

Yom Kippur 5767
Rabbi Daniel J. Fellman
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
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Negativity: Extremism in our own souls

L'Shana Tova. I am blessed to be here with all of you this evening, blessed to be a part of the Anshe Emeth family. I hope that the first few days of 5767 have been filled with goodness, joy, excitement and hope, even as we have spent these days in introspection and reflection.

This past summer, Melissa and I were fortunate to spend an incredible week in Denmark. We flew to Copenhagen not because we are lovers of Danish culture, not because we wanted to be surrounded by tall blond-haired blue-eyed people, nor because we are masters of the Danish language. Frankly, I know more flavors of the pastry called Danish than I do words in the language called Danish! No, we flew to Denmark to spend time with family.

Melissa spent a summer as an exchange student in Denmark during her high school years. The following fall, her family hosted her Danish exchange 'sister' for the year in Michigan. And a generation earlier, Melissa's mother spent time as an exchange student in Denmark with the same family. So our trip was in part a chance to add another chapter to a now two-generation connection between Melissa's family and the Andersson family in Vejle Denmark.

As we planned the trip, we both tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to learn the Danish language, and we both tried to learn about Denmark, its people, history, and culture. We learned much—about the Viking history of Denmark, about the bold and defiant actions taken by Danes during the Shoah, and modern facts, such as the fact that Denmark has

the highest taxes on earth, and that Denmark was recently ranked the happiest country on earth.

But none of that preparatory learning could match what I saw and learned during our days in Denmark. I think I now have at least a bit of an understanding of why the Danes are generally a satisfied lot, why they happily pay high taxes, why theirs truly is a noble culture. And I know I have a better understanding of family, both generally, and in this case specifically my wife's family.

Our first days in Denmark were spent as tourists in Copenhagen. We saw the sights, enjoyed the sounds, smells, and tastes, and got to meet some wonderful people. We found that the Danes were a welcoming people, a nation comfortable with itself and happy to welcome outsiders.

When we traveled to Melissa's exchange family, we arrived just in time for a big family get-together. In truth, other than the language, the family gathering could have been your family or my family. Cousins laughing, mothers instructing, fathers attempting repairs, children blissfully playing with each other, the afternoon vanished fast.

Then we got to talking. We asked why the Danes were regarded as happy people. Our hosts were surprised, asking if we knew the high rate of suicide in the country. They then began to explain their way of life. They attributed the suicide rate largely to long winters and gray days, but just as quickly opened the discussion on the Danish zest for life.

The Danes, as they told it, believed in a world where people were entitled to the freedom and privacy to live their lives as they chose. Danish families have divorces and divisions just like American families, but they also work to maintain family ties. Danes take pride in being non-judgmental, and to a person, spoke of the kindness with which they greet others—whether friend or stranger.

The Danes spoke with pride of their system of government, a system which provides cradle-to-grave health care and education for all citizens at no cost. They spoke of a nation willing to be a part of the greater world, but unwilling to have nuclear weapons on its soil. They spoke of a nation wondering how the United States could be so engaged in a battle that at its core had ignorance, fear, and distrust.

Mostly, though, they spoke of the Danish world view—one that is upbeat, positive, hopeful.

Hearing the words of our Danish friends, I couldn't help but think of the values that make up the Jewish world view. We too see the family as essential. We too try to see the best in each person. We too care about the health and education of all, and see it not as a privilege for a few but rather as a necessity for all. And, just like the Danes, we Jews living in 2006, now 5767, find ourselves wanting to live lives of hope, yet we, like they, are surrounded by negativity and fear.

One of the realities we face this Yom HaKippurim, this day of judgment, can be summed up in one word: negativity. Our world, and for far too many of us, our lives, are filled with negativism.

We see fear and pessimism everywhere we look. Whether reading the local newspaper, talking to our neighbors, or filling our gas tanks, bad news abounds. Flip on the television news and we are likely to see stories of corruption, shootings, auto accidents, implosions in the personal lives of political leaders or celebrities. We hear and see others around the world engaging in violence and vicious acts aimed at our country.

