

Examining Our Souls, Examining the Soul of Our Nation

For the past 40 days, from the new moon in the month of Elul, through the *Yamim Noraim* of the past ten High Holy Days, we have been doing the hard, spiritual work asked of us. We reached deep into our souls, reflecting over the past year, naming the things we did wrong, voicing our regrets both out loud and inwardly, and pondered on what we wished we had done differently. We were asked to examine what our purpose is in the world, what we were created for, and do what we can in the coming year to fulfill that purpose. We repented and vowed to change our ways so we could move forward into a new year, because it is so important for us as Jews, to continue to better ourselves and be the best human beings we can be. God expects no less of us.

But our soul reflection is not yet done. We have more work to do during the next 40 days. Perhaps this soul searching is more important than our own individual spiritual journey and should be part of that journey. There is another soul that we need to truly reflect on, to see where it has been during the past year, what that soul did wrong, what that soul could have done differently and work hard to do what we can to repair that broken soul. **That is the soul of our nation.** Many years ago, I gave a sermon asking if you felt you were an American Jew, or a Jewish American, meaning, what is the first priority in your life - being Jewish, or being American. Either way, we are BOTH American and Jewish. And this matters now more than ever.

As a rabbi and a Jew, I hold the teaching of Judaism to be universal - valuable, not only for myself, but for all humankind. The Prophet Isaiah said to our people, reflecting God's message,

"I created you and appointed you a covenant people, a light unto the nations, opening eyes deprived of light." (Isaiah 42:6)

"I raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel: I will also make you a light unto the nations, that My deliverance may reach the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6)

Judaism teaches us values that are so precious to us, that many of our people died defending these teachings.

1. In the creation story, the Torah teaches us that human beings, both male and female are **created in God's image**, that **every person** is holy.
2. As early as the story of Cain and Abel, when God questions Cain about his brother's whereabouts, Cain replies, "Am I my brother's keeper? (Gen. 4:9) The obvious answer is, **YES. We are our brothers' keepers.** We are each responsible, one for the other.

3. In Deuteronomy we read, "If there is a **needy person** among you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather **you must open your hand** and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs. For there will never cease to be needy in your land, which is why I command you, Open your hand to the poor and needy. (Deut. 15:7-8)
4. Judaism believes strongly in **justice**. The Torah commands us: Judges and officers you shall appoint in all your cities... and they shall judge the people with **righteous** judgment. You shall not be partial in judgment, hear out low and high alike. Justice, justice shall you pursue. (Deut 16:18,20) and would help
5. In the Midrash we read: When God created Adam he gave him a tour of the Garden of Eden and then warned him: "**Take care not to spoil or destroy My world**, for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you." (*Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7:13) God reminded Adam, and us, it is our obligation to take care of the earth God created for us.
6. In his book *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides reminds us: Just as there is a law against fraud in buying and selling, so **there is a law against deception by words**, as it is said: "And you shall not wrong another... (Lev. 25:17) which refers to deception by words. (MT 14:12) It is forbidden to deceive people by creating a false impression. (MT 18:1)

Our parents, grandparents, and great grandparents risked their lives to give you, their descendants, a better life. They called the United States, the *goldena medina*- The Golden Country. They believed the morals and values that they wanted to live by, which were denied to them and others by the countries they were fleeing from, were worth taking that risk. They believed America was the best place for this to happen. We owe it to them to do what we can to enable these values they risked their lives for to continue, so that we can pass on to our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren the opportunity to live in the *goldena medina* too, with the values and morals we cherish and want others to also have.

Last night I talked about turning fear into hope. We cannot let our fears paralyze us. Because Fear is about limits, but hope is about growth. Hope enables us to look forward, to be able to take action. Of course, the first thing you need to do is vote. We are lucky that it is so easy to vote absentee, if you don't feel safe going to the polls. If you don't know, you can mark on the absentee ballot, reason for requesting it is because of "temporary illness" which refers to the pandemic. But NY is pretty well decided. So the second thing you can do is make donations to the candidates YOU believe can best carry out the values you cherish, even if the candidate is in a different state. It doesn't have to be big. Small donations are also valued, and they add up. Finally, volunteer to work on campaigns of people you believe would make this country a better place and would help heal our collective soul. They need your help. You don't even need to leave your home. This can be done by phone, email and texting. Contact the candidate and

they will tell you how you can help. I implore you, as your Rabbi, as your spiritual leader, I truly believe that the soul of this nation has been lost. It is up to us, to restore it.

Talmud teaches us: When the community is in trouble, a person should not say, "I will go to my house and I will eat and drink and be at peace with myself." (B. Talmud Ta'anit 11a)

Our American community is in grave trouble. Don't hide in your house. You can't be at peace with yourself, if the world around you is not.