

Sermon For Rosh HaShanah Day- Our Tribe  
September 10, 2018 – 1 Tishri, 5779  
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton  
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This past summer, my son Ari worked as a broadcaster for the Duluth Huskies – a minor-league baseball team. There were lots of reasons to love the Huskies. First, our beloved Rabbi Emeritus Merle Singer grew up in Duluth, and I've always had a soft spot through him for Minnesota. Second, the team is part of a college development league, and it's fun to watch these young talented players grow. And ... they did well! When they made the playoffs, I flew to Minneapolis, rented a car, and drove seven hours to Bismarck, North Dakota to watch their first playoff game. They won, so we drove another six hours to Willmar, Minnesota where they beat the Stingers too. I flew home, and Ari jumped on the bus for the seven hour ride to Fond Du Lac, Wisconsin where they faced the Dock Spiders in the Championship series.

They split the first two games, and we anxiously listened to Ari and his partner Mitch call the final game. It was a tight game, and I hung on every pitch. I had become a really passionate Huskies fan. In the later innings, the Huskies fell behind 4-3. They had a chance to score, but one of the players made a base-running error and got a needless out. I was SO angry! I pounded my fist on the table in frustration – my daughters looked at me like I had lost my mind. They lost the game and I was crushed.

It's amazing to see how passionate we get for sports teams. They become like family. We exult when they win, and anguish when they lose. They evoke deep connections – the city where we grew up, the school we attended, the place we make our home. They represent the tribes to which we belong.

From the very beginning of time, human life and experience was tribal. Before the dawn of civilization, for thousands of years humanity roamed the land as tribes, working together to eke out an existence. We learned that if you pull down the branch I can pull off the fruit and we can share the food together. We learned that if we surround an animal we will be more successful at the hunt and can share in the meal.<sup>1</sup>

As tribes evolved, they began to create symbolic markers to rally group membership. We embraced physical markings, we made standards and flags, we invented songs, we told and retold our stories. Tribes make for the source of our identity. They tell us who we are, where we come from, what matters to us, who we need to care about, and who we can trust.<sup>2</sup>

Jonathan Haidt in his monumental work: *The Righteous Mind* teaches that being part of a tribe makes you feel bigger. You are not simply one lonely individual but you are part of a group and that group makes you larger. Because other people depend on you,

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2012, p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

you develop a sense of importance. Because what you contribute to the group matters, you have a purpose. Because other people care about you, you are loved. A veteran of World War II spoke about his experience this way.

Many veterans who are honest with themselves will admit, I believe, that the experience of communal effort in battle ... has been the high point of their lives ... Their "I" passes insensibly into a "we," "my" becomes "our," and individual fate loses its central importance... I believe that it is nothing less than the assurance of immortality that makes self-sacrifice at these moments so relatively easy ... I may fall, but I do not die, for that which is real in me goes forward and lives on in the comrades for whom I gave up my life.<sup>3</sup>

Tomorrow is September 11 – a date that has taken on so much resonant meaning. Seventeen years ago, our nation was attacked in dramatic and vicious fashion, killing nearly 3000 people and injuring more than 6000. In the aftermath of that attack, we felt an inexorable need to come together. We called everyone we knew to make sure those closest to us were okay. We came together in civic gatherings and in synagogue to pray and remember. We flew our flags on our homes, on our cars, and on ourselves. We sang national hymns at school and at baseball games. Thousands joined the military. Peoples from around the world expressed their care and concern.

Our congregation began the tradition of leaving empty chairs on our bima, draped in the American and Israeli flag. This tradition was formed to remind us that there were those from our people who were spending holy time in harm's way, to defend and protect the United States of America and the State of Israel. Even though we who are sitting here are not serving in harm's way, we care for those who are. Like a tribe or a sports team, we may not be on the field of battle or play, but we are fully invested – their success is our success, their loss is our loss, their pain is our pain. Because we share a kinship, be it a fan-base or nationality, they sacrifice for us. And in turn we honor them because it is for us that they sacrifice.

As Jews part of the power of this ritual of the New Year derives from coming together as a community to reconnect to each other, to our ancestry, to our people and our tradition. There is a reason that coming together is so powerful. It is because God is found in that web of relation. God is found when we come together as one.