Our national life does little to help us. We are regularly inundated with messages of fear—color codes for our security, warnings about liquids on planes, threats to our way of life. Yes, they all have kernels of truth, and in some sense, most of the warnings could be deemed necessary. But too easily, the warnings are delivered with words which add to our angst rather than comfort our curiosity.

To be sure, world events aid in the development of a negativity-laden society. We are now five years into a war, longer than the entirety of U.S. involvement in either World War I or World War II. And with no end in clear sight, the pessimistic view of our national security and the world scene can easily be justified.

Beyond national and world events, our current culture only exacerbates the problem. We live in a society of me-first. This view supports our constant pushing to the top, while elbowing others out of the way, and results in a strong level of distrust. We look at others not as friends or friends-to-be, but rather as enemies, as impediments to our goals. So easily we look out on the world and conclude that others are arrayed against us, some conspiracy afoot.

But maybe there is more to being negative than just reacting to the events in the world around us or our culture. Maybe our negativity comes from other motivations in our lives. In a wonderful book published last year, the notion of motivation, and the effects of our motivations on our lives, gained notoriety. In *Freakonomics*, Steven Levitt, an economist, and Stephen Dubner, a writer for the New York Times, suggest that our underlying motivations, sometimes sincere and sometimes cynical, play a major role in the decisions we make in our daily lives.

We choose to be negative, they argue, because we are motivated to do so. If our national leaders want us to trust them, they create an environment of fear, positioning themselves as the only trustworthy option in a dangerous world. Dubner and Levitt suggest that while morality represents how we would like the world to work, economics represents how our world actually works.¹ If they are correct, then our current condition of negativity comes from two sources—the influences we feel in our culture, but also our own reactions to the culture. Put simply, we live in a time when negativity sells.

¹ See *Freakonomics*, by Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner. New York: William Morrow, 2005.

One of the unique characteristics of the Jew in history is that regardless of what was occurring in the world at large, the Jew has been able to maintain a sense of hope and joy. Our Torah is filled with discussions on the dichotomy between good and bad, positive and negative. Our Yom Kippur Torah reading illustrates our Jewish view.

In Deuteronomy 30, we read that God and God's laws are not the realm of an ivory tower, nor are they hard to reach. Rather, says the Torah, be optimistic, and see that God and God's teachings are well within the reach of every human being. In fact, our Torah teaches us that such knowledge resides within each of our hearts, within each of our souls.²

Wow! What a wonderful gift our Torah gives us. We, each of us, have the power and the ability to see the good and the right. Such strength we gain from this insight!

How can we not be optimistic with such an understanding? The sense of God's nearness has kept the Jew, has sustained the Jew through dark nights and dark decades. Surely we too can harness this spiritual strength to help us overcome the negativity of our day.

In the years after World War II, many writers, especially preachers, wrote books on optimism. Norman Vincent Peale wrote of the power of positive thinking, Milton Steinberg, a conservative Rabbi born in Rochester, New York who rose to serve the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City, wrote of the beauty and uplifting message of Judaism in its most basic form, and a Reform rabbi named Joshua Loth Leibman, who rose to serve Temple Israel in Boston, Massachusetts, wrote *Peace of Mind*, a volume which suggested that the way to world peace was through peace in each of our own minds and souls. While Peale lived to a ripe old age, his book creating a lifetime of passion and praise, both Rabbis Steinberg and Leibman died young. Their messages, even if not as well known, endure in their clarity and depth.

² See Deuteronomy 30:11-14.

In a second book, published posthumously, Rabbi Leibman expands his hopeful view of humanity and the human ability to effect peace. Near the end of this second volume, entitled *Hope for Man*, Leibman summarizes his beliefs. Writes Rabbi Leibman:

The world of tomorrow is going to need more healthy-minded, well-adjusted, sane spirits than ever before. If we keep these five notions of emotional maturity—

Bravery enough to accept our imperfections;
the development of a mature conscience;
the development of courage;
the adoption of a long-range scale of values;
and love,

then we shall be able to affirm that life is worth the struggle. It is worth it in its own terms and because it gives us the possibility of making those terms better for the infinite generations yet to come. Suffering we shall surely undergo, failures we shall certainly encounter, tragedy will often be our lot. Yet we can create an unconquerable human spirit that proclaims, in spite of all and through it all, that life can be made worth living. There is hope for humanity.³

Rabbi Leibman created a blueprint, not just for his generation, who endured the horrors of the Shoah and World War II and survived to build peaceful and productive lives, but for our times as well. Rabbi Leibman's five principles are as new and significant today as they were when first published.

