

**“Where Are You?” - Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon
By Rabbi Brad Bloom - 5779 September 9, 2018**

There was a time when, in Russia, Jews were so divided and in conflict against each other that one group of observant Jews did everything in their power to turn the other sects of observant Jews over to the police. This happened over two hundred years ago when the Orthodox Jews and the newly powerful Hasidic Jews were at each other's throats. Happily those issues were resolved long ago, but there is a story about one Hasidic rabbi who was arrested and jailed for holding religious views that threatened the Orthodox power structure.

Rabbi Shneuer Zalman, the founder of the Chabad movement, was sitting inside a jail in St. Petersburg awaiting his trial. The chief of the city's police entered his cell and he beheld the majestic face of the rabbi who was in such deep meditation that he barely noticed the chief of police standing inside his cell.

The rabbi looked up at the Police Chief and could sense he was a thoughtful man and asked him what kind of man he was. The police chief sat down beside the rabbi and started to talk with him, and even began asking the rabbi various questions about the meaning of the Torah

Finally, the police chief asked the Rabbi a question, “Rabbi, I have read a verse in Genesis chapter three when God catches Adam eating the forbidden fruit from the Garden of Eden. God says to Adam, “Where are You?” Rabbi, what does the question “Where are You?” really mean?

“Do you believe,” answered the rabbi, “that the Torah and the entire Bible are eternal and that every era, every generation, and that every human being is included in them?”

“I believe this,” said the Police Chief.

“Well then,” said the Rabbi, in every era, God calls to every human being: “Where are you in your world?”

“So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed, and how far have you gotten in your world?”

God says something like this (to the police chief): You have lived seventy two years. How far along are you?”

When the Police Chief heard his exact age mentioned by the Rabbi, he was stunned and then pulled himself together, laid his hand on the rabbi's shoulder and cried out; “Well said Rabbi!”

Secretly, however, his soul trembled.

Is this the fundamental question for the High Holy Days that we, two hundred years later, should still ask ourselves; “Where are we in our world”? How we address this question could be important regarding who we are, not only as individuals but where are we in the world as a Jewish community at CBY?

I want to focus on this question ‘Where are you?’ It is about time we look around this sanctuary and behold the sea of faces gathered together. Is there not a communal judgment that also deserves our honest reflection? Most of us have moved here from other places. We have created an amazing Jewish community over the last thirty-five years or so. Isn’t it time we think about where we as CBY are in this world we live in?

Let’s look at where we are inside our own gates. In many respects we are diverse when it comes to our previous religious affiliations or having no prior membership in a synagogue. Some come from Reform, Conservative and even Orthodox backgrounds. Inevitably we bring differing expectations from our past about the songs we sing in services and the prayers we read. We also have different ideas about the world and that includes the current events in the larger society. What is the secret of how we have made it work despite so many differences and varied Jewish backgrounds?

We are challenged, like so many other religious institutions, to deal with outside world issues as they impact us both personally and in a communal setting. I have witnessed how those issues have created, at times, friction between our own congregants who share differing and or conflicting opinions. Does Judaism teach us about an ethos of mutual respect and civility in so far as how we respect our diverse viewpoints? How do we talk to each other, knowing full well we disagree with others and even have opposite views on many current issues today?

But there is another, even more pressing issue that we must address, and that is where do we stand in relation to the larger Hilton Head community? This year we inaugurate the High Holy Days season of penitence and renewal by facing some unique and unprecedented challenges with some of the outrageous candidates whom we have been reading about recently, and who either deny that the Holocaust happened or admire Adolph Hitler for his leadership skills. These issues have received nation- wide attention. The Temple Board of Directors decided it was right to act on these serious developments. A special task force was created with the goal of organizing the community wide Lowcountry Coalition Against Hate as a response to these two candidates. And where are we in this world of Jewish identity with regards to education and advocacy against hate speech? It is the first time we have faced this kind of issue here and as a community, and the leaders of CBY have had to ask of themselves hard questions as to whether this congregation should take the lead and speak out on this situation.

[Of course,] this is an issue that not only is a matter for our Temple’s task force but it is one for all of us. Why are we taking decisive action when many say a holocaust denier candidate and a candidate who admires Adolph Hitler do not have a chance? The answer is, we are doing this for us and for the future of the congregation. We are taking a proactive stand because we are the only Jewish full service congregation in the Lowcountry. If not us then why should anyone else in the community at large speak out? We are doing this for our kids who are watching us to set a good example that Jews are not afraid to speak out against hate speech. For the last two years we have sent our teens to the March of the Living trip to Auschwitz, Poland and Israel. If we feel that it is so important to send them to learn about the Holocaust then how can we be silent in the face of bigotry and hate when it happens here in our own beloved Hilton Head?

And where are we and how far are we along the road as a Jewish community? We do this for future generation of residents who should feel confident and safe that this community rejects hate and that we are not afraid to speak out and that we will not remain silent.

As Isaiah once thundered;

“For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch.

The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give” (Chapter 62)

Finally, where are we in the world inside CBY? Among some circles in the congregation we have been asking hard [questions] within [our own] community about how we talk to each other about political issues. There have been times when there have been hurt feelings and accusations of a lack of respect for opinions that have nothing to do about Judaism but ultimately impact the tenor of relationships which have been built up over the years. A joint committee of congregants got together of diverse viewpoints and discussed these issues and created a joint document which states ten principles on how we are supposed to relate to each other when we discuss current events, even when we disagree. I am proud of the work of the Unity Committee and everyone will be receiving a copy of the document and I hope we will learn from these principles that in light of today's world, we as members of the Jewish community of CBY need to be careful about being respectful of diverse viewpoints lest we alienate members from the congregation.

When it comes to the time honored phrase Tikkun Olam we have liberals and conservatives in the political world who have differing ideas about what constitutes Tikkun Olam or repairing the world. Both of them stand on equal footing and, I believe, we should be more respectful towards those viewpoints, even if they don't always coincide with our own interpretations.

The great sages Hillel and Shammai had their own rivalries about whose schools of interpretations were the correct ones. The school of Hillel used to recite their colleagues views which they disagreed with before their own. They even married each others' daughters despite the deep-seated rivalries between them. That kind of courtesy is so basic to human relations and appears to be at times in short supply in our country and even in our religious communities. So when God asked Adam “Where are you?”, and when the rabbi in Russia asked the same question of the Police Chief they were asking something much deeper than literally where are you but, rather, what are you doing with your life? How are you living it? Are you doing your best to be respectful of those who do not share our world view? If we cannot truly answer yes than we have some work to do these next ten days.

May God give us the strength and courage to reflect and take a new look, not at changing our viewpoints on issues of the day but on how we react respectfully in conversations with our good friends and fellow congregants. The shalom of the congregation will depend on each of us doing our part to preserve shalom at CBY.