

The Vulnerability of Democracy ~ Kol Nidre 2017
Rabbi Yael Ridberg

Exactly one month after the election, I emailed the wife of Imam Taha Hassane of the Islamic Center of San Diego. A mutual colleague introduced us, and Lalia and I met for tea one morning. I reached out to her because I sensed that the American-Muslim community was particularly vulnerable in anticipation of the incoming Administration, and I didn't know any Muslims personally.

Not one.

We sat together at a Persian bakery for several hours, sharing stories of being mothers to four daughters, the peaks and the valleys, being in the fishbowl of religious life, and reflecting on the common historic bonds between Jews and Muslims. She asked me if I was familiar with the story of the Grand Mosque of Paris? I admitted I didn't know it. Lalia shared with me that when the Nazis occupied Paris, the rector of the Grand Mosque, Si Kaddour Benghabrit, provided many Jews with forged Muslim identity papers, and the mosque provided refuge for a number of Jews to hide in the sprawling complex.

It's a remarkable story of protection and rescue, but what struck me most of all was that more than a story of Muslims saving Jews, this was a story of Algerians, Moroccans, and Tunisians helping other Algerians, Moroccans, and Tunisians *despite* religious differences. They were assisting their countrymen and women.

I have thought of this story many times since my tea with Lalia. I have been reminded of it every time a new group of Americans has been threatened, has been made vulnerable, which in turn, has made me feel vulnerable as a Jew for the first time in my life.

On Rosh Hashana I spoke about the vulnerability that makes community so challenging and inspiring. How using the tools of **resilience**, **integrity**, and **hope** can help to strengthen our resolve to turn inward in community. Tonight, on the holiest night of the year, I want to explore several areas which point to the vulnerability of Democracy as we begin this new year.

The mishna in Ethics of the Sages teaches us simply: *Bamakom she'ayn anashim, hishtadel l'hiyot ish* (6:2). In a place where it appears there are no people/humanity we must struggle and try to be human. And so we must look around, and determine the kind of *anashim*—human beings in America—we will be in the face of Democracy's vulnerability.

Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up—ever—trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?¹

As the fictional President Shepard said in Aaron Sorkin's *The American President*:

¹ <https://www.globalonenessproject.org/library/articles/five-habits-heal-heart-democracy>

America isn't easy. America is advanced citizenship. You gotta want it bad, 'cause it's gonna put up a fight. It's gonna say, You want free speech? Let's see you acknowledge a man whose words make your blood boil, who's standing center stage and advocating at the top of his lungs that which you would spend a lifetime opposing at the top of yours. You want to claim this land as the land of the free? Then the symbol of your country can't just be a flag; the symbol also has to be one of its citizens exercising his right to burn that flag in protest. Show me that, defend that, celebrate that in your classrooms. Then, you can stand up and sing about the "land of the free."

Let us remember the privilege we enjoy to worship together, to share ideas openly, to offer critique and even to disagree. It is our democracy that enables each of us to do these remarkably simple but powerful acts.

Just before MLK took to the microphone at the March on Washington in 1963, a rabbi named Dr. Joachim Prinz got up to speak. He had been a rabbi in Berlin under Hitler, and during that time, he learned many things. The most important thing he learned was that bigotry and hatred were not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem was silence.

He argued that the fight for civil rights was not motivated solely out of sympathy and compassion for the black people of America. It was “a sense of complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience.”²

Looking out on the Mall that day, Prinz warned that America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent. Not merely black America, but all of America. It must speak up and act, *for the sake of the image, the idea and the aspiration of America itself.*

So on this Kol Nidre night, *let us* not be onlookers, *let us* speak up and act together.

In generations past, everyone's family in this room were given opportunities to gain education, join the workforce, and become part of building this *goldene medina*—this great nation. But we also know what it looks like for America to turn its back on refugees. My grandmother Cille Waxman Ridberg z"l couldn't enter the US as an orphan through Ellis Island because of the Immigration Act of 1924, which aimed to keep the United States free of immigrant populations deemed to be “suspicious” or “dangerous” including Jews. Only when the port in Boston opened up was she able to enter and join extended family in Wisconsin, and ultimately create the family from which I descended.

