

JCS Yom Kippur Remarks September 28, 2020 by Bernie Banet.
Ann Arbor Jewish Cultural Society

We learned of the sad death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg during our Rosh HaShana virtual observance. May her memory inspire us. Justice Ginsburg was an American hero and a Jewish hero, driven by the imperative of tikkun olam.

RBG relied on the phrase "Equal protection of the laws" from the Fourteenth Amendment in her successful advocacy for gender equality and women's rights. This afternoon I would like to speak for four minutes about equality as a central tenet of our secular humanistic Jewish moral code and a core value against which we orient ourselves on Yom Kippur.

Think about how our American, our Jewish, and our humanistic values converge on a commitment to the moral equality of all human beings. The Declaration of Independence proclaims "All men are created equal." When we pledge our allegiance it is to a republic that promises liberty and justice for all.

As humanists we agree with the American ideal that every person should be regarded as a precious life entitled to basic human rights, to dignity, to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, simply by virtue of being human. No one is inherently better than anyone else.

The Torah's ancient statement of moral equality is that all humans were made "b'tselem elohim" - in the image of God. In our wisdom tradition, the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic teachings repeatedly remind us to remember that we were strangers in a strange land and that we must empathize with other people and treat them with kindness and fairness.

The Jewish experience of 3000 years of persecution, occupation, expulsion, exile, and genocide calls on us to identify with people everywhere who live in societies that do not fully protect human rights, including in America and Israel.

On this Yom Kippur, amidst our political turmoil, and thinking about Justice Ginsburg, I am pausing to look back on the progress toward equality and dignity that I have seen in the United States during my lifetime. I am also thinking about the work that remains, the work that we are obliged to continue.

I was born in 1944, when World War II and the Holocaust were in full operation. I guess anything looks good by comparison to mass slaughter, even a pandemic.

In 1944 in the U.S. it made all the difference in the world to your future whether you were male or female, Jewish or Gentile, gay or straight, black or white, and whether your parents were married or unmarried. Such distinctions determined where you could go to school, where you could work and what work you could do, where you could live, where you could spend your leisure time, who you could marry. It was a world of

- Blatant and cruel racial discrimination, and, in the U.S. South, legally mandated racial segregation
- prohibition of interracial marriage,
- anti-Semitism
- the oppression of Native Americans
- discrimination against women
- sexual and physical abuse
- denial of reproductive freedom
- criminalization and persecution of homosexuality
- immigration preferences for white northern Europeans and closed doors to others
- And restrictions on the interactions of unmarried individuals.

During my lifetime I have seen many of the constraints - and privileges - imposed by aspects of identity reduced in important ways. I have lived through a series of rights revolutions that have made great strides against the denials of equal rights permitted under law that were previously widespread.

Recently, though, the incidents that spawned Black Lives Matter and #MeToo and the sight of immigrant children in cages reminded us that racism, sexism and xenophobia persist; they have not gone away. Troubling, also, is the fact that, despite the visible progress in equal rights under law for women and minorities, for the past fifty years or so, there has been a large increase in income and wealth inequality in the U.S. This has been paired with the destruction of ladders of opportunity for the less privileged of whatever race.

Our current era, it seems, has become a time to pursue our individual and corporate prosperity while ignoring our obligations to the basic wellbeing of all. We have forgotten that we are all in this together. Some call our time another Gilded Age. The pandemic has only exaggerated the inequalities and injustices in our economy and society.

To learn more about the work that needs to be done to pursue our value of moral equality I recommend that you read a book that will be released on October 13. It is

[The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again](#) by Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett.

By way of full disclosure, I provided some assistance to the principal author, as a volunteer, over several years, finding and forwarding information relevant to this book.

May you all have a healthy, peaceful and successful new year.