

“January 6th”
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On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, a colossal shift in history occurred. Until that day, no military attack breached the borders of the United States since Pearl Harbor. Whether or not we lived in New York City, all Americans felt violated, and most people around the world felt threatened. It was a day that words could not capture, so we gave it numbers instead. 9/11 did not feel adequate for me at the time. If we were going to assign a number to the day, I favored 2,957, the number of people killed in that horrendous assault. It seemed that 9/11 skirted the enormity of the human tragedy. For instance, a New York City-based colleague received a call from a congregant several days after the attack. She told him that she was cleaning the windows of her apartment and wanted to know what to do with the rags with which she wiped the glass. Without thinking, the rabbi said, “Throw them in the trash, I guess.” She responded quickly, “Rabbi! I can’t! There are people in these rags!” The rabbi immediately understood his error and insensitivity to the moment. He told her he would arrange to bury the rags in a cemetery. A date, reduced to its numerical representation, 9/11, doesn’t capture *that* angst, *that* brutal reality check, *that* spiritual struggle.

Not long after September 11, 2001, I began to feel a personal and rabbinic response. I watched on TV as responders carried the remains of bodies from the rubble that once was the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania. I recall thinking, “The families of those victims have an ironic fortune in all this. They have something relatively substantial to bury. What about the other families left with unidentifiable and jumbled cremated remains, like the ashes on the cleaning rags the woman I mentioned collected from her windows? How would they prepare for a funeral for their loved one that wouldn’t include a casket, and everyone present knows why? Should they have a casket anyway, representing that the person did once have a body? Would that make the mourners more or less comfortable? Should they ask for some anonymous ashes from the sight and have an urn at the funeral? Wouldn’t that also have a deleterious effect on those present, perhaps an impact even more damaging than utilizing an empty casket or having no casket at all?”

You may recall a controversy in the late 1980s that arose over a proposed convent on the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp. I found it hard to believe that the Polish cardinal could be so culturally and emotionally blind, insensitive, or ignorant to allow such an idea even to

have a hearing, much less give it credence and move it forward. For many Jews, Auschwitz is a cemetery. It's all survivors have as a memorial, a "grave" to visit. It's holy ground for our people, a place that should be sacrosanct, inviolable. Even though I also understood and understand that, from a Catholic perspective, one way the Church consecrates a place as sacred is to establish an institution of holy purpose there, I still couldn't believe they would do this. I thought about all the incidents I heard and read about when an area, often a burial ground, considered sacred by a particular group, usually a minority not in power, is appropriated for another use by an overarching authority. Maybe because of Auschwitz and the other death camps, I always connected to those who felt others desecrated their sanctified ground.

Similarly, as much as I felt the numerals 9 and 11 couldn't capture the horror of that day and the multitude of deaths, I was convinced that only the victims' families should have a say as to what would happen to "their loved ones graves." There was something **incongruent** about not seeing that arena as a cemetery. I responded the same way when a congregant proudly showed me a piece of concrete from the remains of the Twin Towers someone gave to him. I looked at it and felt kicked in the gut. It was as if he was showing me part of a gravestone that he would now display somewhere in his home as it gathered dust.

Time is more challenging to honor and set aside than space. Similar to how I **still** feel about 9/11, I can't help but think there must be a better epithet for January 6th than "January 6th. Ultimately, I hope we will all agree on a reference to the day that's more descriptive, like Independence Day or Martin Luther King's Birthday. However, there are still raw feelings and challenges about what happened on January 6th. Despite how we Americans applaud ourselves for our ability to accommodate diverse, even opposing, views, when it comes to what the events of January 6, 2021 **mean**, all of us must reckon with those whose opinions differ significantly from our own. Finding common ground won't be so easy. In the end, it doesn't matter what we call the day. What matters is what we **do** from these moments forward in the wake of that day.

Little did I know it last High Holy Days, but I had a premonition that something like January 6 might be waiting around the corner. Here's some of what I said referencing the, then, upcoming election:

"The more I think about the importance of November 3rd...the more my mind drifts to November 4th...Whatever the outcome [of the election], I believe that November 4th, 2020, will be a [turning point] for us. No matter who wins the Presidential election, we know what

issues will be waiting on the President's desk, and they are unambiguous. They are the same issues for every American."

In hindsight, it is clear to me that I felt the overriding issue was then and still is the "two-camp" reality in which we Americans find ourselves. To face and possibly overcome such a divide will be a complex, painstaking process in which few civilizations thus far succeeded. As the scholar Eric K. Ward said:

"History is full of **awful** examples of what happens to humiliated losers. And a few **good** examples of winning the peace, of creating time and space to form a new center."

That is our challenge: "Creating time and space to find a new center." How do we do that? As a Jew and as a rabbi, my moral backbone and guidebook for engaging with such challenges come from our tradition. On Yom Kippur afternoon, we will read Chapter 19 of the book of Leviticus, which tells us how to be holy in our everyday human living. That's why we refer to this chapter as "The Holiness Code." Here's a part of that code that many of us know well: "V'ahavta l'rei-acha ka-mocha, Ani Adonai." "Love your neighbor as yourself, I am Adonai." This idea could not be more critical as a standard for contemporary American society. The last words of that verse explain precisely **why** we **MUST** love one another. Those words, Ani Adonai, I am Adonai, I am God," wrench our heads toward the stunning reality of the core of this mandate. Our love for one another creates the possibility for the very existence of "Ani Adonai, I am Adonai, I am God." Our love for one another sustains the Divinity that ribbons through everything. Our love for one another is essential to the functioning of the Universe itself.

Last High Holy Days, I raised the idea for the United States to form a Truth and Reconciliation Commission similar to the one South Africa created to help heal its dichotomized country. It is important to note that the initiators of their commission chose to look at the process as Truth and Reconciliation, not Truth and Apology or Truth and Forgiveness. Apology would be remarkable, but it's not likely. Forgiveness, too, would be excellent, but it asks the wounded to take on more burden, and I don't believe that's in the cards either. Reconciliation **IS** possible even though it is the most pitted, stoney, indirect, knotty, and thorny of these roads to traverse.

I sometimes look to Native American wisdom to understand formidable challenges like reconciliation. American Indians' beautiful

spirituality has a way of saying things in a concise and focused manner. For instance, Lakota Sioux Chief Yellow Lark once said:

I seek strength not to be greater than my brother
But to fight my greatest enemy – myself.

We learn from his words that when we walk to the table of reconciliation, we must take along the heavy baggage of personal responsibility. And, a Cherokee tale says:

One evening, an elderly Cherokee brave told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside him.

He said, “My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all.

One is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.

The other is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather:

“Which wolf wins?...”

The old Cherokee replied,
“The one that I feed.”

Today, on this Rosh haShanah, our Jewish declaration of a new year, a new era, a new perspective, I would like to **renew** my dream for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a communal challenge for the Beth Shir Shalom community and those joining us from the Northshore Jewish Congregation in Mandeville, Louisiana. What if we set ourselves up as examples and formed a small Truth and Reconciliation group in our synagogues to be facilitated by professionals with strict guidelines for the tenor and manner of the discussion? Just being Jews, we know how to do this. We know how to hold a strong opinion while still respecting the essential humanity and integrity of someone who has the opposite view.

We can do this, and we should. What an incredible way to live out, “Love your neighbor **as** yourself,” and actively reveal the Divine spark in everyone and every thing.

May we, as humans, as Jews, and as citizens of these United States, become moral catalysts so that **all** Americans commit to a path of peace and embrace, openness and understanding, empathy and compassion, of hope and love. Amen.