

Sermon For Rosh HaShanah Evening
September 8, 2010 - 1 Tishri, 5771
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

It was 2004 when a 20 year-old Palestinian young man named George Khoury went out for a jog. George was a charismatic young man, a law-student and a musician. Suddenly, a group of gunmen drove by in a car, and murdered him, pumping bullets into his back from behind. But later something extraordinary happened. The killers apologized - they had thought George was a Jew.

George's father, a well-known Jerusalem lawyer named Elias Khoury, knows the dark side of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict as well as anyone. Shortly after the creation of the State of Israel, his family's land, some 750 acres was seized by Israel for security purposes, bankrupting his family. His father, Daoud, an educated man, fought the confiscation, and had difficulty finding even menial labor, until finally securing a job as an accountant at the King David Hotel 20 years later. Shortly thereafter, in 1975, Palestinian terrorists placed a bomb in a refrigerator in downtown Jerusalem, killing 13 people including Daoud Khoury. Elias was only a few feet away.

Elias Khoury is a Palestinian nationalist. He often takes cases fighting Israeli confiscation of land from Palestinians. But in memory of his murdered son, Elias also did something extraordinary. He sponsored the translation into Arabic and the publication of a very well known and popular book - the autobiography of perhaps Israel's most famous writer, Amos Oz.

The Arabic version of *A Tale of Love and Darkness* went on sale in Beirut last February. What could possibly have motivated a Palestinian lawyer and mourning father to have sponsored the translation and publication of an Israeli autobiography? "This book," he said, "tells the history of the rebirth of the Jewish people. We can learn from it how a people like the Jewish people emerged from the tragedy of the Holocaust (and were able to reorganize themselves and build their country and become an independent people.) If we can't learn from that, we will not be able to do anything for our independence."¹

¹ From "Palestinian Sees Lesson Translating an Israeli's Work" by Ethan Bronner in *The New York Times* March 6, 2010

The idea that one people has something important to learn from the experience, the ideas, the history, the perspective, of the Other is a notion that seems to be in very short supply these days.

We live in an ever-increasingly polarized world. We live in a world of red states versus blue states, of partisan anger, of "us" versus "them." More and more, we find in our society and in our world a growing sense of alienation and anger. People don't just disagree with each other. We demonize each other. We don't stop at debating ideas, we impugn the very humanity of anyone who disagrees with us. We call our leaders Wingnuts and Socialists. When leaders disagree in our country, we challenge their patriotism. We yell louder and louder, and listen less and less.

We have, as Bill Bishop notes in his book *The Big Sort*, participated in an extraordinary migration whereby we self-segregate ourselves into communities and lifestyles where more and more people live, think, vote, and practice religion in nearly identical fashion.²

It is no accident that we who celebrate these Holy Days together, live in a community with one of the highest concentrations of Jews in America. Jewish people make up barely 1 ½ percent of the American populace, but Jews make up nearly 40 percent of the population of greater Boca Raton. But even with this distinction, we self-segregate further. We move into neighborhoods of almost uniform socio-economic value. We try to send our children to school with people whose values mirror our own. Aimee and I deliberately send our children to Jewish Day School - and not just any Jewish Day School, but the Donna Klein Jewish Academy, a pluralistic community Jewish Day School where our progressive Jewish ideologies will be taught and shared. In our ever increasingly separated society, we find that we have less and less opportunity to spend time with people who are different from ourselves.

And maybe this is a good thing. It's much more comfortable, isn't it, to be with people who think like you do, who act like you do, whose values seem the same as yours, who speak our spoken and unspoken languages?

Not much has changed. In the early years of the United States, members of congress lived in boarding houses in Washington, DC, usually sharing rooms and eating clubs with other members who hailed from the same state or part of the

² Bill Bishop. *The Big Sort: Why The Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008.

country. This segregation often extended to the Capitol and the floor of Congress. Research conducted by historian James Sterling Young found that the boarding houses and eating clubs also became voting blocks. Members of a particular boarding house came from the same part of the country, would sit together on the floor of Congress, and more often than not, would vote in identical patterns. What was true at home was true in Congress. Birds of a feather flocked together.

There were some who believed this was only the natural consequence of a diverse nation. Cato, one of the anti-federalists who opposed the constitution, wrote that there was no way we could form "a perfect union" from a people who were all so different from each other. The congress, he wrote, "therefore, composed of interests opposite and dissimilar in their nature, will in its exercise, emphatically be like a house divided against itself."³

But others among our founding fathers had a different dream. It was their dream that by bringing together representatives of various peoples and factions, a deliberative process would produce the most effective and useful outcomes for the nation. They believed in creating a government of deliberation and compromise. They understood that like-minded communities could produce extreme politics and that would be detrimental to the whole. Roger Sherman wrote that it was the duty of representatives: "to meet others from the different parts of the Union, and consult, and agree with them on such acts as are for the general benefit of the whole community."

And it used to be this way. Fifty years ago Americans might have been loyal to their party, but our country was far less partisan. It was not uncommon for members of different parties to collaborate more on legislation, and to work together for the common good. Former Oklahoma Congressman Mickey Edwards stopped at the barbershop in the Rayburn House Office Building, "and the barber told me, he said, 'It's so different, it's so different. People don't like each other; they don't talk to each other.'"