In the Book of Exodus, the people of Israel gather together at Mt. Sinai. The Torah teaches that "A mixed-multitude went up out of Egypt" (Exodus 12:38). When they lacked for food and water, they turned on each other and on Moses their leader, but now, they came to Mt. Sinai and it was there that God chose to commune with them. The Torah teaches that the people made camp at the mountain, using the singular verb *VaYichan* to show the unity they had fashioned. When Moses gives them instructions, they all answer together as one. By becoming one with each other, they were able to be one with God as well.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

So, if the way we draw nearer to God is to be more one with each other, then perhaps the goal is to erase the tribal divisions we create for ourselves?

That is the goal that novelist Michael Chabon proposed earlier this year in his controversial graduation address at the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. Chabon finds the idea of barriers repugnant: "I abhor homogeneity and insularity, exclusion and segregation, the redlining of neighborhoods, the erection of border walls and separation barriers. I am for mongrels and hybrids and creoles, for syncretism and confluence, for jazz and Afrobeat and Thai surf music, for integrated neighborhoods and open borders."<sup>4</sup> He explains that boundaries and borders are what separates people. The purpose of walls is to define those on the opposite side as "Other." To Chabon, there is no difference between a wall to imprison and a wall to protect. "Security for some," he said, "means imprisonment for all."<sup>5</sup>

In some ways, I understand his criticism. Our country and our world are growing ever more tribal. The natural impulse to associate with people who are like us and to define everyone else as "other" is growing. Over the last several decades, Bill Bishop writes in his book *The Big Sort* that Americans have migrated, moved, and organized themselves into ever more homogeneous groups. College-educated whites move to different cities than the non-college educated. Different ethnic groups sort into communities where people like them live. Gay individuals and couples move to certain zipcodes. More and more our kids go to schools with kids who are mostly just like them, and we congregate with people who are mostly just like us.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, he writes, national institutions have splintered. "In this new world, there will be greater differences nationally among communities but fewer differences within the smaller groups ... missing will be any sense of the whole... We have created, and are creating, new institutions distinguished by their isolation and single-mindedness."<sup>7</sup>

Jonah Goldberg writes that "For most of human history, meaning was confined to a very small zone: "us." *Us* could be a tribe, a faith, a city-state, or denizens of a specific class. The rules for *us* were different from the rules for *them*, and there was nothing wrong with using force ... to arbitrarily enforce the rules in your favor." When all of your identity is bound up in a single group or cause, your concern for institutions and people outside your group diminishes or vanishes."<sup>8</sup> In essence, your total concern is for your tribe, and everyone else becomes your enemy.

This sense of obsessive self-concern is spreading. A young woman lamented to me this summer that on her college campus, the drama group she loves has become so preoccupied with promoting identities of color that her own identity as Jewish woman is demeaned and ignored. Campus speech codes and intolerance have rendered her voice

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<sup>4</sup> "Those People, Over There" by Michael Chabon. Graduation address at HUC-JIR Los Angeles - May 13, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2008, pp. 7-8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 302.

<sup>8</sup> Jonah Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*. New York: Crown Forum, 2018, pp. 60-62.

meaningless. At a political rally, two men proudly showed off their T-shirts which read: “I would rather be Russian than a Democrat.” As Israel too becomes more tribal, the deputy mayor of Jerusalem pronounced that Reform leaders and other “quarrel-mongers [should] examine themselves” after a stone spontaneously fell from the Western Wall onto the egalitarian prayer platform. The President of Israel, after the passage of the Nation-State law, declared: “This law is part of a broader trend, a global one perhaps, that ... strives for a reality in which there are two options: Either you are with me, or you are against me. Either you are with me, or you are a traitor, an enemy.”

So maybe Chabon is right. Maybe the key to building a better world is to eradicate boundaries and erase difference, to embrace a radical universalism that says all things are one.

But what Chabon misses is that boundaries and borders matter. There is enormous value in one’s distinctiveness, and in distinguishing difference.

The Torah begins by describing the world as *Tohu VaVohu* – messed up and mixed up. God begins the work of creation by bringing a sense of order to that chaos. And to do that God needed to make separations, borders, and boundaries. God separated light from darkness and day from night. God separated the sky from the earth and land from sea.

But then God made other distinctions. Humanity was not like other creatures – we were created differently, in God’s image, and with that power and privilege came responsibility and duty. Not only were we given the earth to conquer and subdue, but also to till and to tend.

God also made distinctions in time – six days are for work, but the seventh day is for holiness.

