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 Rosh Hashanah I

OUR TRIBES

I want to take a little survey here.

If I were to ask, “Are you an M.O.T.?”
 how many know how to answer?

If you don’t, M.O.T. was once and maybe still is,
 slang for “Member of the Tribe.”

The question means, “Are you, or is he or she, Jewish?”

Tribes are an important part of life and most of us belong to several of them.
 Besides being part of *Am Yisrael*, the Jewish people,
 we may be “members of the tribe” of our home city or state.

Are there any proud NY’ers here? Washingtonians? Chicago-landers?
 Bostonians? Floridians? All tribes.

We may be members of our favorite sports teams’ tribes too:
 Mets, Red Sox, Cubs, Dodgers, Giants, Heat, Dolphins.

We have tribal identity based on where we live.

As we tell everyone when we go off the rock, “We’re from the Keys!”
 There’s some cachet there. (Though I’m not so sure since last week.)

We are members of our professional tribes: teachers, doctors, accountants,
 therapists, attorneys, salespeople, shopkeepers, artists.

And we belong to other tribes too:

Fishermen, musicians, sailors, Facebook friends, Mah Jong players,
 book clubbers, volunteers, people in recovery, etc.

We are M.O. many tribes.

And we wouldn’t have it any other way.

Tribes are important in the Torah. There are the 12 tribes of Israel,
 but also Ammonites, Hittites, Gergashites, Jebusites, Edomites, Hivites
 and that’s just in the holy land.

According to the Bible, each of seventy nations
 is allotted a parcel of tribal land.

Today those seventy are over 190 countries,
 and though there are exceptions, and it may be changing somewhat,
 most of them still look at themselves as a tribal homeland.

Tribes are a source of identity, but they are also a source of conflict.

In the Middle East there are Sunni, Shia, Kurd and Alawite—
 enmeshed in what seems like endless war.

In the Balkans, Orthodox Serbs, Bosnian Muslims and Croatian Catholics
 have been nursing grudges and spilling blood since the 14th century.

In India, it’s Hindu v. Muslim.

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Today in much of Western Europe,

it's the natives vs. the newcomers.

In Israel there is not only the tribal conflict with the Arabs, but also

Ashkenazim v. Sefardim, Religious v. Secular, Left v. Right, and more.

In Kenya, tell someone what tribe you belong to and

they can probably tell who you voted for.

Believe it or not, it's similar in America.

Give a political consultant your age, occupation, education, address,

the make and model of the car you drive,

and they can predict pretty accurately who you voted for.

All this is because we are tribal creatures.

It's Rosh Hashanah, the time for new beginnings.

And my sad prediction is that we will not stop many, if any,

of the tribal conflicts that currently consume our world—

though that remains our Messianic hope.

But perhaps we in this room,

can distance ourselves from the negative tribal behavior

we engage in that causes us harm.

For starters, maybe we can be less suspicious of members of other tribes,

at least when we don't know very much about them.

The hurricane may have taught us a lesson on this.

Everyone in America who watches a news or weather channel

thinks they have a fair idea about what happened in the Keys.

But many of us heard from dear ones who saw those accounts and

to be honest, were more worried than they needed to be,

especially about us in the Upper Keys.

We're grateful that they care,

but thankfully for most of us, it was not that bad.

The reason they think it was, is that their impressions came

from the media, mass media and now social media.

And the reason it looked so bad, as we all know,

is that the worse it looks, the more people will pay attention.

In situations like this I like to remember the words of Will Rogers,

It isn't what we don't know that gives us trouble,

it's what we think we know that just isn't so.

And we can apply this bit of wisdom to our tribal relations.

When we get most of our information

about them from the mass media, social media, or even the government,

there is a good chance that much of what we think we know just isn't so.

I'm a proud M.O.T.,

but I've spent a good amount of time crossing tribal lines.

And maybe the most important thing I've learned is

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while there are bad people everywhere,
 most members of other tribes,
 even those we may be suspicious about,
 are for the most part no less decent than we are,
 and want the same things from life that we do:
 to raise a loving family, earn a decent living,
 fulfill their God given potential and
 live in peace with their neighbors.
 My experience is that this is true locally, nationally and internationally.

