

ROSH HASHANAH DAY ONE 2016
BIKINI VS. THE BURKINI

(Read a few segments of current events here from NYT)

In case you haven't noticed, the world has gone completely mad. You might remember the story of Rabbi Nachman of Brezlov that I shared two years ago:

The king's stargazer saw that the grain harvested that year was tainted. Anyone who would eat from it would become insane. "What can we do?" said the king. "Perhaps," said the star gazer, "we should set aside enough grain for ourselves. At least that way we could maintain our sanity." The king replied, "If we do that, *we'll* be considered crazy. If everyone behaves one way and we behave differently, we'll be considered the insane ones.

"Rather," said the king, "I suggest that we too eat from the crop, like everyone else. However, to remind ourselves that we are not normal, we will make a mark on our foreheads. Even if we are insane, whenever we look at each other, we will remember that we are insane!"

We marked our foreheads, determined to retain our sanity in a world gone mad, but it didn't quite work. The grain has taken its toll, and insanity has now become the "new normal." Unlike last year, we do not even flinch at tales of refugees drowning off the Mediterranean coast. The civil war in Syria, which has now taken over 500,000 lives, and displaced over four million people, has become background noise. A day does not go by without a suicide bomber exploding a bar, a wedding party, or an airport. ISIS, constrained somewhat in its land grab for the Caliphate, now targets young Westerners willing to eat a particularly poisonous variety of tainted grain.

And on the political front? The grain is so tainted that the craziness has been "baked in". It is now possible for a presidential candidate to exaggerate wildly, utter defamatory remarks, and evade any semblance of truth. Emails vanish. Russians hack into our data systems. The marks we placed on our foreheads have rubbed away, as we bury our heads in social media looking for the latest political gaff on this alternative reality show. We hear the sounds of the shofar, trying to blast us out of this bad dream, but we are too enmeshed. Much like Alice in Wonderland, we have eaten the tainted cookie and fallen down the rabbit hole. In this crazy, upside down Mad Hatter's universe, the important is unimportant, while the unimportant is very important. And the article of clothing that held our attention all season? It's the Year of the Bathing Suit! Burkini versus Bikini? The world has truly gone mad.

Remember the cartoon character Cathy, where AACK! Cathy had a meltdown every season as she tried to squeeze herself in teensy weensy bikini before the summer diet was complete? In one of her final cartoons, the headline reads:

"After decades of fighting for options that work on real woman's bodies, we finally have another choice in women's swimwear."

Then, there are two images of Cathy emerging from that familiar try-on room. The first is marked “THEN” and we see Cathy in an unflattering bikini, screaming “AACK, I’m showing too much skin”, the second, marked “NOW” shows Cathy in a hideous stripped two piece suit covering her knees crying “AACK! I’m showing too much fabric”.

A headline in the August 28 New York Times reads: “Penalizing women for covering Too Little, and Then too Much.” I think of it as The NYT Swimsuit Issue, Summer 2016. On the right hand side there are two photos, one on top of the other, with the following captions: “From Bikinis to Burkinis” On the top, we see a police officer issuing a woman a ticket for wearing a bikini in July, 1957. The caption at the bottom reads: “August 2016. Armed police officers forced a woman to remove her shirt on a beach in Nice, France last week after a ban on burkinis went into effect”.

Too much skin or too much fabric? In a world of relentless gun violence, a presidential election year when the majority of voters do not want EITHER of the candidates, and a planet continuing to suffer the effects of climate change, why are we so concerned with bathing suits? On the surface, the answer is simple. Culture wars have always been fought over women’s bodies. From abdomens to abortions, its usually men who decide what women can and can not reveal, legislating cultural norms into the regulations of the time.

But the burkini-bikini debate is about much more than simply a women’s right to choose. In its essence, the debate is about FEAR- fear of the “other”, fear of change, fear of loss of power, and ultimately, fear of death. The burkini ban in Cannes comes on the heels of a horrific terrorist attack in Nice a month earlier, carried out not by a woman in a burka, but a man driving a huge cargo truck, killing 86 and wounding over 300 people. Of course the French are afraid, but it is not easy to ban cargo trucks. The burkini ban is really an attempt to separate what is indigenous “French” from what is seen as the invading foreign culture. In a comeback bid, Nicolas Sarkozy, a former President of France, is now running a strong comeback with the statement “The burkini is a political, militant act and must be banned.” For France to remain French, at this point, you have to show some skin.

