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Our Values: Clarifying Them

Values. It's what our faith, and really, every faith, is ultimately about. Values are going to be a theme for us during these Holydays. This morning, we'll speak about clarifying them. Next week, we'll talk about holding on to them and fighting for them. And we'll have time for some more in-between.

We're making this emphasis because values are core. For individuals, and for society. There has yet to be a system, capitalist, communist, socialist, fascist, democratic, republican, Zionist, nationalist, monarchist, you-name-it, that has managed to achieve the goal of "liberty and justice for all." Most of the time, it is "liberty and justice for some," and a good deal less, for others.

Which is why spiritual-religious values in general and Jewish values in particular, are essential. They guide us when national efforts and partisan slogans fall short.

Values are why Judaism, and the other great faiths, are still around after thousands of years. They have outlasted every political ideology that has ever been tried — or I daresay, ever will be. Because no matter what the system, no matter who is in power, there will always be a greater need for *tikkun olam* — for repairing the world — than those in power will be able to effect.

We have many values, but let's begin with one we can see. One that is literally looking us in the face. The twentieth-century Jewish philosopher Emanuel Levinas suggested that the face of the other is as the face of God; that every face we see is potentially, a portal to godliness. Look around and see faces. Look around and see God.

That may sound radical but it really isn't. Every faith teaches that the human form is holy, and where better to see that than in our faces? The question then becomes, how are we going to treat that face? This question, and value, unites the entire human family. It is also a starting point as well as a destination.

Alas, we seem to have wandered off course. In the Americas, in Europe, in Africa, in the Middle East, in the Far East, you name the place and we will find people, both in power and out, who are willfully blind to the divinity of at least some of their fellow human beings. They disregard that

value, and sometimes even mock it, in the name of nationalism, racism, fundamentalism, or some other -ism. It is a great sin. But pointing it out can raise tensions.

Dennis Prager is a Brooklyn-born teacher of Judaism who has been a conservative talk show radio host in Los Angeles for many years. Some time ago he was a visiting scholar at our congregation and told a story about defending Israel at an interfaith event. At one point a questioner arose, and with some hostility asked, “Mr. Prager, are you a Jew first or an American first?”

In familiar Jewish fashion, Dennis responded with another question, “Tell me, sir. Are you a Christian first or an American first?” The gentleman was taken aback, but eventually answered, “Why, I’m an American first.” At which point Dennis said, “Then, permit me to say that you are a very bad Christian.” And, he claims, the Christian clergy onstage and in the audience, agreed completely.

They did, because they understood, that the purpose of religion, whether it is Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or any other, is to cultivate the deepest, noblest, and truest of human values. It is to connect us to one another while connecting us to the Highest. And this universal sensibility is meant to guide us in the public realm.

There is supporting evidence in no less than the US Constitution. According to the preamble, “We the People . . . in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish...etc.”

In other words, this is a legal document, one that establishes the civic institutions necessary for the republic to function, e.g., a Congress, an Executive, Courts, etc. But beyond that of a well-run democratic government, there are no values there. Which is as it should be.

We are grateful to the Founders for understanding that if we are going to achieve our civic goals, faith needs to be free to teach values to the people, who will, ideally and in turn, participate in the democracy by working to create the best possible society.

Which is why we can be Jews first, Christians first, Muslims first, Hindus first, whatever our faith may be, first. Because if we are nationalists first, of whatever nation; or partisans first, of whatever party, we’ve missed the essence of citizenship, and the point of faith.

Let’s clarify a bit further. When the Torah says, “Justice, justice, shall you pursue,” (Deuteronomy 16:20) the Rabbis ask, naturally enough, “Why is the word ‘justice’ repeated?” They answer that the goal of justice must be achieved through the value of justice; that just means must be used to reach just means. You have to admit, that’s pretty good for seventh century BCE.

I can think of more than a few judicial systems around the world that fall short of this standard. But our faith insists upon it. And so should we as citizens. We'll come back to this point shortly.

The Torah also teaches that we should not judge a poor person favorably because we feel sorry for him; nor should we favor a wealthy person because we respect his power. Each is to be judged according to their merit, or lack thereof. (Lev. 19:15) This is our value. Again, if only the courts reflected it.

I remember reading as a kid, in a distinguished publication (it was Mad magazine), that whoever said money can't buy happiness, never sat in a courtroom. I've yet to hear a legal professional disagree. Courts and judicial systems often fall short of the Torah's value to treat everyone equally, regardless of financial or social status. But it remains our value. And we fight for it whenever we can.

Jewish tradition values care for the planet. According to the *Midrash*, if we destroy it, God is not going to make us another one. That was written at least 1500 years before the first Earth Day. Again, governments, to be charitable, have a mixed record on this. Can you say Red Tide? Big Sugar? Disease on the reefs? Salinity in the Bay? There may be legitimate debate as to what are the best ways to protect the planet. But that it needs protecting is not a question.

Jews have also taught the world not to oppress the stranger, the newcomer, the outsider, the refugee. Why? According to the Torah, "...you know the heart of the stranger, having been strangers yourselves in the land of Egypt." "You shall love him as yourself." (Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:34) We know that governments have a mixed record here, too. But we enshrine this value at the heart of every Passover Seder.

We are taught not to "stand idly by while your neighbor's blood is shed." (Lev. 19: 16) Yet we know that when innocent lives are being lost or otherwise put in jeopardy, governments are not always there to protect them. People with values are.

