

Rosh Hashanah 5767
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
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Confronting Extremism in Our National Life

L'Shana Tova umetukah—a sweet and happy new year to all of you.

What a pleasure to be here! To be honest with you, I can hardly believe that Rosh Hashanah is again upon us. My first year here at Anshe Emeth has been filled with great growth and challenge—and also much joy. Melissa and I both feel blessed to have found a home at Anshe Emeth, and in all of you, an extended family.

Each year, it seems that Rosh Hashanah arrives bearing gifts. Sometimes those gifts are a calm world or a calm life at home, while in other years those gifts are newness—new lives, new jobs, new relationships. Every year we are given the gift of introspection, of time to consider the state of our nation, our people, our souls. And one more gift that comes with each Rosh Hashanah is the gift of memory.

Rosh Hashanah, with its introspection, celebration, and hope, also includes a chance to look back on years gone by. What a wonderful gift, this chance to look back. How blessed we are to savor such a gift.

As I look back this Rosh Hashanah, a particular set of memories stands out. These memories are tinted with two colors: green and yellow. Those two colors stand out because they were the colors of my father's political campaign logos and signs.

My dad was a state senator when I was born, served as a county board member, like a freeholder here, and when I was 8 and 10, ran two high profile races for U.S. Congress. He ran in 1980 and lost in the Reagan landslide, then ran again in 1982, only to come up a bit short again. Those campaigns did more to define my childhood than any other single event.

During the campaigns I learned so many important lessons. I watched my parents work together to achieve a joint goal. I watched as my extended family pitched in, whether marching in parades, going door to door to meet voters, posting yard signs, raising money, or in the case of my grandparents, watching us kids so that my parents could go out and campaign.

I learned about winning and losing, and how to deal with both. I learned then that one can never really say never, that each sunrise brings a new day with new opportunities, and that life carries on, no matter how things turn out.

I also learned a fair bit about the rough and tumble game of politics. I learned about interest groups, important issues, national trends, and the importance of being able to define one's own principles.

One lesson that still jumps out at me is that one always looks at oneself as a moderate—with those on the right being radical in comparison, and those on the left being just as radical. The unusual part of that definition is that it never mattered what one's views were. A conservative Republican would look at herself as moderate, noting the whackos to the right and left of her, while the liberal Democrat, with wildly different views, would just the same look at himself as a moderate, with those to his left and right as both off the deep-end.

Most of us see our own view as the moderate middle-ground voice. And we are usually troubled by those we perceive to be extremist—whether their extremism is to the right of us or to the left of us.

The simple truth we face this Rosh Hashanah is that our world stands sharply divided. On one side stand those who believe that their God commands them to act definitively to defend their faith, and on the other side stand those who see a world where multiple faiths and multiple understandings of God and God's will can exist. Our world is broken this Rosh Hashanah, and none of us is exempt from the task of repairing it.

The persistent problem of extremism pervades all that we do and say and pray this Rosh Hashanah. Extremism represents a real threat to our existence as Americans, as Jews, as human beings. So many events of the year just ended cry out to us this Rosh Hashanah. Those cries beg us to respond, to demonstrate our faith and our humanity. And respond we must.

Problems with extremism that once seemed limited to small groups out of the mainstream of American life now pervade our national discourse and our personal lives. You and I have suffered this year, and this Rosh Hashanah, you and I need to work through the challenges and emerge ready to re-engage in the healing of our world.

Let us begin this task by looking at examples of extremism gone awry.

In our own country, the views of Extremist Conservatives who have ascended to power create a real threat to our liberty. Of late, the views of one religion and its adherents seem to be the basis for policies governing all of us. While we all recognize the right of any religion to have a position on significant issues, as Americans we also understand the need for all peoples of faith to be able to practice their religion freely and openly.

Whether the issue is the large notion of a separation between church and state or the more particular issues of stem cells or gay rights, no single religion has the authority to dictate policy for all of us. As Americans, we are blessed with the ability to practice our faith in peace.

In the writing of the Constitution of the United States, our founding fathers struggled with the intersection of religion and government. Unable to agree, they decided to not include the subject in the text itself. Instead, the issue became the first subject addressed by a group of amendments proposed immediately after the constitution was ratified. That collection of amendments, now known as the Bill of Rights begins with this statement:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;¹

Almost two hundred and sixteen years later, we still struggle with the meaning of this all-important clause.

The year 5766 saw too much ignoring, too many acts of discarding, too many bold-faced abuses of this principle we Americans hold so dear. As we contemplate a new year tonight, we must also contemplate our very freedom to worship and celebrate as we do tonight.

In an address in 1776, years before the constitution and the bill of rights were ratified, Thomas Jefferson spoke of the need for separation between government and religion. In his speech to the Virginia legislature that year, Jefferson endorsed a 'disestablishment proposal' which would draw a clear and recognizable line separating government and religion. Jefferson that day argued four key points:

¹ Constitution of the United States, Amendment one.

1. The state has no right to force religious opinions on the free conscience, which can only submit to evidence.
2. A state religion is not expedient, since it is neither desirable nor attainable.
3. If a state religion were desirable and attainable, there would be no way to ascertain which religion should be imposed.
4. It is advantageous to religion not to impose one set of beliefs.²

Jefferson recognized the possibility of the problems we now perceive. If one religion or one religion's particular beliefs are forced upon the entire nation, problems emerge for both the nation and the religion.

The year 5766 saw evangelical extremist conservatives continue to assert their beliefs at the expense of our freedom to practice our beliefs. Too often, these individuals used their own personal faith as the basis for national policy, ignoring the very separation of religion and government rooted in our constitution. As 5767 unfolds, threats to our ability to freely practice our beliefs remain. Two issues illustrate the challenge we face.