Fear of the other, the “foreigner” the stranger in our midst, seems to be hard-wired into the human brain. The Torah would not admonish us thirty two times to take care of the “Widow, the orphan and the stranger” if this were our instinctual behavior. “*V’Ahavta l’re’echa c’mochca-* and you will love your neighbor as yourself” we are commanded. (Lev 19:18) But who is our *re’echa*, a word that can mean anyone who is not you-neighbor, or friend or even your enemy. The sage Hillel taught that the phrase meant “What is distasteful to you do not do to another person.”

Fear of the “other”, another person who does not look, or dress, or act exactly like me, has become a dominant theme of the current political debate, both here and in Europe. It is exactly a year since I gave a sermon about the plight of the Syrian refugees headed towards Germany. In that one year, the tide of political favor has turned against Angela

Merkel, who offered a home to over a million refugees. Yes, there were incidents of violence and rape, but primarily the reaction is due to fear that the refugees will undermine the essential character of the German nation. Much of the Western world was stunned when England chose “Brexit”, but the same fears were at play. From the openings salvos of “Mexicans are rapists” to demands for a blockage of all Moslem immigration to the US, this season’s campaign has stoked fear of “the other” as a menace to our American way of life.

Enter the burkini, a prime example of all that is foreign. An eighteen year old Moslem woman describes her burkini as follows: ”There is no shape that it takes on, no existing style that it resembles, and it can be secured only with an array of hooks, straps and elastic bands. It cost over \$100 plus shipping. My latest is Barbie pink”. I am immediately ready to put down my newspaper and call the Fashion Police. “But,” she continues, ” I have worn a hijab, a headscarf, since I was ten. I recognize that it would be contradictory to wear a hijab in the street and a bikini in the pool. I cannot help but feel some empathy for this articulate teenager, for whom the burkini ban says you are unwelcome here, you are a symbol of Islamic extremism, and you can’t even swim in a pool or enjoy a beach day without being watched. Will she become radicalized, perhaps because of that very ban?

Empathy, the ability to acknowledge the pain of others, puts a human face on those who we often dismiss as “other”. Once again, the picture of a five-year-old Syrian child, who looks so much like my grandson, sitting alone in a hospital corridor with a bloody forehead, went viral and broke our hearts. It is much easier to dismiss the Syrian refugee crisis as something that does not concern us when there is no face to the picture.

It is very difficult to empathize with people who we cannot visualize or understand, and who therefore seem strange and foreboding. We may live in a city that is culturally diverse, but often live in “silos” where we interact primarily with those who look much like ourselves. How many of us can honestly say that we have friends who are Muslim? OK, those who said yes are probably doctors. Hospitals here and in Israel are generally safe islands where even people who are “enemies” work together to save lives, often becoming colleagues and friends. I’d like to share a story that I credit to Rob Eshman in the Jewish Journal.

A suicide bomber lives, and opens his eyes in to see concerned faces hovering over him, and a beautiful young woman in white stands by his side. “Am I in heaven?” he asks. “No”. Hadassah!”

It’s true. In the haven of hospital, it is possible to empathize with the human pain of even our enemies.

Xenophobia, an exaggerated fear of “the other” is often a prime tool of politicians seeking to rally voters to their side. In Israel last year, Netanyahu won an election that every Israeli poll predicted that he would lose with the eleventh hour cry: “The Arabs are voting, the Arabs are voting.” Israel was founded as a “Jewish and Democratic” state, and Israeli Arabs have always had the right to vote. But much like many minority segments of the US voting population, they often do not exercise this right, for fear that

their voices won't be heard. On the rumor that Israeli Arabs were flooding the polls, Netanyahu was able to strike terror in the heart of the Jewish majority, who despite their distaste for the government's policies, ultimately voted for Bibi, motivated by fear.

Unfortunately, one does not need to be an Arab to be feared as "other" in Israel. Apart from the now 20% Arab minority, Israel is a nation made up of many Jewish tribes- Secular, Orthodox, Haredi, (ultra-Orthodox) Mizrachi, Ashkenazy, and Sephardi. Each one of these tribes has its own turf, and its own code of dress. Each one fears that the other is out to change and destroy their way of life. The Jews of Jerusalem and the Jews of Tel Aviv seem to live in different countries, and constantly revile each other. We would do well to remember that the sages tell us that it was "senseless hatred of Jew versus Jew, *Sinat Chinam*", that destroyed the Second temple in Jerusalem, sending the Jews in exile for two thousand years.