One more, for the moment. According to the Prophet Ezekiel, we are to share our bounty with the needy, clothe the naked, deal truthfully." (Ezekiel 18:7, 9) People who are committed to these values often employ them with more success, and with more caring, than any number of official institutions.

Political systems, governments, and politicians come and go, succeed and fail, but values abide. They may not always be easy to implement. But a living faith binds us to them.

I want to go back to reaching just ends through just means. Full disclosure, I majored in political science in college and have spent entirely too much time listening to politicians, of all different parties, and from many different countries, in the years since.

One of the things I've learned is that most of them can paint a decent enough picture of their goals. Pretty much everyone has a vision, at least to their own way of thinking, of a just end.

What distinguishes them is the means by which they intend to get there. Some politicians, we can usually tell, are looking to reach just ends through just means. Others, not so much. And with some, it's hard to say.

But the question, for those who aspire to lead us, and for us too, is not, "Do you believe in just ends?" Because pretty much everyone can talk that talk. The key question is, "Can you get us there by just means?" Because if the means are not just, it is highly unlikely that the ends will be.

We can take the former Soviet Union as an illustration. Its goal was to create a socialist workers' paradise. For the sake of discussion only, let's call that a just end. But it was a calamitous failure, because essentially right from the beginning, their leaders tried to reach it through horrific means.

Secret police, the gulag, murders by the millions, purges; even if the economic and political systems worked, which they didn't, those means would have destroyed whatever chance they had to reach a just end. USSR, RIP. We pray for the souls who were slaughtered in your name.

Today is Rosh Hashanah and that same key question is being asked of us. What unjust means might we be employing, or supporting, in pursuit of what we say are just ends?

We can use our values to clarify. Are we working with honesty, decency, and caring, for those whom we have at our advantage, and on behalf of those who cannot care for themselves, as Ezekiel said? Are we promoting the virtues of hard work, fairness, equality of opportunity, and equality before the law, as the Torah commands? Or are we okay with letting the most powerful call the shots and the devil take the hindmost?

If we are counting on unjust means to lead us to just ends, we should understand that countless empires, and countless individuals, have crashed on that rock. It is, at best, a fool's errand.

There is a famous poem by the twentieth-century German Lutheran pastor, Rev. Martin Niemoller. It is engraved in permanent display at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. You may have heard it.

"First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out —
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me — and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Rev. Niemoller was, originally, a Nazi supporter. He turned a blind eye to the party’s unjust means because he believed they would somehow lead to a just end. By the time he, and everyone else, realized how wrong they were, it was too late.

Niemoller was imprisoned but survived the war. When it was over, he wrote, “... whenever I chance to meet a Jew known to me from before; as a Christian, I cannot but tell him: 'Dear Friend, I stand in front of you, but we can not get together, for there is guilt between us. I have sinned, and my people has sinned, against your people and against you.'” (Niemoller, *Of Guilt and Hope*, 1946)

Niemoller became aware, not only of his own guilt, but what happens when even the best-intentioned people pursue what they think will be just ends through unjust means. He learned, that not only do the ends not justify the means; but that the means are what matter most — by far.

We human beings are flawed, limited, and possessed of an enormous capacity for self-deception. We are not prophets. We cannot see the future. We never know, with any long-term project, how the ends will turn out. But we can always see the means — often right in front of our faces. And in the faces of the other. Which, once again, are as the face of God.

It is far too easy to adapt Niemoller’s poem to our world today. I’m going to do it anyway. Think ends and means as you listen.

First they came for the people with no health insurance, and I did not speak out — Because I had a job with benefits, or Medicare.

Then they came for the women who said #MeToo, and I did not speak out — Because, you know, “he said, she said.”

Then they came and shot up the schools, and the offices, and the concerts, and I did not speak out — Because I was a responsible gun owner.

Then they came for the free press, and I did not speak out — Because everyone knows how annoying they can be.

Then they came for the loyal opposition, and I did not speak out — Because how can you be loyal if you’re a member of the opposition?

Then they came for the brown-skinned children, and to separate them from their mothers without a fuss, they told them they were taking them to get a bath. And I did not speak out — Because... is there anything I can possibly say here?

One may agree or disagree with some of those intended ends. But none of those means is remotely justifiable.

In fairness, achieving just ends through unjust means is not always impossible. There are exceptions, particularly in wartime. But even there, the record is mixed.

At any rate, most of our issues today are not matters of war. They are matters of conscience. They are matters of decency. They are matters of being our brother's keeper. They are matters of seeing God in the face of the other. They are matters of values.

When the dust finally settles, and the day of reckoning arrives — and in our tradition today is *Yom Ha-Din*, our day of judgment — what will we say to those for whom we did not speak up? And what will we say to God, to whom, on this day, we are supposed to be giving an account of ourselves?

Will they be words like Niemoller's, correct and sincere, but far too little and much too late?

Or might we have something better to offer, if not today, then when we are standing here again next year? Perhaps something from our tradition. Something like, "I tried to live by the words of the *Mishnah*, where we are taught that, "It is not for you to complete the work, but neither are you free to abstain from it." (*Avot* 2: 21) Or, more simply, "I may have failed, but I was not passive. I did not enable. I was not silent."

Such words, and such values, have been given to us that we might live by them. I pray that this is clear.

L'shana tovah.