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### *Is Rosh Hashanah a Jewish Holiday?*

Do you think Rosh Hashanah is a Jewish holiday?<sup>i</sup> Yes, we are sitting here in the sanctuary/chapel, missing work, and missing school, separating ourselves from the non-Jewish world. But unlike other holidays we celebrate as a Jewish community such as Passover, Purim and Hanukkah which talk about our particular history as a Jewish people, Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of the world. And more specifically, today is the day that God *finished* creating the world. Today, *Adam*, the first person was created. In this way, Rosh Hashanah is not a Jewish holiday; rather, Rosh Hashanah is a Jewish way to celebrate humanity.

According to a Midrash,<sup>ii</sup> God decided to create the world from two people, Adam and Eve. God did this so that everybody would know that we have common ancestors, and nobody would feel superior to another. If the point wasn't clear enough, ten generations after Adam and Eve, after violence and corruption take over the world and God feels the need to start over, once again, God creates the entire world from just two people, Noah and his wife.

This idea that we are all brothers and sisters seems so simple. But humanity struggles with this concept. Over this past summer, we witnessed too many examples of people's claims of superiority acted out in violent ways. Ten people were shot in a Charleston Church, killing nine, because of the color of their skin. Six people were stabbed at the Jerusalem Pride Parade, killing a 16 year old girl, all attacked for being a part of the GLBTQ community. Hundreds of thousands of migrants attempted dangerous passage by sea and by foot to Europe, many of whom are fleeing wars in their home countries fueled by ethnic, religious and sectarian conflict.

It is hard not to be carried away by a wave of hopelessness when looking at the way our human family treats one another. The second story of the creation of the world, Noah's story, offers a message of hope that I invite us to embrace when feeling like the bad will overwhelm the good in our world. Noah found God's favor because he was a *tzadik*, he was a righteous person and he walked with God.<sup>iii</sup> After the flood, after Noah had experienced the worst of humanity and the total destruction of the world, Noah found the courage to take the first steps off the ark. Once on dry land, after giving thanks to God and bringing sacrifices, the Torah tells us that Noah's reaction to the flood is to plant a vineyard.<sup>iv</sup> Noah takes those first steps and plants those first seeds because of his belief in the future.

It was Noah who God chose with his wife and their family to repopulate the world after the flood. As a Jewish community, we usually think of *B'Nai Noach*, the children of Noah, in reference to people who are not Jewish. But we too are connected to Noah. He is our grandfather, albeit a thousand generations removed. We all have a part of Noah in us. We all have the ability to believe in the good of humanity. We all have the ability to take small steps towards change and building a better future. And while sometimes it feels like the small steps we take to walk with God do not matter, they may be the first steps needed to bring waves of positive change.

The idea that we are all brothers and sisters seems so simple. It seemed inherent to me as a child. I remember one of the first times I realized that people struggle with those who are different than themselves. It was also one of the first times I realized that people can change their way of thinking.

Some of you know that I was an avid musician as a child and teen. I played the oboe. In middle school I made the transition from learning with an amateur musician to learning with a professional musician, the principal oboist of the Seattle Opera. I remember the first lesson with my new teacher. My dad accompanied me to my teacher's apartment. I was with my teacher in his music studio office, and my dad waited just around the corner in the living room. My dad was the type of guy who would open up every drawer and cupboard in a doctor's office while waiting for an appointment. And that afternoon, while I practiced scales, I could hear him in the other room, not so quietly pocking around, looking at books, magazines, and pictures. My dad was strangely quiet as we left the apartment. He waited until we got in the car and said, "I think your new teacher is gay." Actually my dad didn't use that exact language; he used a derogatory word in Yiddish to describe my teacher instead. My dad sounded like a *zaydie*, like an old man using that word. I am sure I replied to my dad in a sassy, not-so-respectful teenage way, "SO!" But my dad didn't take my bait, he didn't get angry.

"So, does that bother you?"

"It doesn't bother me, does it bother you?"

My dad, who rarely thought before speaking, took a bit of time to reply. "Well, it doesn't bother me, if it doesn't bother you,"

A few years later, in 1996, my father serving as temple president supported our rabbi in officiating at his first same-sex wedding. And you know what; I had never put those two stories about my dad together until this past summer when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Marriage Equality. Thinking back about my dad and his changed opinion personalized the slow road to marriage equality in our country for me. Indeed, the push towards marriage equality in was fought slowly and methodically, step-by-step, leading to the landmark Supreme Court ruling in June.

