

CHANGING THE CATEGORIES

Shana Tova!

For those of you who are hoping that I will speak about the upcoming election this morning, let me assure you that by the end of the sermon, your hopes will come true. For those of you who are praying that I won't speak about the upcoming election this morning, let me assure you that by the end of the sermon, your prayers will be answered.

How is it possible that two groups with directly opposing desires will listen to the same sermon and come away with opposite understandings of what was said? If I could answer that question, I would be able to explain American politics!

I will not speak about the presidential candidates and the election today, other than to urge every one of you to vote. It is not merely a civic responsibility; it is a holy act. Men and women died so that we might have the right to vote. We sanctify their sacrifice by exercising that right.

I won't speak about the election. I do want to say something about the State of the Union. Each January, the President begins the State of the Union address something like this: "My fellow Americans, I am pleased to say that the State of our Union is..." You fill in the adjective. Strong. Healthy. As far back as I can remember, no matter what was happening in the country, the adjective has always been positive. Politically, I suppose it has to be. If they could say how they really felt, I wonder what adjectives the various Presidents would have liked to use. I wonder if I could repeat them from the pulpit. If you were to give that speech today, what adjective would you use to describe the State of the Union?

My own answer to that question is colored by the reading I've been doing this year. I've been reading about human origins, and how our modern behavior is shaped by our early evolution. One of the topics that interested me is the

biological basis for tribalism, and how it has led us to look at almost anything and immediately divide it into two categories. You know: there are two kinds of people in the world – dog people and cat people. Apple people and Android people. People who squeeze the toothpaste roll and people who roll it neatly. Those who think that there are two kinds of people in the world, and those who don't.

It turns out that although in theory we are all smart enough to know better, evolution has primed us to think in binary: us and them. In the world of our hunter/gatherer ancestors, belonging to a group was a matter of life and death. And the only way to have a group is to define who is in and who is out. There are, after all, only two kinds of people: those who are like us, and those who aren't. Even as groups learned to cooperate, and civilization grew, people still defined themselves as one or the other, as in or out. A member of this caste or not. A citizen of this empire or that one. Democrat or Republican.

And in order to make that distinction meaningful, we have to define our group as somehow better than the other. We're good, they are bad. We're righteous, they are evil. We like to think that we have grown past this, sometimes it feels that way. But it turns out that it is surprisingly easy to take any group of people and quickly divide them into two tribes. Here's one simple example.

When I'm leading services on Wednesday afternoons with the sixth and seventh graders, it's difficult to get them started. They've had a long day sitting in school. Now they're sitting in the sanctuary, and the rabbi wants them to sing. It usually starts badly. But I can use their innate tribalism to motivate them. I might stop the singing and say, "That was pretty bad, but I know some of you can do it. Sixth grade, let me hear just you." They sing. And then I say, "Okay. Seventh grade, can you do any better?" Well, they're not about to be beaten by a bunch of sixth graders. It's amazing how well they respond. I give the Sixth grade another

chance. Suddenly, kids are singing at the top of their lungs. It might not be for the right reason, at first. But that usually changes. As soon as I tap into “us” and “them,” their energy level spikes. I can accomplish the same thing by starting with the boys, and then going to the girls. In no time at all, they stop being one group - the Wednesday afternoon Hebrew school students – and become two competing tribes.

Of course, by the time services are over, everyone forgets about it, and they go back to who they are – students at TBA. They have much more in common than not: They’re all Jewish students living in Westchester, studying Hebrew, working toward a bar or bat mitzvah.

But by focusing on one trait, one difference, I could get them to immediately see themselves as two separate tribes.

Actually, that’s not exactly what I did. I didn’t focus on a difference between them. I focused on what the members of one sub-group had in common with each other, and did the same thing with the other sub-group. All 6th graders v. 7th graders. Boys v. girls. Their brains did the rest for them. I’m part of this group, and we’re different than that group. That’s all they needed to automatically jump to a competition between us and them.

This can be done at any size of group, and with these kinds of non-ideological categories it’s easy enough to have people quickly see themselves as part of a new sub-group that now includes the folks who used to be “them.” I could change the school dynamic by referring to those kids not as 6th v. 7th, but as the Wednesday afternoon Hebrew school group. Suddenly the kids who were in two smaller tribes are now part of one bigger tribe, as long as I pit them against another tribe, like the Monday afternoon Hebrew school students. Or I could refer to all of them as the TBA religious school, and have a competition with the Woodlands religious school. As long as I can get them to think of themselves as part of the group, I can

have them compete against anyone who is not part of the group. It's hard-wired. It's why color-war at camp works. And it's also why real war is so easy to ignite.

