

## Jewish Cultural Society Rosh Hashanah 5781

My friends, it's been a year. The high holidays are all about the concept of "redo" or "do over" or "do it again, but better." We evaluate our year, our behavior, our mission and then we make a new plan. Last year I talked about developing a personal mission – a statement of purpose. A documented path forward to carry the best of who we each are and who we are capable of being into the new year....that was 5780....

Well, that didn't go as well as planned.... that's what the proverb *Hindsight is 2020* is all about. Complete knowledge or understanding is only available to us after something has already happened. No one could have predicted that the year 2020 would wind up with a worldwide pandemic; sweeping social unrest; the deaths of black men and women in literally too many cities to name; the caging of children and the violation of basic human rights for immigrants; and more than 10 "billion dollar" weather and climate disasters in the US. Pretty much it's been a catastrophe on every front, and a severe lack of leadership in our nation's capital is making America's (and our own worst selves) rise up and give voice to thoughts and ideas that used to be small, insignificant voices that lived in the darkest recesses of our national consciousness.

These newly emboldened voices shout hate and prejudice and lies... and these ideas of negation... hate, prejudice, and lies... are now more prevalent in the national conversation than ever before in my lifetime. I think about this a lot – and by a lot, I mean all the time. So, I want to share some thoughts I have about our need to re-establish the importance of truth and the value of diverse ideas as they relate to our democracy.

Truth is something that is provable through evidence, facts, or lived experience. Truth is important to us both as individuals and as a society. For individuals, being truthful helps us grow and mature and learn from our mistakes. And for society, truthfulness makes social bonds of trust, reliance, and security possible. Lying and hypocrisy break these social bonds.

The importance of telling the truth in humanistic traditions goes back to the time of the Greeks, the Renaissance, the Haskalah, and other great moments of scientific and philosophic enlightenment. I wish that truth-telling was also part of the spirit of our times, but the reality is, that we are living in a period of "fact fabrication." For many people in our country and across the planet, the path to truth is hazy at best, vanished at worst.

- I am thinking of those who are anti-vaxxers who believe that vaccines may cause autism or death, despite scientific evidence that explicitly contradicts this.
- I am thinking of those who are Holocaust deniers, despite archives of evidence and the 6 million plus lives that were lost.
- I am thinking of the damage to our planet because climate change is thought to be a hoax or a natural occurrence, when we have scientific evidence that human activities resulting in

greenhouse gas emissions have caused 100% of the climate warming observed since 1950  
(Source: UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's fifth assessment report).

Many of these issues impact our lives in overarching, not terribly personal ways. But the impact of the wide distribution of alternative facts and lies related to the worldwide pandemic is an actual modern plague affecting each and every one of us – sometimes with the greatest possible cost. Would any of us, in our wildest dreams, have anticipated a pandemic of COVID's proportions resulting in the deaths of nearly 200,000 people in the US, largely due to the double talk and incompetence of our government not taking the virus seriously? Or understanding its seriousness, but trying to cover it up? Why do I say that? Well, how about the constant barrage of misinformation from fake news agencies, and social media posts claiming:

- That the pandemic is a hoax perpetrated by a political party or others who think that the Jews and Chinese colluded to release the COVID-19 virus to an unwitting population for world domination - False;
- That wearing masks actually causes more dangerous illnesses than COVID – False;
- That perhaps COVID positive people can gain benefits by irradiating their bodies with UV light, or injecting disinfectant or bleach in their blood stream. Not only false, but fatal.

What would happen if we abandoned the scientific method in dealing with a plague? As crazy as it seems to ask that question, *here we are*. Our policy makers are not listening to – and are working to undermine and disparage – our nation's highest scientists and public health officials. They are turning to those who will parrot their misinformation rather than learning from those who can save our lives.

We are in an election season, so I want to make it clear that I am not making a candidate endorsement. However, I am also here to remind each and every one of us, that we cannot keep silent when we face the slaughter of truth at the hands of our leaders – any leaders.

Now all administrations (federal, state, local, and university) and all political parties, use data and omit data to sway constituencies. That is part of the way they appeal to and convince people of the validity of their claims. But as citizens, we have a responsibility to do our homework, learn the facts, and speak truth to power when we find that lies are being presented as truths.

Previously, I mentioned that I believe that truthfulness makes social bonds possible. Truthfulness builds trust, fosters commitment, and makes people feel secure that they can share of themselves. Truthfulness helps maintain social cohesion and allows us to consider other ideas and follow societal norms when we might not completely agree. Truth allows us to come together and commit to a greater good.