But then, the Torah introduces us to Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of a very particular people. That particular people is asked to make a particular covenant and to become a tribe. But that tribe is not created simply for tribal sake. That tribe is created to introduce the world to an idea – and that idea is the pursuit of holiness in human life. From Abraham and Sarah comes Isaac and Rebecca; and from them come Jacob and Leah and Rachel, and from them come twelve separate tribes.

It is those tribes that God brought together at Mount Sinai. It is those tribes, separate and distinct, that God sought to fashion into one nation. God brought those tribes together at that mountain to fashion a nation where moral truths and ethical concerns were more important than tribe.

This is the essence of what makes us Jewish. As a tribe we celebrate our distinctive culture. We celebrate holidays with our special foods, we sing our special songs, we don our special garments, we tell our people’s stories. We welcome children into life with rituals that celebrate their entrance into peoplehood and covenant. We celebrate their coming of age by making sure they can tell and interpret our stories; we wed in accordance with custom and tradition, and look to that tradition in moments of anguish and loss. What makes Judaism so valuable is that it is tribal but not simply for the sake of tribe. What makes Judaism so valuable is that every facet of its particularity is for a

purpose; our ritual, cultural, and textual tradition all serve to fashion a world of holiness in which tribes can dwell together as one.

Elli Fischer responds to Chabon by reminding us of a Mishna in tractate Bava Batra of a beekeeper and a mustard farmer who must keep the bees and plants away from each other.<sup>9</sup> “Honey mustard,” he writes, “is a great flavor, but if you turn the bees loose on the mustard plant you ruin both, because they have to develop independently with their own integrity. Chabon forgets that ‘mashups, pastiche and collage’ require difference.”<sup>10</sup>

We are Americans and we are Jews. Our identities are formed from what we learn from multiple allegiances to sacred institutions. We feel a belonging to many tribes. We are loyal to Torah and loyal to the constitution. We are loyal to honor codes of teams and bands and orchestras and studios and schools and neighborhood covenants. It is these multiple loyalties that remind us that opponents are not enemies.<sup>11</sup> A football team can fight with all its might to win a game, but they play within the rules and when its over, win or lose, you walk across the field to greet and congratulate your opponent – and in some cases take a knee and pray together.

But among all our allegiances there are principles we all share. As Americans and Jews we believe and teach that human life is of ultimate value. If we allow someone to take another person’s life or to trample the dignity of another person’s life our society becomes profane. We believe in love and that care and compassion are of ultimate value. If we allow people to act callously toward each other, or to take advantage of those who are weak or vulnerable, our society becomes profane. We believe that justice and fairness are of ultimate value. If we allow people to cheat and lie and steal, if we do not apply the law equally, if we allow people in positions of power to take advantage at the expense of those with less, our society becomes profane.

These are the borders and boundaries we must defend. These are the moral principles we must champion and from which we cannot waver. These principles, lie at the core of who we are as a people. They come from our tribe but are more important than tribe. It is to these principles, and not simply to our tribe, that we must pledge our fidelity.

The sounding of the Shofar is a tribal call. It is sounded from the bima, from the top of city walls, the Temple mount, and from Mount Sinai itself. It is our sound – a distinctly Jewish sound. In some fashion the sounding of the shofar today calls us to return to our tribal roots, its echo reverberates today throughout the entirety of the Jewish world. But the Shofar must call us to something larger than our trial selves or our identity as Jews.

In ancient times the Shofar called us to defend our walls. In our time, the Shofar calls us to defend different walls.

The shofar does not call us to embrace chauvinistic pride but instead to celebrate the boundaries that define what is right and good and holy. We must stand at the

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<sup>9</sup> Talmud Bava Batra 25a

<sup>10</sup> “Michael Chabon’s Sacred and Profane Cliché Machine”, by Elli Fischer in *Jewish Review of Books*, June 13, 2018

<sup>11</sup> Op. Cit. Goldberg, p. 62.

boundary of decency, honesty, integrity, kindness and compassion and say these are the borders we will not allow to be breached. We must stand at the border and banish hatred and greed, oppression and violence, poverty and hunger from our realm.

At Mount Sinai, as we gathered, a mixed multitude of different tribes bound together as one community, Moses admonished the people to set boundaries around them, to keep everyone together as one. And when the Shofar sounded God told us what a holy society is to look like. It is to that call that we must return. As we turn to page 283 – we listen for that shrill call of our people, and our God, to fortify the walls of holiness for our people and peoples everywhere.