Sinat Chinam, which can literally be translated as "free floating hatred" of one group of people towards another, is often manipulated by politicians seeking power. Basic fears are heightened and exaggerated until that which is madness- like the extermination of six million Jews in my lifetime- appears to be a necessary by-product of the need to keep the character and identity of a group or a nation inviolate. It's a journey that often begins in small increments. For much of the early 1930's, Jews were allowed to mingle freely with the rest of the German population, with small restrictions: They could not teach in the universities, they could not have health care, nor could they serve in the armed forces, where Jews had been outstanding officers during the First World War. Slowly, their dehumanization devolved to the place where they only could live in ghettos, wore clothing marked by a yellow star, and by 1940 could not own pets- after all, they really weren't human beings, but vermin undermining national character. Many Jews in hiding were given away by the meow of a cat.

How can we observe the Jewish dictate to 'love one's neighbor as oneself' without abandoning the need to protect that self? When are my fears justified, and when are they fomented and exacerbated by those seeking political gain?

Social media, once seen as the panacea by which to pull a fractured world together, has so far proven to be a false prophet. Each niche group can now scream its fears and complaints out to the world with impunity. An Imam in Yemen can reach a disaffected Afghani teenager in New Jersey. A radical Christian preacher in Florida can circulate a cartoon mocking Mohammed and spark a violent reaction half a world away. Each group lobbies for its own cause using *sinat chinan*, the fear of others, as its rallying cry.

On the other hand, social media does enable us to witness events in "real time". We can hear the wife of a black man pulled over by police officers screaming "Don't shoot, he's unarmed!" as bullets ring out in the background. We have all witnessed the *sinat chinam*, senseless hatred in cities across America this summer, black citizens protesting police shootings that disproportionately target our African American population.

I watch, and have empathy for the Black Lives Matter movement. It was only recently that I was able to understand the legitimate fear of an African- American mother that her teenage son could easily lose his life just by walking the streets as a young Black man. In some cases, however, empathy is used as a tool for other political agendas. The BDS movement on college campuses was organized by Palestinian activists to encourage universities to divest, or cancel any investments in the State of Israel. They were able to elicit empathy for the plight of Palestinians, without providing any understanding of the basic right of Israel to exist. The attacks have grown increasingly anti-Semitic over time. In what is now called “intersectionality” on college campuses-“ The enemy of my friend is my enemy”-the Black Lives Matter movement has now linked itself to support of BDS. A recently released platform of principles of BDS included a statement accusing Israel of genocide of the Palestinian people, which is simply untrue. With one stroke, the strong alliance between Jews and African Americans, as exemplified by the solidarity of the Civil rights movement in the days of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, was severed.

And in the midst of all this, we are worried about the amount of fabric in a bathing suit? The Supreme Court of France declared the burkini ban illegal, but only after the summer bathing season had passed. I spent a portion of the summer on the beaches of Tel Aviv, which until now have been fairly neutral turf. In fact, one of the primary designers of the burkini is an Israeli. She sells to Orthodox Jewish women and observant Moslems, the only difference in style being an add-on hood for those observing Moslem sharia law. Orthodox Jewish and Moslem women can be seen bathing in pretty identical outfits on Tel Aviv beaches, floating with an excess of fabric along side bathers whose swimwear is nearly invisible.

The dangers facing Israel, however, are much greater “death by over-or-under exposure”. Tens of thousands of Arab missiles sit on Israel’s borders. ISIS is camped near the border with Syria, a mere stone’s throw from the Golan Heights. Arab women rushing to hospitals to give birth are often detained at checkpoints for fear that a bomb may be hidden inside the voluminous clothing. The burkini seems skimpy by comparison.

When 9/11 happened, I must admit that one of my first reactions was “Oh no, it’s over. Now we Americans will have to face the same fears that Israelis face all the time.” That turned out to be true. We watch our screens helplessly as San Bernardino and Orlando unfold before our very eyes, and our fears mushroom into realities. We enter an airport or crowded restaurant or stadium, look around and wonder: Will this be the moment that I am at the wrong place at the wrong time? . Who by bombing and who by beheading? Who by a stray bullet and who by crossfire... I really do not want to die while shopping at Macy’s.