For me, the crisis of our national identity has brought into sharp focus, the undermining of our most sacred national value – *E pluribus unum*...out of many, one. It defines our founding leaders' determination to

create a single nation from a collection of - arguably diverse states with different thoughts on freedoms and values. *E pluribus unum*...out of many, one.

The story of our nation is one of dichotomies – federal and states’ rights, freedom and slavery, Native Americans and immigrants (and let us remember that each one of us or our families arrived on these shores as immigrants). All these and many more dichotomies make up the story of our nation. And yet our differences contribute to our shared commitment to democracy, opportunity, freedom of expression, and equality. The unique experiences and struggles that brought us (or our ancestors) to this land contribute to our love of democracy. This is true for us generally as Americans and specifically as Jews.

Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, talks about Jews as being “Proudly particularist and passionately universalist.” Hirschfield claims that dual commitments are hard-wired into Jews. However, the concept of being both *tied to our uniqueness but wanting to pursue the greater good*, has become increasingly difficult for many of us to honor simultaneously. According to Hirschfield, the duality of being both particular and universal, impacts everything from how people express opinions regarding the US president, to Israel’s nation-state law, to what counts as legitimate dissent from well-meaning people, to our most fundamental sense of connection to those who differ from us, and what place we think such people deserve in our communities and our country.

Today, the people of this country are frustrated, filled with mistrust, and angry. This isn’t a completely new phenomena in our nation....there has been rising frustration, mistrust, and anger in the past. In my lifetime alone there has been the anti-war movement, the fight for civil rights, Me too, Black Lives Matter, the ebb and flow of anti-Semitism, xenophobia and more. At times in our nation’s history the people’s frustration and anger have been drivers of change and moved the needle on the national conversation toward a more just and equal world. But today, it feels as though we have stopped listening and working toward the greater good, that this path has been institutionalized within our federal government and is destroying our democracy.

Why are we largely failing to make any real improvements when most decent people lament this circumstance? According to Rabbi Hirschfield, it is because complaining is not a strategy for change. “If anything, it is a strategy for *not* changing — for helping us to feel good about feeling bad and substituting that helplessness for actually making real change in our culture.”

But the High Holidays are all about change, and the renewal that comes from the reflection and resolve to do better. We can stop complaining and wringing our hands and build better alternatives that honor both our uniqueness and our recognition that there is more to us than that which divides us. Finding the balance between the universal and the particular, between honoring the past and working for change, is what defines Rosh Hashanah and drives us inward to rediscover our best selves.

Our tradition gives us a yearly opportunity redress wrongs, reset our course, and act on our universal humanity. We live in an increasingly polarized world, pitting citizens against citizens, natives against immigrants, and people of religious faith against atheists and against each other. Rosh Hashanah

challenges us to act, to make changes in our lives and our communities, in order to strengthen them all. Rabbi Hirschfield reminds us, “The holiday invites us to write the next chapters in our stories — personal, American, Jewish, and more — with pride in our unique experiences, and a deep sense of what binds us all together.”

So, what can we do? We can commit to renewal, to change, to being part of the solution.

Each of us must fact check all the things we share with others -- in person and on social media.

We must prioritize listening. Yes, there are people who will fundamentally disagree with you and you may never convince them of your position, but you owe it to yourself and to them to try to understand what they are saying. Secular Humanistic Jews believe that differences make us stronger as a people. As much as we sometimes wish everyone agreed with us, we seek to be the bridge builders. It is sometimes through disagreement and conflict that we gain better understanding of our own position and those of others. Understanding other people’s world view demonstrates an understanding of the humanity in each of us. And a willingness to “hear people out,” builds trust.

And finally, there is one more thing we can do....VOTE. No matter how difficult they make it for us, VOTE! Vote for candidates who tell the truth. Vote for candidates who believe in science, vote for candidates who believe we are stronger as a people when diversity is supported. Our nation and our policy makers need to represent and support our diversity if we want to avoid living in the world that George Orwell imagined and that crushed the breath out of George Floyd and so many others.

It’s time for all of us to stand up in defense of the truth, to speak truth to power, to fight *for* those who tell the truth and to *be* truth-tellers ourselves. Let us proclaim we are stronger as a people when we uphold the unique gifts each of us has to offer and let us use our unique gifts for the greater good. Let’s do this *now*, so that a year from now, when another Rosh Hashanah comes around, we can look back with pride at the changes we’ve brought forth rather than have to forgive ourselves for what we did not try to do.

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*The ideas presented in this Rosh Hashanah address were inspired by conversations with Rabbi Jeffrey Falick, of the Birmingham Temple and the work of Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, co-president of Clal-the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership.*