None of us here tonight is too far from such a story. The past generations of our families came to America because of the lofty ideals of liberty and justice for all. Those who seek refuge in America today are like our ancestors before us. And the pursuit of undocumented immigrants,

² [Joachim Prinz : I Shall Not Be Silent](http://ikar-la.org/sermons/we-venerate-righteous-gentiles-let-us-be-righteous-jews/), as quoted by Rabbi Sharon Brous in <http://ikar-la.org/sermons/we-venerate-righteous-gentiles-let-us-be-righteous-jews/>

the threat of building an impenetrable wall and shutting out immigrants from certain countries *who have never terrorized America*, denies the very democratic values that enabled each of us to be here. We cannot forget what obstacles our people have overcome, and that we are responsible to welcome the stranger and protect the refugee.

As a community, as a state, and as a country, we must confront our shortcomings in not embracing and sheltering our undocumented siblings. Those of us who by chance or happenstance have papers, or have benefitted from the refuge and shelter that immigration brought, have to demand that we welcome the current immigrants with open arms. Despite the reprehensible repeal of DACA, our call to protect the vulnerable refugees and immigrants is not a call to action because we are afraid that as Jews, we will be next. Our call to raise our voices against unjust policies is because as Jews we believe that the protection of the vulnerable is necessary and vital to our shared humanity.

In a place where it appears there are no people/humanity we must struggle and try to be human and embrace the immigrant and the refugee.

This is what democracy looks like.

The Talmud recounts that once Rabbi Yohanan fell ill. His friend Rabbi Hanina came to visit him, and asked him: Is your suffering dear to you? Rabbi Yohanan replied: I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward. Rabbi Hanina said to him: Give me your hand. Rabbi Yohanan lifted his hand toward Rabbi Hanina, and his friend stood him up, restoring his spirit. The text asks: Why did Rabbi Yohanan not stand himself up? It then answers with a saying: “אין חבוש, מתיר עצמו מבית האסורים” “A prisoner cannot free himself from prison on his own.”³

The message of the text is that we all need the hand of a friend at times to help us stand on our feet, to remind us of our strength and resilience, and that we are not alone. The notion of a “hand up” is powerful because it clearly isn’t a “hand out.” Rabbi Yohanan’s example of recognizing his colleague’s humanity and in helping him to stand, restoring his spirit, is still a relevant and meaningful act today.

The white supremacy on display in Charlottesville last month was supposedly grounded in opposition to the potential removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee—a leader of the Confederacy.

There are likely hundreds of such monuments in the US, and the efforts to remove statues, markers and other monuments that celebrate controversial Civil War era figures from public grounds represent a recognition of the profoundly embedded racism in the fabric of America.⁴

The current reality for people of color in America includes mass incarceration, police brutality, poverty, and profound inequalities. We could argue whether amidst the democratic values we hold dear, that the United States was founded with white supremacy built in. The early economic development rested on the theft of Native land, expropriation of African labor,

³ TB Berachot 5b

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/16/us/confederate-monuments-removed.html?mcubz=0>

and expansion into Mexican territory.⁵

This history, including Jim Crow, systematic discrimination, and a continued racialized program of mass incarceration is deeply woven into the social fabric of America in 2017.

Those of us who are white, we really have *no idea* what it is like for people of color in America today. As Jews we can empathize and identify with discrimination and oppression.

But *it just isn't the same*.

Our ancestors came here looking for a better life. African American's ancestors came aboard the bottom of slave ships. Those are very different.

Since the events in Charlottesville, already in some 20 cities in the US confederacy statues and plaques have come down, been proposed to be removed, or otherwise found new homes for them. Four days after the rally in Charlottesville, a plaque of Jefferson Davis, who was the President of the Confederacy, was removed from Horton Plaza Park here in San Diego.

I don't pretend to think that this is the answer to solving racism, and thereby stabilizing democracy, but I do believe that in recognizing what those monuments symbolize to African Americans, and the descendants of slaves, and not glorifying such beliefs, America takes a step towards naming the foundational inequality of our nation, and takes responsibility for its impact.

That's what *teshuvah* can be.

Colin Kaepernick decision to kneel during the Star Spangled Banner came as a result of a conversation with Nate Boyer, a former Army Green Beret turned NFL long snapper, who penned an open letter to Colin in the *Army Times*, sharing his discomfort with his actions, but understanding his need to do it.

When they later met to discuss the issue, Boyer suggested that instead of sitting, which he had done initially, Kaepernick should kneel, because at a military funeral, after the flag is taken off the casket of the fallen military member, it is smartly folded 13 times and then presented to the parents, spouse or child of the fallen member by a fellow service member while KNEELING.

