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Our Tribes—Part II

So I'd like to continue the conversation on tribes
 that we began on Rosh Hashanah.

We'll start with a question about us and them.

You don't have to raise your hands and

feel free to define those terms any way you see fit. Ready?

How many people think that the main problem is "us?"

How many people think that the main problem is "them?"

Most of us have had conversations on the subject during the past year.

And if we haven't had conversations, we've certainly thought about it.

So even without raising hands, we know the consensus.

They are the problem. Maybe us a little bit.

But it's mostly them.

If by some chance the majority of your conversations during the past year
 have centered on how most of the problem is because of us,

I'd like to hear more about it.

You must be part of a remarkable tribe.

(Canadians maybe, or even Jews on Yom Kippur. ;-)

Most people believe that they are the problem.

Rudyard Kipling put it this way:

"All good people agree,

And all good people say,

All nice people, like Us, are We

And everyone else is They."

That is pretty much the template for tribal thinking.

And it has been around since long before Kipling.

We could do worse than to add it to the *Al Chet* prayer.

"For the sin we have committed against you by blaming them."

As we said last week, we like being members of tribes.

They give us identity and protection.

And we can belong to several at once:

social, economic, recreational, educational, professional, religious, sexual.

We want our tribes to thrive and survive,

because they are our culture.

They are where we feel at home. They are core to who we are.

But we also saw how they can make us narrow.

They can make us more wary of outsiders than we need to be.

They can make it too easy to think, “Everyone else is They.”

There is not a culture in the world that does not have a word for goy.

And it’s never a complimentary word.

Countering our tribal instincts is the Prophet Malachi’s declaration,

“Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us?” (Malachi 2: 10)

While it’s one thing to hear those words,

it’s quite another to build a society based on them.

Author Benjamin Moser recently published an essay entitled, [“How the Bible is Misread.”](#) According to Moser, the Bible is not about sex, abortion, contraception, gay marriage or any of the other things that always seem to be dragging it into the headlines. He claims that it is ultimately a book about the ways in which a nation can be lost. I’ve studied my share of Bible and his thesis is more than defensible.

For example, the Bible frequently repeats the commandment

to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger;

in other words, for those who are most vulnerable.

Because societies are weakened and nations are lost

when members of powerful tribes follow their natural tendencies and

take advantage of the members of weaker tribes.

In today’s context, the widow, orphan and stranger include

the low wage worker, the uninsured, the immigrant and

anyone denied equal opportunity or equal treatment under the law.

If ancient Israel was lost in part because

the weak were exploited by the strong,

it is fair for us to ask on Yom Kippur,

are we putting our own nation at risk in similar fashion?

As we are all aware, America is becoming not only more unequal but more partisan and yes, more tribal as well. It has been this way for a while but it may be reaching a high point, or better, a low point, today.

We’ve learned a lot along this journey, mostly that we don’t like it. We’re not happy when our national conversation is poisoned. We don’t like it when America is reduced to a gaggle of squabbling tribes. The motto of our great nation is “*E Pluribus Unum*—Out of many, one.” It is not, “I can’t hear you over the sound of my own shouting.”

We've also learned that asking partisan politicians to set aside their tribal loyalties, to say nothing of those of their donors, and work to fashion us into a more perfect Union, is to ask of them something that seems beyond their grasp.

We elect them to run a functioning and non-corrupt government, and what grade would we give them on that? Moreover, creating a truly great society requires more than politics, even successful politics. It requires philosophy, literature, the arts, sciences, faith.

Politics may occasionally produce a Lincoln, a Roosevelt, a Kennedy or a Churchill, but most often it is about which tribe gets what, when and how. And if they could even do that fairly and well, most of us would take it. Part of the reason they don't may be that many of them benefit when we are divided.

There was a essay in the Scientific American this year called [Black Lies, White Lies and Blue Lies](#), by Jeremy Adam Smith.

"Black lies," he says, are blatant falsehoods. Statements that anyone can fact check and see that they are not true. We've all heard our share of them.

"White Lies" are the ones we tell to spare people's feelings. "Great haircut!" "Beautiful performance!" "It was nothing you did." Many of these are actually permissible according to Jewish law, but that's a topic for another day.

Then there are blue lies, which Smith describes as lies that people will believe if they reinforce their tribal identity.

For example, "The Yankees stink." It's a blue lie but any Red Sox fan will sign on to it. On some level they know it's not really true, but it feels so good to shout it, especially when you're surrounded by thousands of others shouting the same thing.

As blue lies go, that one is fairly benign. Everyone knows it's a game, everyone gets to vent their frustrations and most of the time, no one gets hurt.

Not all blue lies are so harmless. The Nazis told them about Jews, by the ton. Many Germans knew they weren't really true—but they didn't bother to fact check—probably because it felt so good to shout them alongside thousands of others shouting the same thing. And we know what happened next.

Similarly, the KKK in America. Basically everything they ever said about African-Americans, not to mention Catholics, Jews and others, were blue lies, false but nevertheless reassuring to the tribe. They blue lies gave a sense of identity, acceptance, and of course superiority. They shared them at cross burnings and torchlight rallies. Where they became gateway drugs for much worse.

Even the “good guys” sometimes tell blue lies. When the US government set up internment camps for German-Americans during WWI and Japanese-Americans in WWII, they told the rest of the country how dangerous those people were.

In the years since we’ve wondered how that could have happened. It certainly wasn’t the ideal America. But it was the tribal America.