Ultimately, all of our fears, our fears of the “other”, our fears of change, and our fears of the unknown are really a fear of death. *Unetaneh Tokef Kedushat Hayom*. On Rosh Hashanah, this Day of Remembrance, our liturgy strips away all pretenses, and forces us

to acknowledge that death is inevitable. Who will live and who will die? Whose life will reach its natural end, and whose will be cut short?

Last Thursday, a commuter train traveling at a very high speed slammed into a crowded station in Hoboken, New Jersey, killing at least one woman and injuring hundreds. My initial reaction, and perhaps yours, was that a radicalized Muslim terrorist had hijacked the train, and used it as a weapon to sow mayhem. If terrorists can use cargo trucks, why not a train? The investigation is not yet complete, but the cause of the accident seems to be much more about delayed infrastructure repair and the lack of funding for federally mandated safety improvements than terrorism.

“You shall be in terror night and day, with no assurance of survival”, Moses warns the Israelites, if you do not honor the commandment “to love your neighbor as yourself”. “The sound of a driven leaf shall put you to flight, and you shall flee from the sword though none pursues”. Last month, LAX was closed down for six hours, cancelling over 200 flights because of a false report of a shooter. People stampeded into the streets and social media spread panic from terminal to terminal. On the other hand, there are dangers that confront us daily that we do not fully acknowledge, lest we are forced to alter our way of life. Anyone who travels the PCH knows that it presents a greater danger to our lives than any terrorist threat, and we should be afraid, but we avert our eyes, check our WAZE and keep on driving.

Unetaneh Tokef kedushat hayom...

Today, we are asked to examine our lives, and determine which fears are grounded, and which fears are fomented and overblown. What can we do, other than intensify our security forces and hide behind our locked doors? Our liturgy gives us an answer that each year I seem to encounter anew, as if I never quite heard it before:

*U't'shuvah, U'tifilah, U'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'a hagezehrah
And Repentance, Prayer and Charity lessen the harshness of the cruel decree.*

T'shuvah means to turn inward and face ourselves. We are asked to return to the place where we marked our foreheads and to remember that even though world has gone mad, there is another reality.

Teddakah means charity, and also tzeddek, justice, which encourages us to share our resources so all can have the basic necessities of food and shelter.

Tefilah means prayer. It is difficult to pray sitting here in a room, balancing a clumsy prayerbook on our laps, but far easier to pray when confronted with danger. Long before there were airports and bombs, there were dangers lurking on the road. There is an ancient Travellers Prayer, recited by the Jewish people for almost two thousand years:

May it be your will, God of our fathers and our mothers s' tolechenu l'shalom, that You guide our steps towards peace, and help us reach our desired destination for life, gladness and peace. May you rescue us from ambush, bandits and evil animals along the

way. May you send protection and blessing to us, and grant us grace, kindness and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see us. Blessed are You God, who hears prayer.

This prayer has never seemed more relevant. There are copies for each of us, credit card size, now laminated, to be picked up on the way out. Keep a copy in your car.

What else can we do to calm our fears and help us to keep our sanity in a world gone mad? One thing we have done already. In this non-stop world we have paused our insanely busy lives, and made it to this Sanctuary. We will listen as shofar blasts an alarm - Wake Up! Wake Up! The cry of the shofar breaks into pleading and sobs that echo our internal struggles before rising in one a long blast of faith and hope.

In a world gone mad, it is imperative that we find communities of meaning, extended family where we can “mark our foreheads” and remind each other that we are not really insane. We hold on to and support each other through times of fear, and celebrate together in times of joy. This is the role of community.

Reach out, now, and hold the hand of someone near you. Feel their support and strength. Know that you can count on this feeling in times of terror and despair, even if that person is not near you.

sound of the shofar to awaken you to the truth of your soul.

(Hold on, and then long blast of Shofar, then SILENCE)

(Cantor Sings When you Walk through a Storm...)

Yivarachecha Adonai V'Yishmerecha

May God Bless and protect you

On this Day of Remembrance, may you calm our fears, and guide our steps towards peace.