of the first Temple, the Jews seem to have been blamed for idolatry; for the second, causeless hatred among themselves.

After the Holocaust, this traditional Jewish response to tragedy was anathema. How could anyone even intimate that God was punishing the Jews? But just as this sermon is not about “where was God?”, I don’t believe Rabbi Yochanan’s statement was about God. It was about religion. It wasn’t trying to offer a challenging theology in a time of trauma. It was offering a religious voice that allows us to discover something we can do. We cannot control our enemies; we can control our actions.

A nationally known contemporary expert in the Jewish healing movement, Rabbi Simkha Weintraub teaches, “To be sure, the evil [that] these empires perpetrated is discussed elsewhere [in the Talmud], but the concern in this excerpt focuses on what we might draw out of the catastrophe, ourselves, to reach for a better future.”<sup>ii</sup>

If we understand that this Jewish response as not blaming the victims, rather finding a way forward, we can hear this other aggadah, a story from the Talmud. It is based on a familiar statement, that the world stands on three things, *Torah*, *Avodah*, and *Gemilut Chasadim*, or in the translation from our Mount Zion vision: on life-long learning, worship, and acts of loving-kindness.

Shimon the Just said: ‘Upon three things the world is based: Upon the Torah, upon the Temple Service or worship, and upon the doing of loving deeds.’ As regards the third – [the doing of loving deeds], it is said [by the prophet Hosea], “I desire *chesed*/love, and not sacrifice.” (Hosea 6:6). The world at the beginning was created only by *chesed*/love, as it is said [in Psalms], “The world is built by *chesed*/love.” (Psalm 89:3) It happened that R. Johanan ben Zakkai went out from Jerusalem, with R. Joshua following him, and he saw the burnt ruins of the Temple, and (R. Joshua) said, “Woe is it - that the place where the sins of Israel find atonement, is laid waste!” Then said R. Johanan, “Grieve not, we have an atonement equal to the Temple, the doing of loving deeds, as it is said ‘I desire *chesed*/love, and not sacrifice.’” Avot deRabbi Natan IV, 11

Rabbi Yochanan bases his consoling words, the power of *chesed*, on the fact that *gemilut chasadim*, acts of loving kindness, is equal to *avodah*, to worship. After the devastating destruction of the Temple, instead of blaming the Romans or bemoaning the loss of worship, Rabbi Yochanan tells us that *chesed*/loving kindness can stand in for worship, and it was something we could do; it could even grant us atonement.

When we face a tragedy, we should look realistically at what is in our hands to do. We could blame our enemies; we could blame some Islamic extremists; we could bemoan what is lost, we could focus on wars and spending our resources on fortifications and defense. And wouldn’t we be a glum, frightened country.

And in truth this worry is responsible for much of the pessimism that is shaping political life today. In the Economist, a seminal article last December stated: “Two years after Barack Obama’s hope-filled inauguration the mood in Washington is as glum as it has been

since Jimmy Carter argued that America was suffering from “malaise”. The Democrats’ dream that the country was on the verge of a 1960s-style liberal renaissance foundered in the mid-terms. But the Republicans are hardly hopeful: their creed leans towards anger and resentment rather than Reaganite optimism.”<sup>ii</sup>

At the same time, and here is the good news, since 9/11, hope is on the move around the globe: “some 87% of Chinese, 50% of Brazilians and 45% of Indians think their country is going in the right direction, whereas 31% of Britons, 30% of Americans and 26% of the French do.”<sup>iii</sup> So optimism is just moving to other places.

Again, what is in our power to do?

We have a choice, you and me. We can choose to live, act, and vote based on our fear or based on our aspiration. Which world do you want to live in? Do you choose the world after 9/11 which was marked by solidarity, small and large heroic acts of loving kindness, and interfaith, community gatherings? Or do you focus on the other world that also emerged after 9/11 which divided the world into us versus them, a paradigm shift from peace to terrorism, changing focus from the 1990s of overcoming differences such as in Northern Ireland to a focus in the 2000s of explaining why terrorism needed to be routed out in unending war, civil liberties given up for greater security.

Of course we live in both worlds. Both have truths that cannot be denied. Which world, however, do you find yourself defending? It is the world we defend that we find our hearts most aligned to. What do you say after, “that’s all true, but.” “But there are so many people who are in need or in pain if only we listen and offer help.” Or “But, there are people who really want to destroy America and our freedoms.” Liberals tend to defend the real compassion of the human heart; conservatives the real dangers of those ready to take it all away. Both are right. And that is the problem. Both liberals and conservatives only tell part of the story. It is why our country feels so divided. We too often speak defensively without acknowledging the truths of the other side.

This pushes groups further to the left or the right in the public eye, even when so many -- in the security of their homes and with friends – often feel more in the middle.

This is where moderate religion can come in. The word “religion” comes from the root *ligio*, meaning to bind. It connects us to one another, but it has also been used to do so in history at the expense of others.

America is one of the most religious countries in the world. Last year, Robert Putnam and David Campbell published a sociological look at America entitled, “American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us.”

