

Growing up my father liked to share John Shedd's Poem, stating "A ship in harbor is safe — but that is not what ships are built for." Because he believed this is a great metaphor for life. My dad would use it, when my mother would feel scared about sending me and my brothers off to Israel, or during any life experience when there was concern. He would reassure her that we were supposed to go and explore the world, connecting to Judaism and developing as young adults. It made sense that she was worried. But my father hoped that this poem could be a metaphor instilling hope and pride in my mother's heart overcoming her fear.

The concern and protective impulse that my mother felt was real. I lived in Israel during the 2nd Intifada, from 2001-03. And I am blessed that even with fear, my parents supported my decision. And like my mother, the worries that many of us have today regarding safety and protection of our loved ones is a true concern in our unsettling world. Where it feels like danger is lurking at every corner, and the threat of terrorism is at our nation's doorstep. I believe the poetic words, "A ship in harbor is safe—but that is not what ships were built for," can give us comfort and hope in unsettling times.

By having hope and purpose we can overcome the fallacy of the human impulse to be overly self-protective, closing ourselves off to life. Where we do not live our values and forget about core responsibilities in hopes of being well insulated from the ills of the world; giving us a protectionist mindset. In a way, I believe the poem can be interpreted with a focus of sacred living that resonates today, which would state: "Focusing on ourselves makes us feel safe, but that is not what humanity was created for." Each of us was created to bring forth the divine gifts inside each of us and use them to make a lasting and sacred impact in the world.

During Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about being caring, living sacredly, and fixing social injustices in our midst. Being Jewish means that we have a great and deep responsibility. Many of us strongly internalize this calling of social responsibility, to be a light unto the nations. That we, as Jews, are to live ethically and take the lead in standing up for justice and truth, even when it is unpopular or not accepted by our neighbors. And unfortunately, we live in a scared world, where actions do not always support our values. American society has accepted a false theory that the strength of our community is dependent on government officials.

We can hear this over and over again in the lead up to our national elections. You and I are told, that we are to put our trust in elected officials, and rely on them to protect and preserve our personal values and the priorities that we hold dear. This top-down leadership style is a fallacy, where the president and congress form the morals and character of our country. Instead, we, citizens, should take responsibility to better our community; therefore ensuring a strong America.

It is up to each and every one of us, me and you, to improve our schools, deal with societal epidemics like drugs and alcohol abuse, violence and guns; we are responsible for ethical practices in business and integrity in our daily actions. The good news is that we, as a community, control our destiny. Our government is responsible for international affairs. But our civic organizations, houses of worship, as well as caring people are what makes America great. And it is up to us to make our lives, home, and neighborhoods models of respect, honesty, and devotion to society.

In my short time here in Orange County, I have met Betsy Johnston of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church. She is one of the most inspiring people I have met. Her life is devoted to helping others in needs, and she does it with the utmost love and devotion. What I respect about Betsy is her willingness to fight for justice while living with an empathetic heart.

She moves walls and builds bridges right here in Monroe. When the city or the archdiocese makes a road block, she finds a new path. Betsy has built Our Father's Kitchen, clothing and furniture banks, and she is trying to create an all-night warming shelter. In addition she goes to where the homeless and vulnerable are. Like the trailer park across from the Monroe Stop and Shop grocery store, and even under bridges. Betsy sees the fears and needs within a human being, and not just their problems. She listens, hugs them, and makes a real difference in people's lives.

May we be inspired by people like Betsy, who do not give up. Because their example of love and devotion excites us to help partner together and heal our fractured world. During our High Holy Day prayers, when we share the devotions of heart, we acknowledge the ills of our society.

We say, "Al Cheit Shechatanu L'fanecha, for the sins we have committed against you...by the abuse of power, by hardening our hearts, and by hurting others in any way." We have uttered these words from the depths of our souls, with deep felt hearts acknowledging our faults and responsibilities. In our prayers, we are not just seeking forgiveness; rather, we are taking ownership that we have a sacred responsibility to fix society. To do this well means going through the repentance process.

As part of teshuvah, we seek to make lasting and powerful change in our lives, requiring us/ to first/ go through a *cheshbone hanefesh*, an accounting of the soul. This means that each one of us is to look at ourselves in the metaphoric mirror, owning our actions and when we have faltered. We will grow and develop, when we see the world differently, and go outside of our personal understandings. To change our actions depend on how we comprehend the problem or situation.

So how can we begin to build a better and stronger America? By remembering that every human being is created *B'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. And when we truly see what makes "the other" special, we begin to understand Hillel's golden rule, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor!" How we speak and act are important.

