Last week we marked the 17th anniversary of 9/11. So seminal was that event that we describe ourselves as living in a Post-9/11 World. What does that mean? Some say the world is literally a different place – that we are living in a “new reality”. Others have argued that the world prior to 9/11 was the illusion. In the aftermath of 9/11 they argue that September 11, 2001 wasn’t the start of a new reality, but rather that we’ve finally woken up and realised what the world is really like. That perspective may seem especially cynical and even frightening, but I think what the message really is that 9/11 was the result of forces that had been emerging and building for some time; forces that most of us had been ignorant of. So the world definitely changed and I think Yom Kippur is the perfect time to examine just what kind of world we are living in now and ask ourselves if this is the kind of world we want for ourselves and for our children and grandchildren.

Several years ago I was asked to make a presentation at a forum on faith and world peace. I was part of a panel of presenters what included Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim faith representatives and the Reverend Bill Phipps, former moderator of the United Church of Canada. We were asked to address the question, what do our individual faith traditions have to say about peace and what can religion offer to the pursuit of peace in the world? Daunting questions to say the least, especially for a Zionist Jew who is more than aware of and deeply feels the struggle for peace and statehood in which our Israeli and Palestinian cousins seem to be perpetually entangled.

So I’ll start with the first question, what does Judaism have to say about peace? Well, as I noted on Rosh HaShanah, the prayer for peace is one of the few petitionary prayers retained in the Shabbat Amidah, despite the fact that the Sabbath is God’s day off too. We are the inheritors of a history and textual tradition that reaches back more than five thousand years to our ancient Israelite ancestors. Our textual tradition mirrors the changes in our religion. Worship in the Torah has as its focal point the ancient sacrificial cult – but included among the laws calling for an unblemished goat here or a dove there are the moral and ethical standards intended to be the blueprint for our society. This society, in its day, was revolutionary in its approach to human rights with its guarantees for the disenfranchise members of society such as widows, orphans, the poor, foreigners and even slaves. And while Scripture also records ancient calls for vicious battles that often resulted in the destruction of other ancient peoples – that is *not* the main thrust of TaNaKh, nor of Judaism. It is a reflection of the ancient Near Eastern warrior god mythos and, indeed, a reflection of ancient Near Eastern culture.

Mixed in with the sacrificial laws and ancient battle calls is the inexorable push toward the Jewish ideal of a just society – a society predicated on the belief that all humanity was created “b’tzelem Elohim”, in the image of God. A society striving for justice with the word ‘tzedek – justice’ stemming from righteousness born out of reverence for God, respect for humanity created in the Divine image and a sense of responsibility for the guardianship and healing of a world created by God and entrusted to us.

When Abraham is first called by God in Genesis, he is not called upon to raise an army, go forth, and wipe out idol worshipers from the face of the earth. He is told that through him and his descendants “all the inhabitants of the world shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3, 22:18. Our tradition teaches us that we are to be a light to the nations of the earth – that light is the light of wisdom, justice and peace.

The patriarchal concept of history is a history of conflicts recorded by the victors. The litany of kings, generals, prophets and spies is not unique to Scripture. Think about when you studied history at school. British history centres on the monarchy and the development of the parliamentary system. History in the New World is the history of conquerors, colonizers and revolutionary wars. The texts of TaNaKh exhibit a similar pattern. Battles between kings and would be conquerors, scribes, priests and religious reformers provide the backdrop for the prophetic calls to attend to the social injustices of the day. Prophets ranging from Isaiah to Jeremiah, Amos to Hosea, Ezra and Daniel serve a ringing indictment that the unconscious fulfilment of religious rituals alone is insufficient for redemption. They remind us that God is calling us to be conscious of our humanity and our moral, ethical and even theological obligations to serve the greater good. It is this prophetic tradition that laid the groundwork for Rabbinic Judaism. This is the Judaism that survived the loss of the sacrificial cult and turned our focus instead on daily prayer offerings and text study which, in turn, are the guideposts for our actions in the world.

Among those prayers and texts, peace has been identified as one of our highest values. In the daily liturgy we pray for the peace of Jerusalem and all her inhabitants – Jew and non-Jew alike. The priestly benediction recognises peace as God’s greatest blessing and our messianic concept envisions and end-time of paradise that is not reserved for favoured Jewish believers, but for all good and righteous human beings. It is a liturgy, theology and philosophy that acknowledges that justice is only justice when it is available to all and no only a select, favoured few.

Now to the second question, what can faith offer to the process of world peace? Again, a cynical voice might be attempted to answer that religion has already contributed enough to the process of war, thank you very much, so we hardly need more input from religious leaders. We’ve all heard the rather tired tirade that organised religion is the root of all that’s wrong with the world and the smug voices of atheists who think they are somehow better than believers because they’re not deluded by the “fantasy of God”.