The example I gave is innocuous; the 6th and 7th graders don't bear any real animosity towards each other. And that example is also fluid; since they aren't based on a strongly held ideology, the students can move in and out of different groups I create pretty easily.

In the larger world, the divisions are not so ephemeral. We tend to be emotionally invested in those differences, so it can be much harder to move the boundaries, to shift people in our minds from them to us. Race; religion; nationality; so much of our identity is tied up in those categories that it's difficult to make the leap in perspective. Evolution has made us cling to our tribes, and the stronger we feel about our group, the more we tend to demonize the other group. Black and white; Protestant and Catholic; Democrat and Republican.

And though humanity has certainly gotten better, I think that our tendency to see things as binary remains firmly entrenched; it's just the groups that have changed. For Americans, Jews were once "them" but now are part of "us". Asians were once "them," and now they're us. During the revolutionary war, thanks to the Hessian mercenaries, Germans were them. After the war they were us. Then, during WWI and WWII they were them, and now, as NATO allies, they're us again. The good news is that we are able to re-categorize. We are able to move people in our minds from them to us. The bad news is that we generally only do that when we can find another group to think of as "them." Today we speak of legal and illegal...Or Hispanic and Anglo... or Muslim and non-Muslim. If the past is any indication, those categories too will disappear, replaced by others.

And we don't just do it with race or nationality. We also do it with ideas. We believe this and you believe that. Two different groups.

So is it hopeless? I don't think so. It's difficult to fight evolution. But we can outsmart it. The way to move past the divisiveness is not to eliminate all differences. The way to do it is to accept the differences, while also broadening the categories. We can keep the groups, while at the same time seeing ourselves as part of something larger. A local example: think about Temple Beth Abraham. We have our own division here: Reform and Conservative. Many dual-ideology congregations are the result of a merger, and there these two categories – Reform and Conservative - are the prism through which all else is viewed. There is animosity and suspicion that “they” are going to take advantage of “us”. The beauty at TBA is that, as far as Reform and Conservative go, we very quickly were able to move past that stage. There are still groups, there are still differences, but folks who belong here speak about worshipping in one style or the other while at the same time seeing beyond those boundaries and thinking of ourselves as members of the larger group known as Temple Beth Abraham. Our vision is of what unites us rather than what divides us.

That is the type of vision which is missing in much of American public life. Earlier I asked you what adjective you would use to describe the State of the Union. I would use “polarized.” The word comes from science, and speaks of opposites – the positive and negative poles of a magnet, for example. The most famous opposite poles? The North and South poles. At opposite ends of the earth. As far apart on the planet as you can get. And yet, interestingly, despite their physical distance, they have a lot in common. They are difficult to reach. They are generally inhospitable. They are cold. Things tend to get frozen into place. The perfect metaphor for what is going on in America.

You could each come up with a long list of issues that polarize our country: taxes, trade, immigrants, refugees. In order to do something about any of those issues, we need to move away from the poles. In the past, I would have said we

need to seek compromise. But in American public life the word “compromise” seems to have become a synonym for weakness and caving-in. So instead, of compromising, let’s speak of re-categorizing.

We will never fully do away with tribes. We like being part of a group. Of many different groups. We like rooting for one team against the other. We like competition, and it can be useful and healthy. There are real and legitimate differences in beliefs and ideologies that would be foolish to try to paper over in an attempt to just get along. At the same time, human beings are more than our biology, more than our evolutionary wiring. If that were not true, we would not be sitting here today, on the first day of a New Year, thinking about what we’ve done wrong, and how we can be better. It is precisely because we have free will that we can overcome some of our innate tendencies. Judaism teaches us that the difference between humanity and the other animals is that, unlike the animals, we do not have to be ruled by instinct.

“Thou shalt not murder.” Why not? Because in the world of the hunter gatherer, when our group came across another group, killing them might have made the most sense. As society became interconnected it no longer did. But evolution didn’t keep up. So we have a rule to help us overcome our instinct to be violent.

“Thou shalt not steal.” Why not? Because in a time of scarcity, the best way to keep my family alive might have been to take from your family. But as society grew, we found other ways to help care for those in need. So we push back against our first instinct.

“Do not bear false witness.” Why not? Because when our human forebears were first running into each other, lying to the other group may have been prudent. Deceit was a survival mechanism. We’re still hard-wired to lie to protect ourselves. Ask a three-year old, “Did you break that?” The instinctive answer is

“no.” We have to train ourselves to overcome our evolution, because in order for us to successfully live in society, people need to trust our word.