The two decided that kneeling for the flag would symbolize his reverence for those that paid the ultimate sacrifice while still allowing Colin to peacefully protest the injustices he witnessed against Black Americans.⁶

In the noise of the last week, I'm sure many of us have missed the nuances of this moment. The democratic values that enable peaceful protest also enable dissent, which in turn enables listening, which in turn can hopefully lead to understanding.

⁵ <https://thenextsystem.org/learn/stories/after-storms-defeating-trumpism-rebuilding-america>

⁶ https://www.facebook.com/rabbirenee?hc_ref=ARR6jFLBpoN6v8qOu9k7Q9zbU7faM0W7uoEE2myh7yCapIVGR73-Kj-A7RYDvqGVr0&fref=nf

Elie Weisel taught us: “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place—at that moment—become the center of the universe.”

In a place where it appears there are no people/humanity we must struggle and try to be human in the eradication of systemic racism against African Americans and people of color.

This is what democracy looks like.

As a child of the late 60s and early 70s, I absolutely took for granted that Jews in America were safe and successful. As a rabbi, I never wanted to lead from the “existential crisis” or victim position. And yet, anti-Semitism is a real and present danger in the US today, inextricably woven into the fabric of the racialized hatred that is tearing our country apart, rendering the vulnerability of democracy.

Anti-Semitism is pernicious because it is also contradictory. “Jews have been hated because we were poor and because we were rich; because we were communists and capitalists; because we kept to ourselves, and because we infiltrated everywhere, because we clung to ancient religious beliefs, and because we believed in nothing. Anti-Semitism is the belief that Jews deserve to be persecuted and denied the right to exist, collectively with the same rights as everyone else.”⁷

In the aftermath of 121 bomb threats to JCCs, hundreds of gravestones toppled in Jewish cemeteries in Rochester, St. Louis, and Philadelphia over the course of 12 days last winter, I began to be concerned. It was admittedly a foreign feeling, but it passed as I was more worried for immigrants, black men, transgender soldiers, women, and quite frankly, anyone with a pre-existing condition.

But last month, when the chants of “Jews will not replace us” were shouted by white men wielding tiki torches, no longer hiding behind white hoods; and the President seemed unable to be clear that swastika wearing, torch bearing, epithet shouting white men were on the wrong side of history, I understood that Anti-Semitism was alive and well.

We cannot be tolerant of intolerance. We cannot be supportive of forces that sow division, spread falsehoods and encourages hatred. Every decent person of conscience must decide on what side of the moral universe we stand.

In a place where it appears there are no people/humanity we must struggle and try to be human in the condemnation of anti-Semitism in all of its forms.

This is what democracy looks like.

So what can we do in the face of the vulnerability of democracy?

⁷ <https://youtu.be/3UAcYn4uUbs>, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Educator Parker Palmer offers five crucial habits of the heart, which is where Palmer teaches that Democracy resides.

We are all in this together: We must embrace the simple fact that we are dependent upon and accountable to one another, and that includes the stranger, the "alien other."

An appreciation of the value of "otherness": Hospitality rightly understood is premised on the notion that the stranger has much to teach us. It actively invites "otherness" into our lives to make them more expansive.

An ability to hold tension in life-giving ways: We are imperfect and broken beings who inhabit an imperfect and broken world. The genius of the human heart lies in its capacity to use these tensions to generate insight, energy, and new life.

A sense of personal voice and agency: Many of us lack confidence in our voices and in our power to make a difference, yet it remains possible for us, to find our voices, learn how to speak them, and know the satisfaction that comes from contributing to positive change.

A capacity to create community: There are many ways to plant and cultivate the seeds of community in our personal and local lives. We must all become gardeners of community if we want democracy to flourish.⁸

Bamakom she'ayn anashim, hishtadel l'hiyot ish (6:2). In a place where it appears there are no people/humanity we must struggle and try to be human. We must counter false claims, half-truths, hateful rhetoric, fear-mongering and the demonization of decency. We need to be *anashim* with *chutzpah* and humility to address the challenges of today.

We cannot dehumanize, degrade and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation. Every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, woman, man and child is beloved and precious, we are all American. We the people, all the people, are created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of the Divine. All people are worthy of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

This is what democracy looks like.

Gmar Hatima Tovah – May our democratic vulnerability lead us to serve as creative sources for good.

⁸ Parker Palmer; *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit.* "