Evan Wolfman, president of the now obsolete Freedom to Marry, was one of the leaders in the marriage equality movement. As a lawyer, Wolfman had been fighting for marriage equality since the 1980s. He anticipated the SCOTUS decision more than thirty years earlier in a paper he wrote in law school.<sup>v</sup> Wolfman prophetically described that marriage equality would be won heart by heart and state by state. And indeed, as more people in our country were exposed to same-sex couples who looked just like any other couple but with same-sex orientation, attitudes and opinions changed. Attitudes changed because members from the Freedom to Marry campaign walked from door-to-door introducing themselves to American neighbors.

While we as humanity, as a collective of people, struggle to recognize that we are all brothers and sisters, unlike Noah's time, there are many individuals in our world who are reaching out to get to know one another. There are many people who take small steps to walk with God.

I am proud of my nearly 200 rabbinic colleagues who just yesterday finished their march with the NAACP from Selma, Alabama to Washington DC on America's Journey for Justice. These rabbis took lots of small steps, 1000 miles worth of steps to honor the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Voting Rights Act. They walked with the NAACP to bring attention to issues like economic inequality, education reform, criminal justice reform and voting rights.

Rabbi Andy Gordon wasn't sure what to expect when he signed up to walk with the NAACP.<sup>vi</sup> He knew he would help carry the Torah on the day's 18 mile journey, but it was the walking and the talking that truly inspired Gordon. As he walked he talked with a man name Royal who shared his anger that he could not join the numerous fishing and hunting clubs in town because of his skin color. He worried about his five year old son whose best friend is white. "What will happen when my son's friend has a birthday party at the Fishing Club?" he asked me. "Will the boy include my son in the birthday party or not? Will the father turn his son into a racist or will the boy recognize the ignorance of his father's way?" Rabbi Gordon walked alongside a woman named Keisha, an activist who created a non-profit that supports future business owners and helps get people back to work. Keisha was walking on the Journey for Justice because she believes a smile, a wave of the hand, a kind word will truly change the course of our country.

But we don't have to look to rabbis or across our country to find examples of people taking steps to recognize we are all *B'nai Noach*, we are all brothers and sister.

At the beginning of August, Kim Gubner, an organizing powerhouse in our synagogue family, along with the helping hands of many others in our community, organized Child Spree, a back-to-school shopping event. 65 members of Temple Beth El woke up at the crack-of-dawn on a Sunday to meet 50 children from Laura's House, a local domestic violence shelter. They met at Kohl's Department Store in Ladera Ranch and our volunteers walked with children around the store and helped them pick out clothes. In addition to monies raised, our Beth El community delivered a symbolic message that these students' achievement in school matters to the larger community. The children walked with their Beth El chaperones through the kids' section and the shoe department. The children walked with our congregants and allowed them to take a few steps alongside God that Sunday morning.

Rosh Hashanah is our Jewish day to celebrate God's creation of the world and humanity. This service, with its special prayers that speak of God's universal sovereignty are here to remind us that "we inhabit a single system of universal justice and that all of our actions should make a difference in the world for all of us."<sup>vii</sup> As we celebrate the creation of humanity, let us remember that we are all *B'nai Noach*, we are all the children of Noah. All of us have Noah embedded in our genes, we all have the ability to take small steps with God. We all have the ability to plant seeds that that will grow to change our world.

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<sup>i</sup> Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum, "Melekh al Ko Ha'aretz." In *All the World: Universalism, Particularism and the High Holy Days*. Ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, 2014.

<sup>ii</sup> Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5

<sup>iii</sup> Genesis 6:8-9

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 9:20

<sup>v</sup> Mark Joseph Stern, "How the Mastermind of Marriage Equality Felt the Moment He Realized He'd Won," *Slate Magazine*, July 8, 2015.

<sup>vi</sup> Rabbi Andy Gordon, "Keep on Walking, Keep on Talking," *Rav Blog: Reform Rabbis Speak*, September 3, 2015.

<sup>vii</sup> Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum, *ibid*.