I think that viewpoint gives religion short shrift and is unfair to devout believers of all faith traditions. I have experienced times in my life without a connection to a religious community. I am a much stronger, a much better human being, let alone a better Jew, when I am connected with my Judaism than I was at any time in my life when I was disconnected from it. Indeed that is the main reason I was drawn to the rabbinate. The mainstay of any religious doctrine is not intolerance and hatred. Those elements are commonly found in the history of nearly all religious communities – but they are the products of human nature, not Divinity. The principles that emerge – the ones that qualitatively change and improve personal human existence and can qualitatively change the whole human experience – are the principles of justice, compassion, the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge, reverence for God and a willingness to serve humanity and work toward peace.

The purpose of faith is not to freeze us in one moment in time, but rather to give us the ethical grounding and the spiritual strength to engage in an ever-changing world and to be able to address the time that we live in. Human beings and human societies are organic; faith also needs to be organic. God is not frozen in stone and our relationship with God shouldn’t be either. Our relationship with the Divine evolved during the course of the biblical narratives. The human-God relationship in Genesis is not the same human-God relationship in Isaiah.

Religion only becomes the vehicle for hatred when groups or sects decide, not just that they have the sole, true interpretation of faith, but that others who believe differently are a threat. Fearful of those who dare to believe something else, they go on the attack. At first that attack may be verbal, but in in many, far too many instances, those attacks become physical. I would argue that a faith so easily threatened, a faith that can only be supported through brutal subjugation and violent confrontation, is not really faith at all. The various branches of Judaism are not immune to this same sort of ideological discord. We have our fundamentalists who will seize on a literal, simplistic interpretation of a text – or the interpretation of their favourite rabbinic authority – and use that to support their ideological intransigence, intolerance and lack of vision. Ironically, such approaches run counter to the true spirit of our faith and tradition. The essence of the great rabbinic texts, Mishnah, Talmud, the various codes, are not just how to observe the halakhah. The essence of Judaism, as the prophet Isaiah and so many generations of rabbinic sages have taught so eloquently, is not the fulfilment of ritual alone. At the core of our faith are those ethical and social justice values I’ve already mentioned.

What does our faith offer the world? I like the model of the Talmud itself: students and sages gathering in company founded on mutual respect and a shared desire to learn with and from one another. Their discourse is meticulously recorded. Dissent is common. There are both minority and majority opinions recorded with the expectation that even though a majority consensus has been achieved, there are those who, respectfully, will continue to dissent and will follow the minority ruling.

For every narrow, particularistic text, there is a broader, universalist counter-text. There are still those who will continue to hold on to the narrower interpretations of tradition. Yet, even they cannot escape the fundamental ethical commands which insist that we, in the words of the prophet Micah, “do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

We live in the era of the ‘global village’ – a notion that frightened many at the turn of this century. The concern was that galloping globalisation would result in a world only governed by economic forces and the clash of wills between corporate moguls and ideological extremists. Indeed, for a while there it looked like that was our future. Sometimes it still feels like that might be our fate. But that’s why it is important to answer the call of our faith traditions – because those traditions make humanity, not dollars, the bottom line. The only equation that matters is the human equation. That equation includes access to healthcare, education, drinkable water, life in a non-toxic environment and the ability to sustain oneself and one’s family. The shapers of this global village must be our representatives – the ones that we can hold accountable for the actions they take on our behalf. After all, history will not judge us by how rich we were. It will judge us by how we lived and what kind of world we left to our descendants.

If faith and faith leaders have anything to offer, it is to remind us of our humanity and that every day, not just one time at Sinai, but *every day* is a choice between life and death, blessing and curse, goodness and evil. The prophets and rabbis also teach that we cannot go through life with blinders on. It is not difficult to answer the question, ‘what kind of world do I want to be living in?’ The difficult one to answer is, ‘what am I prepared to do to make that happen?’

For many of the world’s problems, there are no simple solutions, but as Rabbi Tarfon teaches in *Pirke Avot*, “The day is long, the work is hard and the Master of the House [i.e. God] is pressing” (2:15). Faith provides a starting point, an answer to the Torah’s call of “*tzedek, tzedek tirdof* – justice, justice, you shall pursue it” (Deut.16:20) and we know the task is daunting. Nevertheless, Rabbi Taron also teaches, that “It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to refrain from it...” (2:16).

It is Yom Kippur. This day is indeed long and hard and the Master of our House is pressing: what kind of world to you want to be living in? What are you prepared to do to make it happen?

daeh dnzg xnb

May you be sealed for blessing