Do we lump people in groups, continue spreading stereotypes, or even minimize people in jokes? Adonai requires that we honor human dignity. As Deuteronomy 6:18 commands, "Do the right and the good in the eyes of God." Our tradition over and over again calls out to us to go out and spread a moral character of respect, care, and devotion in our world. Do not demonize others, instead let us bring forth the best that is in us, and inspire our neighbors and friends to do the same.

As the Yiddish proverb teaches, "We fall not because we are weak, but because we think we are strong." The notion that America is great takes for granted those who devoted themselves building a special and wonderful nation, especially the men and women who have died serving our country. Generations of Americans have devoted their lives to improve our nation building

infrastructure, creating a land of opportunity, and helping each generation to see the gifts of diversity in our midst. Strength is not about winning, or by protecting against loss. Success is accomplished by working together and creating partnerships of respect and trust, bringing forth the sacred and great gifts of our fellow Americans. An example of what makes America great, in my lifetime, are computers and the internet. A great American innovation, where advancement has been made through open source software and programs, using our intelligence and skills to better our future.

Tonight, we look towards the year ahead, and ask ourselves and each other, “What is needed in our society?” And I believe American society needs more empathy, respecting the narrative and struggles of others. As we see in this political season there is an incredible amount of hurt and anger in our midst. And this pain is real!

Our nation’s history has not always been ideal and at times incredibly hurtful: be it to blacks, Hispanics, working class Americans, women, gays and lesbians, Muslims, those with disabilities, and even at one time Italian, Irish, and Jewish immigrants. Therefore we, as a nation and society, have a responsibility to better comprehend the struggles that all different types of Americans face. We do not have one national narrative; instead we have many identities in our country. And we, as a society, fail to fully comprehend the specific struggles and injustices in our midst. And tonight I want us to acknowledge that their pain is real. Our brothers and sisters in America are hurting.

Judaism calls us to be present to those who are mistreated and downtrodden. There is a sacred gift to be able to listen, internalize, and validate others’ narratives and experiences. It does not mean we are personally responsible. But when we try to downplay the past or smooth over the hurt/ we belittle the one we are interacting with and to whom we are listening.

And in addition, we can be open to multiple and competing narratives. Because they are perspectives, with many viewpoints. Therefore we can be supportive of Black Lives Matter, while also being aware of the hardships law enforcement face, giving police officers encouragement and cooperation. To care simply means to listen and understand. It is like the wonderful rabbinic story of Rabbi Moshe Leib Sassover.

Which he shared with his disciples, “I overheard a conversation between two villagers that taught me how we must truly love our neighbor. One man said, ‘Tell me, friend Ivan, do you love me?’ The other replied, ‘I love you deeply.’ The first man responded, ‘Do you know, my friend, what gives my heart pain?’ the friend answered, ‘How can I know that?!’ the first then said, ‘If you do not know what gives me pain, how can you say that you truly love me?!’” “Yes,” Rabbi Sassover concluded, “To love, truly to love, means to know what gives pain to your friend.”

And this is what Teshuvah and repentance is about; for us to truly understand the pain around us. Because if we go to fix society without knowing the lives and deeply connecting to better understand other’s perspectives, in the end we only serve ourselves. By acknowledging the wrongs and pain, we give voice to those who feel silent.

This is not easy. But it is what is needed in our world today. As Pirkei Avot teaches, “Who is brave? The one who turns a foe into a friend!” Our neighbors should not be our foes or enemies. For our neighborhoods, school, and communities to be great Americans need to become friends.

During this political season, let us not just focus on political parties and candidates. Rather, let us be inspired, as Americans and as Jews, to build our homes, states, and nation as strong-holds of respect, dignity, and care. Yes, our votes do matter, and I hope we all think deeply about whom we vote for. But the people need to partner with our elected officials. Where we hold ourselves and each other accountable to better America through ethics and investment in our entire country. Where we care about one another.

It is up to each of us to stand up for moral leadership because it is just like the metaphor of the ship. For we know what happens if one person makes one small hole under his or her seat in our communal ship we all sink. For our lives are interdependent with our neighbors. Therefore, let us have faith and hope that focusing on making America great goes beyond economic policies, and works to bring healing, wholeness, and the eternal spirit into our midst. May each of us sail, leaving the comfort of our harbors. Because together we can build strength and safety as a fleet, bringing forth hope and goodwill into the world.

Ken yehi ratzon, may this be God’s will.