But so often when we encounter a tribe, or a member of a tribe,
 who is different, either ethnically, religiously, politically or sexually,
 we do not respond as if that were the case.
 We do not respond with higher human or Jewish values, such as,
 “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Leviticus 19: 18)
 All too often we respond with prejudice, resentment or even hostility.
 And this is a sin—
 it is a sin against them, it is a sin against us, and it is a sin against God.

We understand that acting tribally is natural.
 Tribes are our comfort zone. “Birds of a feather and all that.
 But going tribal can also hurt us.
 And sometimes we go there because we are being played.
 Political demagogues and their partners in the media
 love to pit tribe against tribe,
 not for our betterment or edification, but for their power and profit.
 They are masters at pushing our tribal buttons
 and firing up our lizard brains.
 And way too often, we fall for it.

We are not stupid, but we are susceptible.
 We may not fall for everything but we manage to fall for plenty.
 And if you're thinking, “No not me,”
 there are several multi-billion dollar corporations
 to say nothing of political parties
 who are more than happy to let you continue to think so.

The purpose of the High Holydays is for us to become
 more than we have been and better than we are.
 If we are going to accomplish that,
 we may need to rewire some of those tribal circuits.

How to do this?
 Many people say the answer is to teach tolerance and understanding.
 If only we can educate people, goes the refrain,
 they will learn to think differently, and better.

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I am a believer in education and also in better thinking.
But in this case, they're not enough.

When it comes to changing attitudes and behavior,
doing different is much more effective than thinking different.
As it happens, Judaism teaches that actions that shape character,
more than the other way around.

Of the 613 commandments
very few of them deal with what we should, or shouldn't, believe or think.
The overwhelming majority are about what we should do—or not do.

For example, we will never appreciate how meaningful it is
to give *tzedaka*-charity, until we actually give it.
We can think about it all we want, we can imagine it feels nice,
but until we reach down and extend ourselves
on behalf of another human being,
we will not understand the power it has to transform us.

Likewise, Shabbat. Until we actually rest on Shabbat,
however we understand the term—and there are many,
even entry level ways to understand it—
we will never appreciate what a great gift Shabbat can be.

Similarly, until we study Torah,
it may sound like a decent enough thing to do,
but we will not be able to grasp how it can uplift us.

And as a final example, swimming.
We can stand by the side of the pool, listening to the instructor all day long,
but if we don't get in the water, we'll never learn how to swim.

I like that last one because according to the Talmud,
parents have three responsibilities to their children:
1) To teach them right from wrong,
2) To give them the skills and education they need to earn a living and
3) Teach them to swim. (*Kiddushin 29a*)

Okay, the first two we get but seriously, swim is #3?!

The commentators wondered about that too.
They ultimately said that the Talmud wasn't talking about
learning to swim in a river or the ocean.

It was saying that a child needs to be taught to swim through life.
And just like in the pool, the only way to do it, is to be immersed in it.
Again, most of the time in Judaism, good action that leads to better thinking,
not the other way around.

So let's go back to our tribes, and for the moment, to Charlottesville.
 Charlottesville raised a lot of critical issues
 but I'm going to focus on just one.

As we remember, neo-Nazi and other racists
 marched through town, brandishing their tiki torches from Pier 1,
 chanting anti-Semitic and other hateful slogans.

I cannot prove, but I am willing to bet,
 that the wannabe storm troopers shouting,
 "Jew will not replace us" did not know many, if any, Jews.

I feel safe saying this because
 it would be in keeping with the well known pattern.

Where Jews live in free societies,
 our neighbors, as a rule, are happy to have us alongside them.
 It's in the places where we don't live, where people don't know us,
 that anti-Semitism is highest.

This tells us something important, namely
 that most of our neighbors abandon the tribalistic teachings
 that may have taught them to think less of us
 when they get to know us.

