

Erev Rosh Hashanah 2025

Looking Forward

Finley Peter Dunne once said of journalists that their job was to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” His saying has been applied to many other professions – including rabbis. When I prepare to speak, on Shabbat or on holidays I always have this saying in mind. It is my job to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” What that means for me is striking a balance between sermons that comfort those who need comforting and sermons that light a fire under us when we need to snap out of our complacency or privilege and join the fight to make the world a better place. So every year as I read and start thinking about my High Holiday sermons, given to the biggest audience of the year, I try to make sure that I have at least one sermon that comforts and gives hope, while I have at least one social justice sermon which pushes us to act.

This year, however, I found that process difficult. The world is so stressful right now. Everyone feels so overwhelmed with anxiety – anxiety about our country, anxiety about Israel, anxiety about antisemitism, anxiety about our earth and the world. So, so much to worry about. And sadly, we are also living in a time in our country when fighting for justice is more challenging than it has ever been. How could I possibly choose one social justice issue to talk about when so many others are screaming out at us? How could I suggest things we can do to fight when the obstacles seem impossible as our democracy itself is in mortal danger.

Have I comforted you yet?? Seriously, I decided to focus this year on comforting the afflicted, myself included. As I sat down to read and to write I found this challenging as well. Everything is so depressing how could I pull myself into a space where I could offer encouragement and hope? You will have to let me know at the end of Yom Kippur how I did.

I started by turning to the teachings of a brilliant rabbi, taken from us much too soon, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *zochrono livracha*. Rabbi Sacks was the chief rabbi of Great Britain, and I have learned from and been inspired by his writings more times than I can possibly count.

A few weeks ago, I came across an essay that Rabbi Sacks had written about the Torah portion “Re’eh.” While he wrote this essay in 2017 it jumped off the page at me. Rabbi Sacks did a lot of work during his lifetime with Holocaust survivors. He says the following about them, “They really were victims of the worst crimes against humanity in all of history. *Yet they did not see themselves as victims.* The survivors I knew, with almost superhuman courage, looked forward, built a new life for themselves, supported one another emotionally, and then, many years later, told their story not for the sake of revisiting the past but for the sake of educating today’s young people on the importance

of taking responsibility for a more human and humane future.” (From “On Not Being a Victim”, Covenant and Conversation, 2017).

Rabbi Sacks then asks a very profound question, “How can you be a victim and yet not see yourself as a victim without being guilty of denial, or deliberate forgetfulness or wishful thinking?”

We know that it is so easy to feel like a victim. So many in our country stoke our anger, and the anger of others by focusing on victimhood. Frank Bruni in his book The Age of Grievance bluntly says, “Part of what’s so striking about the current state of political play and what distinguishes it from the early 1990s is the directness and fierceness of the competition between Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, people on the right and people on the left, for the Grievance Bowl’s Lombardi Trophy. To the victims go the spoils.” He goes on to say, “Their senses of persecution overlap even as their realities diverge, and there’s a point-by-point, tit-for-tat, yin-yang quality to the battles between the most fervent and immoderate camps on each side....What the left feels and what the right feels are identical: oppressed. There’s a perverse mirror-image to it, a nasty reciprocity, even a strange symbiosis.” (Bruni, Age of Grievance pp. 55-56, 2024. Bruni goes on to explain that underneath all the battles lie legitimate issues, legitimate problems but they get lost in the grievance warfare.

I know that I have been pulled into this feeling many, many times. As I read the news or listen to NPR I find myself yelling at the paper or the radio – so angry and frustrated with everything going on. I have had to cut back my news intake substantially – it was really doing a job on me. But this feeling of anger and victimhood is addictive. Frank Bruni explains, “James Kimmel Jr., a lecturer in psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine and the founder and codirector of the Yale Collaborative for Motive Control Studies, sees it as a kind of drug. ‘I’ve been researching the way grievances affect the brain,’ he wrote in *Politico* in 2020, ‘and it turns out that your brain on grievance looks a lot like your brain on drugs. In fact, brain imaging studies show that harboring a grievance (a perceived wrong or injustice, real or imagined) activates the same neural reward circuitry as narcotics.’” (Bruni, pp 63-64).

At the end of his book, Frank Bruni offers some interesting suggestions for how to combat this toxicity in our society. He includes many important ideas: building relationships with people we don’t agree with; being willing to have real, open conversations; getting out of our media bubble; embracing humility; and being willing to see the gray, not just the black and white. These are all very important but, being a rabbi, I would also turn back to Rabbi Sacks and Judaism for advice.

Rabbi Sacks argues, “We can ask: ‘Why did this happen?’ That involves looking back for some cause in the past. Or we can ask, “What then shall I do?’ This involves looking forward, trying to work out some future destination given that this is our starting point.

There is a massive difference between the two. I can't change the past. But I can change the future."

If we look back, he argues we see ourselves as victims of events that have already happened. If we look forward, we see ourselves as having choices, moral choices and which path to take forward. Looking back can allow us to wallow in our victimhood, in our grievance. Looking forward gives us ideas and hope for the future. The Holocaust survivors that Rabbi Sacks worked with did not live in their grievance with the past (and no one would blame them if they did), they looked forward and created a new life and future that they wanted to live in. Over and over in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people that they have a choice – blessings or curses – it is in their hands.

Rabbi Sacks also brings us the example of Jeremiah, a prophet who lived through very difficult times for the Jewish people. He explains, "Jeremiah kept warning the people that the strength of a country does not depend on the strength of its army but on the strength of its society. Is there justice? Is there compassion? Are people concerned about the welfare of others or only about their own? Is there corruption in high places?....Jeremiah kept saying, in so many words, that God will not save us from our enemies until we save ourselves from our own lesser selves." (C&C) And when the Babylonians destroyed the Temple and sent the Jews into exile, Jeremiah reminded them not to see themselves as victims – that it was in their hands to return to God and create a better future.

Our more traditional prayerbooks remind us over and over that we were exiled from our land because of OUR sins – not because we were victims of someone else. You may not agree with that theology but it is a much healthier response to trauma than being stuck in our victimhood. There are real, legitimate victims in this world but our greatest gift to them and to all of us is to try to look forward to a future that we can make a choice to create. I'm not saying that this is easy – some days it feels impossible but Rabbi Sacks reminds us that it took immense courage for Holocaust survivors to rise above the horrible victimhood they experienced.

As we walk through these next few years and whatever they bring we have to find a way to keep looking forward, to not get stuck in the past wallowing in our anger and grievance, as legitimate as it might be. Anger and grievance will only add to our suffering. As hard as it is, our greatest hope is looking forward and keeping our sights on what our lives and our world can truly be. May the choices we make in the year ahead bring peace, joy and justice to our world. And may we never lose the hope and courage to keep looking forward.