



Rosh Hashanah II Sermon – 5779

by Rabbi Zimbalist

Shanah Tovah and Gut Yontif! I stumbled across a thought-provoking picture on the internet. It was in black and white, and a little out of focus. It showed a white police officer kneeling down in front of a young black boy. Both of them were looking down. The caption told a very short story. It read, “While taking a routine vandalism report at an elementary school, an officer was interrupted by a little boy about six years old. Looking up and down at his uniform, he asked, ‘Are you a cop?’

‘Yes,’ he replied and continued writing the report.

‘My mother said if I ever needed help I should ask the police. Is that right?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ he told him.

‘Well, then,’ he said as he extended his foot towards the officer, ‘would you please tie my shoe?’”

If you hadn’t heard that story before, how many of you thought it would end that way? What a difference it would make if today’s world could be more like that picture and situations were viewed through a lens of kindness and compassion, rather than a lens of suspicion and skepticism. Imagine turning on the evening news and, through a lens of hope and optimism, learning of all the good things that happened in the world that day. Through a lens of acceptance, we could see people helping people regardless of race, gender or sexual orientation. Through a lens of understanding, we could watch people resolve their differences by listening to each other and working together. And through a lens of peace, we could witness different nations existing harmoniously utilizing the art of communication and diplomacy to remain safe and secure. Those lenses exist. And they are attainable. Our challenge today during the High Holidays lies in polishing the glass of the different lenses through which we view the world, to better see each other and understand ourselves.

When we think about glass, lenses are probably not the first thing that comes to mind. Perhaps it’s more apt to associate the word “glass” with windows – something we utilize to see others and the world around us, but not necessarily ourselves. All of us look through windows all of the time. In fact, I suspect that very few of us like to spend time in places that don’t have windows. Through windows, we can watch the sun shine from a bright blue sky, or the rain fall from the clouds, or the wind blowing in the trees, or the leaves change colors throughout the seasons. While those images recall some of the natural beauty and wonders of our world, we also find ourselves looking at other people through windows. And just as windows provide us with the safety and security needed to look at the natural beauty of the world, we must remember that they are transparent and affords those at whom we are looking the opportunity to look right

back at us. And just as we might not like what we see, they too might not like what they see when they see us.

Prior to September 11, 2001, some of us may have had the opportunity to sit atop the World Trade Center and dine at Windows on the World – a complex of different dining venues on the 106th and 107th floors of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. That morning, my cousin Eric – just a few years older than me – was at a breakfast meeting there. And right around the time he left for his meeting, I left for school. I had just begun my final year of rabbinical school at the Jewish Theological Seminary. I was living in Teaneck, New Jersey and it was my turn to drive carpool. I got in my car and drove a few blocks to pick up my friends Bob and Wendy Gamer, and then we headed across the George Washington Bridge into Manhattan. Around 8:00 a.m., as we were on the Upper Deck of the bridge, Wendy told us to look at the amazing view of the World Trade Center. It was a beautiful day. There were no clouds in the sky. The sun reflected majestically off the Hudson River. And we had a clear view of Lower Manhattan. We had no idea that would be our last view of the Towers and how in just a matter of minutes, so many windows of our world – and our country's world – would be irreparably shattered.

There were 43,600 windows combined in the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center – 43,600 opportunities to view the world around us, to see the diversity, plurality, and liberty – cornerstones of the United States of America and the American people. Yet through those very windows, we were being watched and judged by forces of evil whose actions were guided by a hatred of freedom and democracy, an abhorrence of peace and tolerance, and who despised America and American thoughts, beliefs, values and morals. America is the land of opportunity. The terrorists exploited that concept and, after years of planning, determined that September 11, 2001, would be their opportunity to change America and America's impact on the world.

The Jewish Theological Seminary went on lock down shortly after the second plane, United Airlines flight 175, hit the South Tower. No one knew if other buildings, groups or organizations – inside or outside of Manhattan - were targets. And it was unclear if Jewish organizations could be targets. If that were the case, it wouldn't be the first time that Jewish organizations, or groups, or even the Jewish people as a whole were targeted by terrorists and organizations fueled by hate. Just last week we marked the 46th anniversary of the Munich massacre in which the Palestinian terrorist group Black September took 11 Israel Olympic athletes hostage and then killed them all. And the images of shattered windows and glass of the World Trade Center may have brought to mind memories of Kristallnacht – the night of broken glass – when in November of 1938, Nazi paramilitary forces and anti-Semitic German citizens destroyed over 260 synagogues and several thousand Jewish-owned businesses, killing approximately 100 people and injuring thousands more.