If we are to overcome the negativity around us, we must begin with new levels of personal bravery. We must be able to take the lesson of Yom Kippur and make it a part of our every day lives. Yom Kippur teaches us to take a hard honest look in the mirror, accept it all, then find the gumption to improve upon our imperfections. We can accept our own shortcomings, and be strengthened by our acceptance of our challenges alongside our triumphs. Such a bold move will help us trust ourselves, and help us to trust others.

³ Joshua Loth Leibman. *Hope for Man*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966.

Second, we who live in 2006 must work hard to develop a mature conscience within each of us. A mature conscience sees inequality in the world and acts to make lives better. A mature conscience sees the needs of others and understands that meeting those needs represents a job for all of us. None of us is exempt. A mature conscience sees a genocide taking place in Darfur, and does everything imaginable—from letter writing to protests to financial support to help stop this crisis facing not just the people of Sudan but all humanity.

Third, our times demand that we develop courage. We live in dangerous times, with too many people bent on proving their worth by abusing and damaging others. In the world of 5767, we will need the courage to encounter sadness, depravity, and injustice. We will need the courage to endure tragedy and loss even as we work to make our world more whole. Our task is not without risks, and our goals will demand the courage to sacrifice.

Fourth, we cannot allow ourselves to be entrapped by short-range views. The ideals of Judaism are long-range—they were developed over centuries, and they have endured over many more centuries. The Jewish view sees not the immediate short-term problem, but rather sees the long-term solution. The Jew recognizes that all of us as Jews live in partnership with the almighty, that each of us will remain in that partnership throughout our lives. Our task is to stay true to that vision of a covenant between humanity and the Almighty, to work for the day when all the world will know the meaning of Shalom—not just peace, but wholeness.

And finally, we must find ways to love and to express our love. In our times, hate has too often eclipsed love. Hate speech litters our national scene today. Television programs that berate and denigrate are the most popular shows currently on air. We love to watch fighting within families or tribes or contestants, we applaud as human beings are criticized or humiliated. We Jews need to demand better. Our world cries out for examples of love between human beings. We Jews who have known the powers of hate speech must embrace that which unites us, that which elevates us, that which inspires us.

We must embrace the love that exists in our world, and nurture all the love that is possible in the days and years ahead.

And just as our Torah teaches us, I believe that these tasks are within our grasp. We have the ability to stare down negativity, and replace it with the Jewish view of optimism. We have the ability to confront fear and realize the truth of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's words, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." And we have the ability to look out at the unknown—whether that unknown is a person, an idea, or a culture, and greet it with words of welcome, words of embrace, words of peace.

Many places provide us with possibilities. In fact, you are sitting in one such place right now. In the coming year, we at Anshe Emeth will have the chance to engage our tradition in study—from film and history to science, music, Torah, Talmud and philosophy. Come join any of our classes and experience for yourself the Jewish answer to the negativity in our world.

Beyond the classroom, we have many opportunities to take our beliefs and turn them into good works for others. This fall we'll host a Mitzvah Heroes conference where we can meet and learn from people who are single-handedly making our world more whole. And we'll have Mitzvah Day in December, a chance to do for others simply because we have the ability to help. We'll host the men's overflow shelter for two weeks during the winter months, and we'll again collect items to be distributed during our youth group's Midnight Run.

In the end, all of our prayers this Yom Kippur, all of our acts of repentance and return, all of our attempts at change and growth coalesce as we take a long hard look at ourselves. Do we like the world we've created? Are we willing to spend another year like the one just ended? Or does that shofar cry out in a new way, calling us to dig deeper? That sharp Tkiah note of the Shofar can awake the still small voice in each of our souls.

Let the sounds of the shofar resonate throughout all of 5767, and let those blasts of the ram's horn announce a new commitment to our sacred partnership with God as we continue to create our world.

L'shana Tova—G'mar Hatima Tovah. May this be a sweet new year, and may we all be inscribed in the book of life and blessing. Amen.