In the same way, Judaism teaches us that we do not have to see the world only as us and them. Yes, we Jews are a tribe. And yes, it is good and important to sometimes focus on what makes us different than others. We should treasure and celebrate what makes us unique. And yet our heritage teaches us that at the very same time that we are celebrating our peoples’ uniqueness, we also have to see ourselves as part of other, larger groups. And more importantly, that we must recognize that those we see as part of “them” can also sometimes be part of “us.”

The Torah reminds us repeatedly to love the stranger as ourselves. Why? Because we were strangers in Egypt. Even as it exhorts us to remember that we are Israelites, and to not imitate other nations, it asks us to see ourselves as part of another group, the group known as strangers. Stay away from the Moabites, the Midianites, the Hivites, the Jebusites – you are Israel and they are the other. But, if there is a Moabite stranger in your midst – love him as you love yourself, because you too were once strangers in a strange land. As part of one category –Moabites- he is “them;” excluded and even hated. As part of a different category, one that we’re also in – strangers – he is now “us,” and he is loved. Nothing has changed except the category in which we place him.

The Talmud says that the schools of Hillel and Shammai disagreed on almost every point of Jewish law. They fought and argued bitterly for two centuries. And yet the Talmud makes a point of telling us that the members of those schools socialized and dined together, and that their children married one another. Political parties have always been intensely partisan. But in the past, their adherents could still have dinner together. That used to be the case in Washington, but it happens less and less. Perhaps Democrats and Republicans, who have important and

legitimate differences, can learn once again to maintain those differences while also seeing themselves as part of the larger group known as Americans.

Why am I telling you all of this on Rosh Hashanah? Because Judaism has something vital to offer the country at this moment in its history.

It is said of the Temple in Jerusalem that its windows were wide on the outside, but tapered to narrow slits on the inside. Why, the sages asked, would it be designed in such a way that limited the amount of light coming in? The answer is that the windows were not meant to bring light in, but rather to allow the light of what was happening inside to shine out to all the world.

The idea of a synagogue is not to be a replica of what life is like on the outside. Rather, what we do in here is meant to be a model for everyone else. It shouldn't be that we learn out there how to behave in here. It should be that we learn in here how to behave out there. We don't bring the polarization in here; we take our ability to move beyond it out there. America needs - the world needs the teachings that Judaism offers, the teachings of *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam*; the command that we should take care of the poor and the widow and the orphan because they are not the other, they are part of us. America needs - the world needs the teaching that we should love the stranger because while they may be part of another ethnic group they are also part of our group, because we too know what it is like to be strangers. The message of Judaism - the message of Temple Beth Abraham - is the opposite of polarization: it is a message of people from many different communities, with different styles and different ideas all building a sacred community together. It is a message not of us and them, of scarcity and fear of the other; it is a message of generosity and inclusiveness and of hope.

When we were discussing as a congregation whether or not to do away with dues, the greatest barrier was fear. Fear of what would happen. Fear of how everyone would respond. If we don't have dues, how will we know who is in and

who is out? More to the point, if the line between being a member or not is so easy, if the bar is so low, if people don't have a strong feeling of being in, why would they give? And we made a conscious decision to not be frozen by our fear. We decided instead to hope for generosity. To expect generosity. And you responded magnificently and magnanimously. We will need to keep tweaking, keep improving. But we did great. And I am convinced that it's for three reasons: first, because when people believe inside that something is important, they put their money where their heart is. We saw it in donations and we're seeing it as well in our capital campaign, which is closing in on 3 million dollars. Second, because although it's definitely faster and easier to motivate people by highlighting the baser evolutionary instinct of us and them, in the end people feel better and behave better when you appeal to their higher aspirations. And finally and most importantly, the new donations system works because when you expect the best of people that is usually what you get.

This is an amazing synagogue community. We do wonderful things for one another. We continue to build TBA into a place that touches your heart and your soul, one that helps you deepen your sense of life's meaning. It is a place in which study and learning is a lifelong process, where we cherish our children and value the wisdom and life lessons of our elders. It is a place which embraces acts based upon the prophetic values of creating a just society and protecting the most vulnerable among us. It is a place in which our *simchas* are happier because we share them, and our grief is softened because we do not bear it alone. And Temple Beth Abraham is a place in which you feel that you are connected to something that is ancient, that is modern and that will live on into the future.

Just think what America would be like if we would bring those teachings out from here into the world. Just think how we could reduce the polarization we encounter not by papering over differences and learning to play nice, but by

expanding our definition of the group. Not by merely tolerating the other, but by realizing that they are really us.

As we begin a New Year, may we learn to look at one another with new eyes. May our minds be open to new ways of thinking, and may we focus more on what we all have in common. And may each of us take the values of our Temple family and share them with the world. Amen.