They report that 83% of Americans say they belong to a religion. “Nearly half say that religion is “very important” in their lives.” In comparison, “only 17 percent of the Swiss, 12 percent of the Dutch and 9 percent of the Swedes say the same.”<sup>iv</sup>

Our countries' religious fervor is tarnished by the finding that 3/4<sup>ths</sup> of Americans say America is divided along religious lines. By the way, nearly 100% say we are divided along political lines. How is it that in 1960 when Kennedy was running for President, 30% of Americans said that they would not vote for a Catholic and most Catholics supported Kennedy even though he didn't agree with the Church on key sociological issues and then in 2004, another JFK from Massachusetts also a Catholic, John Forbes Kerry, lost the Catholic vote to an evangelical Protestant. Putnam states: "The moderate religious middle is shrinking."<sup>v</sup>

So then how is pluralism growing in America? They answer is that we are more in touch with people different from us than ever before. Most Americans know intimately someone of a different religion, increasingly in the work place, school, neighborhood, and within one's home.<sup>vi</sup> These relationships help prevent other religions from becoming an abstract other. In other words, yeah they're alright. Interestingly, they also conclude that Jews are the most broadly popular religious group in America.<sup>vii</sup>

Putnam and Campbell conclude: "How has America solved the puzzle of religious pluralism – the coexistence of religious diversity and devotion? And how has it done so in the wake of growing religious polarization? By creating a web of interlocking personal relationships among people of many different faiths. This is America's grace."

This may be America's grace, but we still have work to do. We need to grow the power of the moderate religious voice in America, through relationship, through *chesed*/loving kindness. Since 9/11, two worldviews have emerged that have divided religious voices in America. According to a leader of interfaith dialogue in the Twin Cities and nationally, Rabbi Amy Eilberg, "One worldview recognizes shared vulnerability in a frightening world, moving us all to more relationship-building, learning, and collaboration in building our communities and our country. The other worldview turns our fear into suspicion and prejudice, leading us to create more polarization, divisiveness and violence in word and deed against those presumed different from 'us.'"<sup>viii</sup>

Our fears came across loudly last year in some of the hateful rhetoric about the Islamic community center in Lower Manhattan and one preacher's too public burning of the Koran. Our aspirations have been more profound. Countless programs of interfaith dialogue work sprouted around the country in the past decade, some service-oriented partnerships, some educational, and some focused on building relationships across the religious divide.

Here too at Mount Zion, there are many more opportunities to learn about Christianity and Islam and participate in dialogue. Last fall we co-sponsored sessions about Israelis and Palestinians with Gloria Dei Lutheran Church and the Islamic Center of Minnesota.

The greatest marker of this change was the commemoration of 9/11 itself on the steps of the Minnesota State Capitol. Organized by religious leaders from over fifteen religious traditions who met for a retreat last May, the event showed what religion can bring to the civic square. With all the politicians and first responders present, each religious voice rang out peacefully offering the best of religious tolerance without watering down any

tradition or purporting to speak for any other tradition. This was the maturing of the interfaith work that has happened over the past century. Religion on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011 was a voice for *chesed*, for loving kindness, and for community despite our differences.

This is not a sermon about where God is in times of tragedy. It is about choosing to nurture the image of God within us for the good, about strengthening the voice of moderate religion in America. With that image in mind, I offer this prayer:

*Eternal God, Source and Creator of Life;  
From the depths we have called to you in times of challenge,  
and we call to you again for courage, strength and wisdom  
ten years after of our nation's tragedy.*

*Grant us the courage to defend ourselves  
against those who would do us harm.  
Fortify and protect our men and women who serve in our armed forces.  
Inspire our leaders and diplomats to act  
wisely and to pursue peace.*

*Strengthen us to comfort those who stand alone  
without spouse, parent, brother, sister, or friend.  
Allow us to nurture our capacity for *chesed*  
to treat every human being as infinitely worthy and  
dignified by virtue of being created  
b'tzelem Elohim, in the Divine image.*

*May we teach our children to learn and to think,  
to consider and to reason,  
and to nurture hearts of wisdom  
that they may do battle against fear, hatred, and bigotry  
using weapons of the spirit and loving hearts.*

*May we live to see the day  
when swords will be converted into ploughshares  
and nations will not learn war anymore.  
In the meantime, God, grant us the wisdom  
To affirm *chesed* and community,  
The blessings of living in a pluralistic America.*

*Ken yihi ratzon,  
May this be God's will and our own.<sup>ix</sup>*

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- <sup>i</sup> This quote and the rethinking of our traditional texts in relation to 9/11 came from Rabbi Simkha Weintraub's column "Ten Years Since the Hurban." <http://www.rhr-na.org/images/stories/Ten-Years-Since-the-Hurban-of-9.pdf>.
- <sup>ii</sup> "The Redistribution of Hope." *The Economist*, Dec 16, 2010. <http://www.economist.com/node/17732859>.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>iv</sup> *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Robert D. Putnam, and David E Campbell, p. 9.
- <sup>v</sup> Ibid, p.2-3.
- <sup>vi</sup> Ibid, p. 522.
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid, p. 513.
- <sup>viii</sup> "Which Post-9/11 World Do You Want to Live In?" A blog post at Star Tribune's website. Rabbi Eilberg's column was an important stimulus for this sermon. <http://www.startribune.com/local/yourvoices/amyeilberg.html>
- <sup>ix</sup> This prayer was adapted from "10-Year Anniversary Prayer" by Rabbi John L. Rosove, Temple Israel, Hollywood, LA, CA. [http://urj.org/worship/prayers/sept11/?syspage=article&item\\_id=73321](http://urj.org/worship/prayers/sept11/?syspage=article&item_id=73321)