

# SERMON – ROSH HASHANAH MORNING 2019/5780

Rabbi David Edleson

## If Not Now, When?

What a year it has been!

- Last Rosh Hashanah, I had just started as the rabbi for this community.
- In a month, it will be one year since the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting, and six months from the Poway synagogue shooting.
- We've seen a precipitous rise in white-supremacist organizations, something Prof. Katherine Belew of the University of Chicago has shown has been in the making since the end of the Vietnam war.
- We've seen a spike in anti-Semitic incidents; in 2019 so far more than half of the reported hate-crimes in New York City have been against Jews.
- In Europe, it is getting so bad that Jews can't wear kippot, and are told not to show outward signs of being Jewish if they want to be safe.
- In Britain, we've seen systemic anti-Semitism at the highest levels of the Labor party.
- And on the left in this country, we have seen a disturbing rise in anti-Semitic views, some blatant and some hiding under the guise of anti-Zionist, so that many of us feel we have to choose between being involved in progressive causes and being involved in the Jewish community.
- We've seen the conflict at the Gaza Border escalate.
- We've seen anti-Semitism tear apart the Women's March, tear apart progressive organizations, and tear apart women in this congregation.
- We see so many mass shootings we can't even remember,
- and then there is, well, the current administration and its attitude, an administration that is itself symptom of a much larger move toward nationalism and authoritarianism.
- And none of that is to mention the stress and turmoil in our own private lives.

So let's just take a moment and recognize just how much we have lived through this year, how fast things have come at us, and how exhausting it is to keep engaged and not just bury our heads in the sand in the name of self-care.

God bless us, every one!

It feels good to be together after the year we've had.

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As I said last night, we seem to live in a time of disconnection, disconnection from everything but the internet and our screens.

As Johann Hari points out in his book, [Lost Connections: Why You're Depressed and How to Find Hope](#), the staggering rise in the levels of anxiety and depression in our society are not so much medical, as metaphysical. We have become, he argues, increasingly disconnected from nature, from one another, from a sense of a better future, from the sorts of values that can sustain us.

He is not alone. Books like Neil Postman's [Bowling Alone : The Collapse and Revival of American Community](#) and MIT's Sherry Turkle's book [Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other](#), both document the precipitous decline in our social spheres. People are not joining churches and synagogues, but they are also not joining civic organizations like the Kiwanis, the Rotary, and in general, social organizations are struggling.

In many ways, this is the natural extension of individualism. Western culture since the Enlightenment, has taught a gospel of the individual. As my teacher Dr. Micah Goodman at the Hartmann Institute in Jerusalem said:

*Modern individualist culture has given up ten commandments for two commandments, –*

1. *Find yourself.*
2. *Make your own life better.*

He argues that the extreme focus on self has resulted in a collapse, not of faith or of culture, but of meaning in modern Western secular societies, and that we have tried to satisfy this vacuum in meaning with consumerism and compulsive working.

We seem to believe that if we can only get that new thing we will feel ok with our lives. Consumerism seeks to give us a sense of meaning by telling us how things belong to us, of how we have earned them, of how we are in control of our personal lives.

If we just work hard enough, are just organized enough, [Mari Kondo](#)-ed enough, efficient enough, have the right sort of house and the right sort of car, all of which are clean and orderly, and kids that are clean and orderly, then we will be in control and everything will be ok.

But underneath, we are not really so ok.

We work more, we spend more, but something is missing.

That is because human beings don't gain a sense of meaning from things belonging to us.

We gain a sense of meaning from us belonging to something.

We need to belong to a story that is larger than ourselves.

The pressure, in our culture, runs overwhelmingly one way - spend more, work more. We are being propagandized to live in a way that doesn't meet our basic psychological needs – so we are left with a permanent puzzling sense of dissatisfaction.

In this age of consumerism and disconnection, it is particularly sad for me to see people disconnect from Jewish community and from Judaism. Given the very real and palpable rise in anti-Semitism in the US, both on the right and the left, many Jews, particularly younger Jews are choosing to distance themselves from Judaism, to see it as a thing of the past, as something that doesn't speak to their needs, something that is too tribal in an age of global individualism.

Or, they are disconnecting because they don't feel they can continue to be openly Jewish and remain connected to the liberal circles that have been their political and social home for years.