Almost anywhere you look, people in or aspiring to power have used blue lies to demonize some of God’s children, typically the less powerful, for their own advantage. But when those lies take root, it is to the detriment of everyone.

Societies eventually collapse under the weight of too many falsehoods. If they are not stopped, the nation will be lost. But in the meantime, both for the folks telling them and for the folks swallowing them, they are not a bug, they’re a feature.

As we saw last week, better education and better thinking are not strong enough to extricate us from all this. Descartes famously said, “I think therefore I am,” but a book called “The Knowledge Illusion” by cognitive scientists Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach claims that most of us actually think very little—at least as individuals. Most of the thinking we do engage in is groupthink.

Groupthink can be a good thing. It enables us to share, create and cooperate. More than our independence, it is interdependence that has allowed human civilization to flourish and grow. We stand on the shoulders of those who came before us and we cooperate with those who live with us.

But groupthink has its own limitations and one of them is it deceives us into thinking that we are making up our own minds. There’s a scene in the Monty Python movie, “Life of Brian,” set in first century Judea. A huge crowd of would-be disciples wants Brian to be their Messiah. Brian wants no part of it. He tells them: “You don’t need to follow me, you don’t need to follow anybody! You’ve got to think for yourselves! You are all individuals!” The crowd hears this and responds as one, “Yes! We are all individuals!”

Dov Seidman runs a company which advises corporations on leadership. He concurs that thinking by itself, group or individual, is not enough to break us free from the negative effects of tribalism. According to Seidman, we need to get from “I think, therefore I am” to, “I care, therefore I am; I hope, therefore I am; I imagine, therefore I am. I am ethical, therefore I am. I have a purpose, therefore I am...”

All well and good. But if our present cultural moment is better described by, “I belong therefore I am” and “I am a member of a tribe, therefore I am,” we have our work cut out for us.

When I was in the full-time rabbinate, we tried to do some of this work. We set up a number of programs that challenged people to reach beyond tribal boundaries and overcome at least some prejudices. (My own included.)

We actually had some success. On occasion we not only managed to create greater understanding, but also friendships and even long term relationships across fairly heavy tribal lines. And there was relatively little thinking involved.

A number of our initiatives were with Muslims. We had the ADL vet our prospective partners and after we got okays, went ahead.

Most of the people in our community were supportive but predictably, there was some pushback. “What are you doing Rabbi? Don’t you know who these people are? They are playing you for a dupe, just like the Quran tells them to do! You are being naive. These are our enemies. Haven’t you read their book?” And so on.

Believe me when I tell you that none of those folks had studied the Quran. None of them had even studied much Torah, which is relevant because anyone who deals with sacred texts understands that when trying to interpret them, what is literal is only the surface meaning.

But never mind that, their primary sources were forwarded emails, Facebook feeds and the like. In other words, everything that they thought they knew, came from within a narrow tribal framework.

And our partners on the other side heard similar. “Jews? Don’t you know you can’t trust them? They’ll say one thing to your face and do another behind your back. Just like they’ve done to the Palestinians. Just as they’ve done throughout their whole history. Haven’t you read their book?” Etc.

The moral of the story is that suspicion, fear and blue lies can drive people into tribal shells. And those shells will not crack no matter how much truth telling and sweet reason we bring to bear.

So instead we responded, at least to those who were open to the possibility of conversation, as follows. “Okay, I hear what you’re saying. But tell me, ‘How many Muslims do you know personally?’” Most of the time the answer was none. So I would suggest they speak to fifty Muslims and we could continue the conversation after that. Our Muslim counterparts said the same thing with their people. And because we knew that some people might not be able to find fifty

Muslims, or fifty Jews, we arranged a series of programs, at the synagogue and at the mosque, where we provided them for one another.

At which point everything really became quite simple. There was no need for propaganda or re-education. After some introductory words, we sat down together, broke bread and got acquainted.

It didn't take long at all for people to get out of tribal mode and into normal human being mode. And from that perspective it became clear that we were not nearly as different from one another as we may have first thought.

This new activity led to new understanding. The new doing led to new thinking. In time that was followed by new caring and new hoping, new imagining and even new working together. The tribal boundaries were not erased but they were not nearly as imposing as they were before.

There will always be some bad apples. Just like there are bad Christians (see Charlottesville) and bad Jews. But associating every Muslim with ISIS, Al Qaeda or Hamas is like linking every Jew to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion or *Mein Kampf*.

A number of years ago the Conservative Jewish movement added a verse to the *Birkat hamazon*, the Grace after Meals, in some of its prayerbooks. *Harachaman, hu yavi shalom bein b'nai Yisrael u'vnei Yishmael*—May the All Merciful bring peace between the children of Israel and the children of Ishmael, i.e. between the Jews and the Arabs.

And why not? We're fools not to at least make the effort. Did you see that just last weekend a Modern Orthodox rabbi marched as the honorary grand marshal in the NYC Muslim Day parade? True! If we can break down tribal barriers like these, we can break down a lot of them that are nowhere near as strong.

Maybe we can devote the rest of this, our most holy day, to identifying the common humanity that We and They always share. No matter what tribes we may belong to, be they ethnic, religious, political or social.

To embrace the Malachi's teaching, and one another, in the year ahead. Because seriously friends, the fate of the nation may be at stake.

We'll continue tomorrow.

G'mar tov and l'shana tovah.