In a bipartisan vote this summer, both houses of congress voted to expand stem-cell research in the United States. But when the bill reached the desk of the president, the first veto of the almost six-year-old administration was used. The reason? Our president stated that his personal views on life, guided by his own religion, precluded him from supporting such research.

On the one hand, a president standing on his or her moral principles deserves respect and applause. We want our public officials to have a conscience, to have some sort of moral bearing. But at the same time, we must ask ourselves a tough question: Are we willing to let one person's religious views dictate law for the rest of us? Is American democracy working well or beginning to break when such actions occur?

The underlying issues of the stem cell debate center on the question of when life begins. Our tradition teaches that life begins at birth. Other traditions teach that life begins at conception. The truth, at least as of now, is still unknowable. Science has not yet given us the answer to this pressing question. So we are left with competing valid understandings.

Stem cells are the building blocks of human life. A stem cell can produce many more human cells, and research indicates that many diseases may find cures by using stem cells to help grow new cells in the bodies of those affected with certain ailments.

Stem cells are often harvested from embryos. Some suggest that because they believe life begins at conception, the use of such an embryo amounts to murder. Others say that embryos are not yet human life. For those on this side, the more pressing value is healing humans in need. Thus, the use of potential life to save already existing life becomes not just acceptable, but imperative.

Our own tradition teaches that human life begins at birth, and that the embryo may be considered potential life, but not equal to a life already existing. Therefore, we follow the Talmudic dictum which teaches that one who saves a single life is as one who has saved an entire world.³ So from a traditional Jewish perspective, if stem cells can preserve a life, we must use them.

² See *Under God*, by Gary Wills. New York: Touchstone Books, 1990.

³ Talmud Sanhedrin 37a

While our position may make sense to us, we know that we can no more insist that our view be followed than those who support another view can insist their view be followed.

So ideally, we would be somewhere in the middle—advocating for no particular rule supporting or denying the use of stem cells. Such a move would allow scientists the opportunity to continue to study and would at the same time honor religious differences by not endorsing any particular approach.

All too easily, we Americans, uncomfortable with leaving a pressing issue open, having no legislation on one side or the other, have opted instead for one religion's answer. Such a move gives short term clarity at the expense of long term freedom. Instead, our nation needs an embrace of that lonely, scary, and by nature challenging position known as the middle. Daunting? Yes. But it might also be the most honest position in a world where we still do not have all the answers.

A similar example of opposing views based on religious differences emerges in issues concerning rights for homosexuals.

Those who are literalists read a verse from Leviticus prohibiting homosexual behavior and insist that such activities be outlawed as they present a threat to traditional marriages. Though they may not take every verse of the Bible literally, they choose, for political gain, to read this one verse literally. Their move works to create controversy, and attempts to make a complex issue seem simple.

On the other side, religionists who are not literalists argue that the biblical verse in question has particular historical and cultural connections, and knows nothing of a committed monogamous union between two people of the same gender. Those with these views see the value of a committed loving relationship, the importance of treating all humans as the children of the Almighty, and view such issues as personal matters, far removed from the ordinary tasks assigned to the government.

Again one religion attempts to assert its view on other religions, and again, the rights to freedom of religion are easily trampled. Again matters of private practice and belief become fodder for public discourse. And again, the political world creates an environment where the answers to life's most complex problems magically appear clear and concise.

We Jews know better. On Rosh Hashanah, we are called to see the complexity of our lives and our world. We are called to account for our actions and our beliefs. We are called to return to that still small voice inside each one of us that recognizes the need to live in a world of gray instead of a world of black and white.

As 5767 dawns, we face a daunting task. We must not only do our own personal spiritual repair, but we must also help our nation and our society become more whole. We live in times that do not permit us the luxury of waiting for others. The task at hand is just too great. So together, we must heal ourselves, and then heal our world.

Our healing begins with our presence here tonight. Coming to the Temple, uniting as a community, we start the process. In our prayers during these holy days, we have the opportunity for introspection and for communion with God. By joining together, by joining in prayer, we are taking a vital first step.

The second step simply stated, is study. Anshe Emeth has a wonderful program of study during the coming year. This fall our Kollel will focus on Jewish medical ethics, including the issue of stem cells. Make a point of joining us for these important classes. We also have a dialogue group with our Christian neighbors here in New Brunswick. Call me at the Temple office and tell me you want to join! Through conversation, sharing, studying, and listening, we can all grow intellectually and spiritually.

Finally, this year we must find the courage to act on our beliefs. We must make our voices heard in the halls of all levels of government in our nation. In this election year, we must participate actively, and work to elect candidates who share our views. When we act on our beliefs, we not only ‘walk the talk,’ we also become models for others, especially our children.

Friends, as we welcome the New Year, our tradition cries out to us. Let this Rosh Hashanah be a season of renewal for all of us, physically, spiritually, and intellectually. Our tradition demands of us no less.

As the French Jewish thinker of the early twentieth century Edmund Fleg reminds us, our Jewish tradition calls us to act in ways that bring honor to ourselves and to God. Writes Fleg:

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel demands of me no abdication of the mind.

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel requires of me all the devotion of my heart.

I am a Jew because in every place where suffering weeps, the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew because at every time when despair cries out, the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew because the word of Israel is the oldest and the newest.

I am a Jew because the promise of Israel is the universal promise.

I am a Jew because, for Israel, the world is not completed: we are completing it.

I am a Jew because, for Israel, humanity is not created; we are creating it.

I am a Jew because Israel places humanity and its unity above the nations and above Israel itself.

I am a Jew because, above humanity, image of the divine Unity, Israel places the unity which is divine.

L’Shana Tova.