This past year, I have had people tell me that they have stopped wearing their stars of David when they go to political meetings. They have stopped speaking up when someone says something anti-Semitic because they have been silenced and made to feel that as Jews, they are only welcome if they turn their backs on important aspects of their Jewish identity, on Jewish peoplehood, and on hard-earned Jewish power.

Novelist [Dara Horn has pointed out](#) there are two sorts of anti-Semitism - Purim anti-Semites and Hanukkah anti-Semites.

Purim anti-Semites are very open in their hatred for us, and make it clear they want to do us harm. They try to get other non-Jews to join in their conspiracy theory and bigotry. They are easy to recognize. They march with torches.

Hanukkah anti-Semites are very different. They say that they love us, except for our refusal to assimilate, and that if we would just let go of our peoplehood and agree with them about cultural values, then we can not only stay, we can be leaders. Hanukkah anti-Semites use Jews who have joined them as spokespeople to show they can't really be anti-Semitic. They divide us by calling some of us 'good Jews' with "good values" while decrying others of us in extreme terms as symbols of all that is detestable and wrong with society.

It is easy to resist Purim anti-Semites. Hanukkah anti-Semites are much harder because they reach out a hand in friendship if we just agree with them, if we do penance and undergo reeducation so they we learn the error of our ways and of our people.

Sadly, both types of anti-Semites traffic in a ridiculous conspiracy theory, one in which Jews, a tiny percentage of the population, have control over information, over governments, that we are getting away with something nefarious.

*But I don't think anyone should be Jewish because of anti-Semitism.*

We should hold onto Jewish values and traditions because they are complex, profound, and represent millennia of vibrant debate and disagreement.

We should hold onto to Judaism because it offers us a counterbalance to the gospel of individualism and consumerism that permeates our culture.

We should hold onto to our Judaism because it counters disconnection with real community of actual people with shared values and history.

We should lean into Judaism because it counters the message of endless work with the requirement of Shabbat, to remind us that we need rest like we need water. Shabbat that teaches us to unplug, to let go of control, to remember who we are underneath all the drama of our lives. But we have to keep Shabbat for it to have meaning.

We should learn about Judaism because it has complex and varied approaches to spirituality and mindfulness. In India and here, I've met so many Jewish people blissfully chanting in Sanskrit and Pali but who will say they didn't like Hebrew because they didn't understand the words. Judaism offers one of the most ancient, thoughtful, and complex intellectual traditions there is and it is right here if you just lean in.

We should embrace our Judaism because it teaches us that we are never in complete control, but neither are we passive victims to history. It teaches us the value and the limits of commerce. Judaism teaches us to break our addiction to ourselves, and learn to balance our obligations to our well-being with our obligations to community and the larger world.

We should hold onto Judaism because our Jewish heritage gives us the gift of belonging to a story larger than ourselves.

We should lean into Judaism because instead of slogans and bumper stickers, it offers complexity and paradox. It challenges us to balance competing goods. It asks us: "If I not for myself, who will be for me. If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

It has been quite a year, but I hope in this new year, you will consider the words of Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein of the synagogue in Poway, who lost his finger in the shooting while protecting the children, said,

*I pray that my missing finger serves as a constant reminder to me. A reminder that every single human being is created in the image of God; a reminder that I am part of a people that has survived the worst destruction and will always endure; a reminder that my ancestors gave their lives so that I can live in freedom in America; and a reminder, most of all, to never, ever, not ever be afraid to be Jewish.*

*From here on in I am going to be more brazen. I am going to be even more proud about walking down the street wearing my tzitzit and kippah, acknowledging God's presence.*

As Reform Jews we need to find our own way as community to fulfill his call to be more brazen. Like the cantor did by starting to wear a kippah every day since Pittsburgh.

So this Rosh HaShanah, I want you ask you -

*So, in this New year, why not become more involved in the Jewish community? If not now, when?*

A great tradition has been given to us. It is a Tree of Life to those who hold it close. We just have to reach out and grab it. In this New Year, let us put our arms around this community, and this tradition and take our place in keeping this ancient people alive *l'dor va'dor* – from generation to generation.

Ken Yehi Ratzon.

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