

Kol Nidre Remarks September 15, 2021

Good Evening and Shana Tova.

Thank you Rabbi Kramer for allowing me to share some reflections on behalf of Jewish Federation.

In the coming weeks and months, I look forward to sharing with you specifics about numbers and dollars and details about the great impact of Federation programs.

But tonight, as we enter this solemn holiday, I want to share some broader, existential thoughts about the importance of Jewish life and Jewish community.

Throughout this pandemic I have found myself frequently asking myself the perennial question of why would a just, loving, merciful God allow for such suffering.

Like so many of you, I consume news article after news article, story after story to keep up with the latest on the virus and what different medical experts and public health officials are saying about it.

Yet no amount of news or data or charts could answer the theological question about why God would allow for this to happen.

In hopes of finding some explanations, I have found myself Googling that question and flipping through the pages of the Hebrew Study Bible that I keep on my nightstand.

I came across verse after verse from the Torah and the Prophets warning of disease and plagues, especially when the Israelites betrayed God.

Did all of this mean history is repeating itself? What could we learn from these Biblical stories? Was God punishing us?

With no authority to answer these myself, I posed this question to several religious leaders.

Their unequivocal answer was it is impossible for us as humans to know why certain tragedies like this happen and we cannot determine which to attribute to God's wrath and which are just the result of natural consequence or disaster or human misconduct.

They advised that what we can do as humans, with our free will, is to decide how we respond to such suffering and reflect and learn what we can do better moving forward.

The shining example can come from Dr. Taylor Nichols, a Jewish emergency room doctor in California.

A critically ill patient with COVID arrived by ambulance to his emergency room and the patient asked Dr. Nichols not to let him die.

As he began to prepare to treat the patient as he did all of the others suffering from COVID, he noticed something different about this man lying before him.

The patient's skin was covered in Nazi tattoos, including a large swastika on his chest.

Dr. Nichols reached into the deepest depths of his reservoir of goodness and compassion and mercy and he did all that he could to save the man's life.

Many of us will not be confronted with such a trying and profound moral challenge as Dr. Nichols.

But, during Yom Kippur, we can reflect on how well we have lived out Jewish values and represented ourselves as Jews.

It understandable that we may have not been as involved with Jewish life during these times of COVID – especially with limited programming and most of it virtual, on top of the other demands and constraints on our time and attention.

But Jewish life cannot be taken for granted. It is not a given and it never has been.

Our history has always been one of whether we respond as our ancestors did with “Hinei”—“here I am”—ready to serve, ready to give, ready to do what is needed.

At times, it may be tempting to become complacent— I know I am guilty of that. So here is a little Jewish guilt to remind us of why we must recommit this year to Jewish life.

There are at least 49 documented attempts since 733 BCE that despots and tyrants and regimes have persecuted us and tried to wipe us from existence.

Since the Holocaust, the world Jewish population has been shrinking and is now only about 0.002% of all humans.

As the late Rabbi Emil Fackenheim, who was arrested by the Nazis during Kristallnacht, yet eventually escaped Germany, once said, we must not grant Hitler a posthumous victory.

The only way to deny him that is to proudly embrace Jewish life and identity.

While we enjoy much privilege and freedom in this great country that we live in, we need not look any farther than the doors of our congregation here and others throughout the country to see the police presence that has become a necessary constant at our shuls to keep a watchful eye from those seeking to hurt us or commit acts of vandalism and destruction.

The images of men at the United States Capitol just this year wearing shirts that said “6 million wasn't enough” should haunt all of us and is living proof that people still wish our death.

In additional cause for concern, just this past summer, parents in Mountain Brook demanded the end of teacher training from the Anti-Defamation League—which Federation as long supported— which was adopted after videos surfaced last year of anti-Semitic incidents by students in the district.

As if that were all not enough for one year, we have politicians exploiting the Holocaust to try and twist our history to justify their political agendas.

The positive news is that as Jews we know what we need to do in response.

First, to the extent one is capable, we can be generous not just in times of crisis, but as a regular habit.

In fact, one study by philanthropic experts argues that people’s level of empathy and therefore charitable giving ebbs and flows, rising when crises occur.

Let us prove this study wrong and do what we can to give generously and not wane in our empathy for those in need, especially Jewish causes here and abroad.

Second, we must speak out and condemn any incidents and uses of anti-Semitism or attempts to exploit the Holocaust.

Eric Fingerhut, the CEO of the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) condemned the "repeated use of Nazi imagery to discuss public health issues" and he said it is "outrageous, offensive and unacceptable. Jewish Federations are working hard to secure Jewish communities facing rising antisemitism across the country, and this kind of rhetoric only adds fuel to the fire."

Further, we must continue to engage in efforts to promote Holocaust education and teach tolerance.

Third, we must remain steadfast in our support of Israel. It is our homeland and safe haven and we must never take its existence for granted.

Fourth, we must be as united as possible as a people.

We are one big Jewish family. And like any family, we may have different views on certain issues and different ideas and approaches. We can be frustrated, annoyed, and disagree at times, but ultimately we must stick together.

After years of political discord in Israel, political leaders from across the ideological spectrum there are encouraging unity. In fact, both Prime Minister Neftali Bennett, who is to the political right, and President Isaac Herzog, who is to the left, are warning about the perils of polarization.

They have both spoken passionately about wanting all Israelis to watch a film called “The Legend of Destruction” as a cautionary tale which tells the story of how the Romans took advantage of Jewish infighting in 66 A.D and as a result conquered Jerusalem.

As Jews, we continue to have too many enemies and threats. We are stronger when we are united.

And lastly, in addition to generosity, speaking out and educating, supporting Israel, and uniting, the best way we can respond to all of the hardship and suffering is by trying to be as fundamentally good individuals as possible.

In her dairy, Anne Frank wrote that she believes “despite everything people are good at heart.”

It ceases to amaze me that surrounded by such evil and suffering she still felt that way. Yet that was the nature of her soul.

During these times of challenge and turmoil it is tempting to think that perhaps Anne Frank’s assessment of humanity was wrong.

But Rabbi Zalman Shmotkin, the Executive Director of Chabad’s website, encourages us to remember that we can keep the memories of passed ones alive by asking “What’s the person’s continuing impact on this world and what can we learn from them their lives to apply to our own?”

The continuing impact and life of Anne Frank and countless Jews throughout history teaches us to maintain hope in the face of despair. To see the goodness in the world and in one another when evil seeks to dominate, and to live out that goodness by being kind and gentle and compassionate and caring and loving towards one another.

On behalf of the Jewish Federation of Central Alabama, may we all be sealed in the book of life for a year of hope, a year of seeing and doing goodness, and a year of choosing Jewish life.

Shana Tova.