And although 6200 miles away from Chicago, we must never forget the threats and challenges that Israel, and our family and friends in Israel, encounter every day. To Israel's north, Lebanon continues to become destabilized by the growing presence of Hezbollah, which now has an estimated 150,000 rockets and missiles aimed at Israel. The demographics of Lebanon are also a destabilizing factor, as it has absorbed approximately 1.5 million Syrian

refugees. And with Syria in shambles, ISIS and al-Qaida have found it a safe-haven for growing their terrorist networks. To the east, Jordan has been facing unprecedented economic and social challenges, having absorbed 1.3 million Syrian refugees. Extremism is on the rise and ideological jihadists are challenging the pro-Western monarchy. To the south, the Sinai Peninsula is becoming increasingly lawless with a growing powerful presence of militant Islamists – including ISIS affiliates. And there has been an increase of domestic terrorism in Egypt which continues to endanger its stability and harm tourism and the economy. And of course, we cannot forget about Iran – the foremost state sponsor of terrorism in the world, which has amassed a stockpile of advanced missiles capable of striking Israel, U.S. forces and other U.S. allies.

Israelis live every day with tangible threats to their homeland security. That wasn't the case in America for quite some time until the attacks of September 11th. So after the lockdown at the Seminary was lifted and the George Washington Bridge was reopened, Bob, Wendy and I left Manhattan and headed back to Teaneck. As we approached the bridge, an officer stopped us, looked carefully at my car and asked us several questions. He then told us to drive as quickly and safely as possible across the bridge. We did. And sadly, that trip across the bridge was as memorable, if not more memorable, than the one we made about 10 hours earlier. Looking down the Hudson, all we could see and imagine was death, destruction and devastation. The car next to us was covered with ash, as was the driver who had blood across his brow. My cousin Eric would never make it out of the North Tower and not return home to his wife and infant daughter. And as we crossed over into New Jersey, all I could see in my rearview mirror was the dark, frightening cloud of debris that was looming over Lower Manhattan.

Mirrors are similar to windows in the sense that they are both made of glass; however, mirrors allow us to see only in one direction – either at what is behind us or back at ourselves. So perhaps both images are apropos for us to consider today during this high holy day season. Before we can look through a window at the year ahead, we must carefully look at ourselves with a mirror, and ask do we like what we see? Do we see more than just our physical reflection? If our reflection only reveals our physical traits and we base our self-assessment solely on that, how are our mirrors different from another person's window? Maybe a better question to ask ourselves is "who" rather than "what" do we see when we look into a mirror? Does our image reflect a person who is beautiful both on the inside and the outside? Does our quality of character need improvement? Do we like who we see, or should we be bold and shatter the glass reflecting the image of who we are right now, in an attempt to discover who we can be in the year ahead?

In the Mishna from Tractate Keilim, we learn about impurity and different materials, objects and vessels that can become impure. The Mishna teaches (2:1): *Klei zichuchit – Glass utensils – P'shuteihen t'horin u'mikableihen t'mei'im. Glass utensils that are flat are pure, but glass utensils that are concave are impure.* In other words, flat glass utensils, like knives, cannot become impure because they are not made to hold other substances. They can move substances and substances can rest on them, but their intrinsic design is not made to hold anything. However, receptacles made of glass – like a spoon or a cup – can become impure through the substances that they hold at any given time. And while on the surface this teaching might seem obscure, its message is quite timely and applicable to our holiday season.

Among the many images that our high holiday liturgy uses to describe the relationship between God and people is one in which the Divine is an artisan and human beings are His art. God is described as a potter, a mason, a blacksmith and a smelter. And God is even described as a glazier – an artist who melts, blows and shapes glass into beautiful works of art. Applying the lesson from the Mishna that flat glass vessels are innately pure, while curved shapely glass vessels are inherently impure, we can conclude that people as God’s creations – with all of our unique shapes, sharp edges and flaws – are naturally impure and imperfect by design. Just knowing and accepting that with regard to ourselves should help us when looking carefully and critically at both ourselves and each other.

We must remember – God created us inherently flawed and sees us exactly as we are. And year after year, we pray that God is merciful to us despite our imperfections. In the New Year, let’s challenge ourselves to mirror more of God’s merciful attributes and be more patient, tolerant and kind. Let’s create an environment where honor and respect frame the windows through which we disagree, and thereby allow us to learn and grow from our differences. And once we do that, we can begin this new year seeing ourselves and everyone around us differently than before. And who knows, maybe our new personal and collective vision will be one that sees things through an entirely different lens – a lens of greater love and a lens of greater peace.

*Zochreinu l’Chaim – May God remember us and see us fit for another year of life.
Melech Chafetz b’Chaim – May God who rejoices in life bless with eternal life those who were taken from us in acts of terror and hate. V’katveinu b’seder ha’Chaim – May we and all whom we love in America, Israel and around the world be inscribed in the Book of Life. L’ma’anicha Elokim Chaim – And may God bless us with a happy, healthy, peaceful and prosperous New Year.*