

Rabbi Michael A. White  
Rosh Hashanah Morning/5768

Friends, Shanah Tovah and welcome home. I know that some of you were enamored with the Tilles Center last year at the Holy Days, but I do hope you'll agree that it is wonderful to be back at your spiritual home, Temple Sinai, and in this beautiful new space.

We began contemplating refurbishing and expanding our synagogue six years ago. Today all the planning and hard work, all the *tzedakah* you have given and all our leadership's devotion has come to fruition in this glorious new House of Worship and Jewish Assembly. We thank you, first those of you who were so generous, whose contributions made this beautiful facility possible. And you cannot even begin to imagine how much effort went into the construction. You have friends and neighbors, leaders of this great religious center seated among us now, who devoted countless hours, daily, to ensuring a successful and responsible project. They love this synagogue, and they care about you and your Jewish journeys here at Temple Sinai. We are so blessed, you and I, to have such dedicated leaders in our midst.

There are too many to thank individually here, but we will have that opportunity at our dedication events later this year. I hope you will all partake and celebrate with us. As we look ahead, we see only blessing and joy for this community. I hope you will all take advantage of many opportunities we offer for you to connect with your heritage, with your community and with the Holy One of Blessing.

Rosh Hashanah of course is an auspicious time to express gratitude for this new phase in our congregation's life. A holy day of renewal and rebirth, Rosh Hashanah recounts the creation of the universe and the sacred purpose for which God created humanity. This day is inspired by the hope and optimism with which our Torah speaks of humanity and the world we inhabit.

*Va'yar Elohim et kol asher asah, v'henei tov me'od.* And God saw all that He created, the Torah teaches, and found it very good. And from this fundamental Torah teaching, springs forth Judaism's belief that the world is intrinsically good, and humanity has an unlimited capacity for goodness because we are the handiwork of the Eternal One. That is the message of this sacred day.

Yet, Rosh Hashanah and our Judaism are not blind to the realities outside our beautiful new House of Worship. They do not allow us to deny the demons that can spark the human spirit, demons that bring murder and tears and loneliness and hatred. Dark demons that drive people away from one another, blanketing communities with mistrust and fear. Every day we are inundated with sorrow-filled news reports from around the world that remind us of those demons.

From the time of the prophets to the present day, Judaism has refused to divorce itself from this world, from grappling with the moral issues that confront us, because how we respond literally determines who shall live and who shall die.

The Hebrew prophets declared that a religion that looks only inward and walls itself off from the cries of the hungry and oppressed, a religion that refuses to stare down evil and complacency, is both dangerous and morally bankrupt. No, we are commanded to wrestle with present-day wickedness and bring the conscience of our tradition to our response, especially on this most sacred day.

This past summer, London law enforcement happened upon two cars filled with explosives, one parked in the center of London's Piccadilly Circus and the other at the entrance of England's busy John Lennon Airport. A sign of our times, this event wasn't so unusual---for cars-bombs to be deliberately parked in busy centers of civilian traffic, placed there to murder as many men, women and children as possible---that, we are used to. And thank God, those cars were found before they exploded.

No, what caught my attention, and I'm sure yours as well, was the arrest of several physicians, implicated in this terror attempt. What are we to make of this: that physicians did this. The unnerving revelation that doctors, who were trained to save lives could become murders? This morning I want to teach you that this is, truly, a Rosh Hashanah question.

First, we Jews shouldn't be surprised by this. We have long known that just because a person has a good education, doesn't mean they live by a moral compass. Our people have suffered at the hands of some of the most cultured, learned and successful butchers in human history

This past summer I traveled to Israel with my family, and we had the great opportunity to visit the inspiring new museum at Yad Vashem, Israel's National Memorial to the Victims of the Shoah. At one point in my journey though the museum I saw portraits and biographies of some of the leaders of the Third Reich. There was Josef Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda, who earned a PhD from Heidelberg University in 18th Century Romantic Drama. There was Josef Mengele, the infamous physician who stood on the platform at Auschwitz and with a flick of his wrist determined who would go to the labor camp and who to the gas chambers. He had a PhD from the University of Munich. First in his class. Hans Frick, 3rd in command in the Third Reich and Interior Minister, was first in his class at law school at Heidelberg.

I was particularly intrigued by the character of Ernst Hansfstaengl. The son of a German mother and American father, he studied at Harvard where he reportedly had many Jewish friends. He returned to Germany to run his family's business interests there. He became so captivated with Hitler that he became his first financial backer, funding Hitler's rise to the Chancellor's office. These men had the finest educations in countries at the zenith of intellectual and cultural enlightenment. And yet they were monsters.

Historians have pointed out that the opera houses and concert halls throughout Germany remained open during the war. One can imagine high Nazi officials listening to the Berlin Philharmonic in the evening, and returning to their offices to plan the extermination of our people the following morning.

How do doctors and attorneys and scholars of romantic literature, trained in the greatest centers of learning in the world, become so radically evil? The answer begins, I believe, with a bit of Rosh Hashanah wisdom. The first principle of the High Holy Days is that we are all capable of evil, that we all have dark places within us, that we are passionate creatures, we human beings. And each of our souls contains a reckless strain, capable of genuine rage. Every one of us. The rabbis called it the *sitra achra*, the demon within us.

Rabbi David Wolpe explains the *sitra achra* like this: “You can be the most worldly, thoughtful sophisticated person, and let someone cut you off in traffic and all of the sudden you discover that you are a bundle of primitive passions. You get angry far beyond what it merits.”