This did not happen because of more education or better thinking.
 It happened because the act of living with us gave birth to new understanding.

It also happened because Catholic and Protestant leaders
 got to know our leaders as people,
 instead of as religious or theological abstractions.

And this happened because of programs of outreach and dialogue,
 sponsored by groups like the Anti-Defamation League,
 the American Jewish Committee, the World Jewish Congress and others.

Nationally, internationally and locally, lived experience
 enabled our neighbors to overcome their tribal prejudices and
 allowed them to accept that we are every bit
 the mostly decent human beings they are, thank you very much.

So good for them. But this is our holy day, not theirs. What about us?
 What actions can we take that will help us break free
 from our tribal prejudices?

And let's not pretend that we don't have them.
 We do, religiously, socially and politically.

We are grateful that most political leaders in America
 no longer stand in front of anti-Semitic mobs and flatter them
 in order to gain power.

But many of them do demonize other tribes.

And sometimes, I'm sorry to say, we go along with it.
 Especially when we don't know better or, sometimes,

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thank you Will Rogers, when we think we do but really don't.
 As people who have been on the receiving end of this equation far too often,
 we Jews should understand better than anyone
 how dangerous this is societally and how wrong it is morally.

Just as it is true that most people who get to know Jews, like Jews,
 most people who get to know
 (insert the name of any minority tribe here) get to like them too.
 As someone recently put it, people who know Juan and Muhammed
 generally like Juan and Muhammad.
 Or at least they don't hate them simply for being Juan or Muhammad.
 If Juan or Muhammad is a jerk, fine, we can hate them all we want.
 (No, sorry I can't say that. We can hate their jerky behavior all we want.)

Similarly, people who know people with alternative gender orientations
 generally overcome whatever prejudice they may have
 towards people with alternative gender orientations.
 All told, in places where there are many
 Juans, Muhammads, and LGBTQ communities,
 people vote to welcome other Juans, Muhammads and LGBTQ communities.
 And where there are few or no Juans, Muhammads or LGBTQ communities,
 people more often try to keep them out.

We can understand it.
 Fear of the unknown and dislike of the unlike are always with us,
 ready to be exploited.
 And when they are, back to tribal conflict we go.

The Prophet Malachi said it as well as anyone ever has,
 "Have we not all one Father, has not one God created us all?" (Malachi 2:10)
 Those words are inscribed on the walls of countless synagogues.
 Probably because we realize that we need them staring us in the face.
 When we lose sight of the fact that we are all children of the One God,
 when we act as if we are only members of tribes,
 whether those tribes are religious, political or social,
 we are cheating ourselves and our fellow human beings.
 And yes, that's a sin too.

Reb Shlomo Carlebach, you may know the name,
 was a Hasidic rabbi and also a singer, musician and guitar player.
 He passed away in 1994.
 Synagogues around the world make use of his melodies. As do we.

One of the ways in which Shlomo was unique, and there were many,
 is that he could cross any tribal boundary.
 Not only in the Jewish world, which is difficult enough,

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but in the wider world as well.

Once he was visiting a prison, somewhere in America.

There might have been a Hasidic Jew or two inside but the overwhelming majority of the population were members of other tribes. What should he say? What would he do? How could he connect?

His repertoire was basically Hebrew folk songs and prayers from the *siddur*. Not exactly the playlist for this congregation.

He played a little music but then stopped. He got off the stage and went to one prisoner after another, and offered a hug. Just like that. And after overcoming some suspicions, tribal and otherwise, they started hugging back. In short order everyone was into it. Picture the scene. I don't know that I could have pulled this off. But I know Shlomo could.

As he continued on his way down the line, one of the prisoners whom he had hugged a few moments earlier, ran back to him. He told Reb Shlomo, "If someone had hugged me like that ten years ago, I wouldn't be in here today."

Reaching beyond our tribes and seeing one another's full humanity, in a world that all too often encourages us to deny it, is not only powerful, it can be life changing. For all of us. We need to be able to do it—better than we do now.

We'll continue the theme next week.

L'shana tovah.