Our *sitra achra* may also explain why, like so many of you, I’m such a fan of the the Godfather movies and the Sopranos. They enable us to indulge the darker places within us, knowing that it’s all just a movie, just a TV show, that no one really gets hurt. That whoever got “bumped off” on the Sopranos on Sunday night showed up on the Today show on Monday morning to talk about it because it’s all make-believe.

These sacred days remind us of the never-ending struggle to subdue the *sitra achra*, but we can never completely vanquish it because it is essential to what it means to be a human being. That’s why we need Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur every year. Because we struggle. We fight it. We mostly keep it in check, but sometimes we explode and then we have to engage in teshuva, in the atonement necessary to clean up the messes we have made. The Holy Days remind us of this struggle and this mitzvah.

The question is not: do we have dark passions inside of us. Rather, the important question is: what do you do with them? The Holy Days teach us that when that anger bubbles up inside of us we have a choice to make. And how you respond to your passions when you are at the crossroads of patience and fury, of kindness and cruelty doesn’t depend on your academic degrees; it doesn’t depend on the universities you attended. It doesn’t depend on your social or economic status. None of that has anything at all to do with whether or not you are kind, and empathetic, and patient in your response.

Bin Ladin is a trained engineer. Abdel Azis al Rantissi is the founder of Hamas. He is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of innocent lives, including children, and is a certified pediatrician and professor of medicine and genetics. But Jeremy Hernandez, the 20-year-old camp counselor who saved 50 children on a bus in Minneapolis, as the bridge collapsed underneath them, dropped out of automotive repair school because he couldn’t afford the tuition.

Judaism teaches us that positive, authentic learning is learning that instills love, kindness and empathy. That's why our prayer book teaches: *The whole Torah exists only to establish peace. Its highest teaching is love and kindness. What is hateful to you, do not do to any person. That is the whole Torah. All the rest is commentary.*

We Jews have always rightfully valued education. We justifiably believe that school is a vehicle for success, for self-fulfillment. We want our children to have access to the most exciting, accessible learning, to attend the best colleges, so they can avail themselves of a vast array of opportunities.

But I do worry about our kids, yours and mine, about your grandchildren. We would think that sending them to great schools would shape their characters and stimulate their moral compasses. And I know that our schools try very hard to do that. We have gifted and devoted administrators and teachers in our local districts; many I'm privileged to call my friends. I am personally grateful for all that they have done for my own children.

But my fear is that our culture pushes kids today far too hard; that we have created a culture where learning for inspiration, learning for the sake of nourishing compassion, learning to create goodness in our world is being choked to death by the frenzy to succeed in the college admissions mania.

The kids that I know here at temple are extraordinary kids, with wonderful hearts and inquisitive minds. And they know that I love them. But we are torturing them with ridiculous expectations. We drown the individuality right out of them, as we pound them into a cookie-cutter mold of absurd expectations. We have created a culture where we demand that kids care mostly about grades. Far too many of our kids tell me flat out that the most important thing is not to get a bad grade. They're terrified of it. Terrified of how it will destroy their futures. And those who feel that they can't measure up often feel like second class citizens in their own schools and classes.

There is nothing wrong with striving for excellence, for working hard to achieve acceptance at this country's great schools. Hardly! And I want all our kids to reach their dreams. I love writing letters of recommendation for them and seeing them grow and their horizons widened in college. But sometimes it breaks my heart to hear the fear in their voices. To see the tension in their faces, especially at December and April as college acceptances and rejections arrive.

That's why our discussions with kids here at Temple Sinai are so important. We grant perspective to the insane pressures to succeed out there. We focus on their hearts, on their conscience, on their ability to cry when they see others in pain, and to enable the inherent compassion that I believe is inside each of our kids, to blossom and guide the decisions they will have to make.

We, here at Temple Sinai, we teach our kids that what is most important is to be kind. We teach them that if they are good, they will find happiness, and that it won't matter which

college they attend. They'll do just fine. Better than just fine. They will reflect sparks of the Holy in their journeys through life.

We teach them that their most important priority must be to care about those who are different, those who are in pain. The nameless and voiceless of this world whose cries so often fall on deaf ears. We teach our children to listen to those cries and to use their creativity and their learning to salve the pain.

The ancient rabbis taught that the study of Torah exists *rak letzoref et habriyot*, only...only...to strengthen our concern for the value of life. Unless learning is coupled with compassion and empathy, it can create a terribly dangerous façade, lulling us into the bloody illusion that we are safe, so long as we are surrounded, and led, by people with good liberal arts educations.

We want kids to know that education should not simply lead to the next personal goal to be achieved, the next rung on the ladder of success to be climbed; but that learning is a sacred vocation, a beginning; a vehicle for bringing the spirit of God into our world. That with faith, and within sacred community, we will know that we matter, that our actions matter, that we have the power to heal and to elevate and to restore dignity.

Those doctor-bombers didn't teach us anything new. We Jews are well-acquainted with ingenious highly educated murderers.

And so, at this historic sacred convocation, ushering in a new year and a new era for Temple Sinai, I want you to know that the values and teachings that move in and through all we do in these beautiful holy spaces and classrooms begin with the belief that if you are caring and generous, if you stand up for what is right and just, especially when it's uncomfortable, you will find a sense of purpose and destiny that will far supersede any material success you may enjoy.

All the Hebrew classes and Torah study, all the history lessons, the holiday celebrations, --all of it--we teach for this purpose: to enlarge our hearts and to ennoble our natural ability to care, to spark the courage within us to stare down the ugliness that clouds so much of this world, channeling our power to blanket cruelty with compassion, to subdue a mean spirit and our own apathy toward it, with gentleness and mercy and love.

This is Temple Sinai's mission, and we reaffirm it on this sacred New Year's Day.

*With gratitude to Rabbi David Wolpe's teaching on this subject.*