We live in a country that is far more diverse than our Founding Fathers could ever have anticipated. Men and women come to America from nearly every corner of the globe. But the dream of integration is quickly evaporating. More and more we do the segregating ourselves.

I remember so clearly when I was in my first year in college, our dorm had kids from many different places, including

³ Cato's Letters - number 3

my friend Alvin, who grew up in Brooklyn. Later in our first year, Alvin decided to live in a special residence hall called the Harlem Renaissance Center - a dorm that was for students in African-American studies. Ostensibly, this was a dorm for African-American kids. The university neither encouraged nor required these kids to live there. On the contrary, they chose to live there. The students in the Harlem Renaissance Center mostly hung out with each other, or in the cultural center, a hangout for people of color. Alvin had been a good friend for part of my first year, and then he disappeared. I hardly ever saw him after that. And I felt like my own experience as a student was diminished because he went to his world, and I went to mine.

Because I missed Alvin, I tried to spend time at the Harlem Renaissance Center. The programs were fascinating. I learned so much about African-American history, so much about their legacy of persecution. I saw how the stories of my own people, the story of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt had grown to be so important and liberating to African-Americans. I learned why Jews and Blacks, who once worked in common cause in the Civil Rights Movement, began to grow antipathy and mistrust.

I will admit, though, I always felt a little out of place, and more than a bit uncomfortable. I was one of maybe four white students and without question the only Jew who participated in the KWANZAA celebration. Eventually, I stopped going.

At some point in my second year, I ran into Alvin on the quad and we met for lunch. I told him that I missed him and he said the same. I told him that I felt out of place and uncomfortable when I went to the Cultural Center or the Harlem Renaissance dorm. He smiled and said, "that's funny. Those are the two places on campus where I actually do feel comfortable."

Maybe we're meant to be separate. Maybe it's better if I live in my world, and they live in their world. Maybe Cato was right, that the only place you can really find union is "in the four walls of a home."

So, maybe we have it all wrong at Temple Beth El. After all - look around. We are an extraordinarily eclectic group. We have members of our congregation who are having children, members whose children are having children, and some even whose grandchildren are having children. We have Jews that come from classical Reform backgrounds, Jews that come from more traditional and even orthodox backgrounds, Jews by choice, and non-Jews as well. We have Jews that come from every continent on earth except Antarctica. I am blessed that many members of the congregation like to share their political e-mails and

thoughts with me, and I get left-leaning messages along with missives from the Tea Party. We have Democrats and Republicans in our congregation, Liberals and Conservatives, rich and poor, professionals and working class people, those who have generations of American roots, and members who have come to America just recently.

Some would see our diversity as a weakness. I believe our diversity is our strength. I believe that ultimately, what God wants of us is not to retreat into an echo-chamber of like-minded ideological reinforcement. I believe ultimately what God wants of us is to talk to each other, to wrestle with our beliefs, and grow stronger from the struggle.

When we segregate ourselves, we limit our exposure to new thinking, to new ideas, to new ways of looking at ourselves or at the world. It's like locking ourselves in an echo-chamber, where we find that the way we think is the way everyone thinks, and our opinions the only ones. It becomes difficult if not dangerous to question the status-quo for fear of being mocked or seen as seditious. Studies have shown again and again that like-minded groups grow more extreme over time. People hear the same ideas over and over again, and those ideas grow more ingrained and hardened. And the echo chamber produces ideologies that grow ever more extreme. It's true in the Madrassas of Pakistan, where anti-Semitism and anti-American hatred grow among people who have never met a Jew or an American, and it's true here, where anti-Islamic hatred is growing at a terrifying rate among people who have never had a single conversation with a Muslim man or woman. It's easy to love what we know, and as our people knows all too well, easy to hate what we've never met.

Building an Islamic center in lower Manhattan is no more a celebration of terrorist ideology than it would be to build a church a few blocks from the site of the Murragh building in Oklahoma City simply because Timonthy McVeigh was Christian. In some ways, the best way we can honor those killed in the terror attacks of 9/11 is to show the world that the foundation of diversity, tolerance, and religious freedom on which this nation stands, and from which the Jewish people have benefitted more than any other, were not taken down with the destruction of the Twin Towers.

This is the season of Teshuva of return. We are called to our annual accounting of our souls, where we take stock of our beliefs and our deeds, and consider whether we are following the right path. How will we ever know if we have found that right path if everyone around us says there is only one path and we're

already on it? How will we ever see a different path if everyone around us simply continues straight on like lemmings?

Our tradition teaches that God is one. God is found in the spiritual power of relationship, the bonds we form with one another. And if we choose to build a community whose web of connection links us to those who see the world just as we do, we might find participation in that community to feel pretty good. But ultimately, our spiritual growth in that community would reach a dead-end. For if we are to build real community, then we have to expand that web of relationship beyond the borders of the familiar and the comfortable to those who see the world differently than we do.

Temple Beth El is blessed to have shared an interfaith partnership with St. Joan of Arc Catholic church, our neighbors across Fourth Avenue. This year will celebrate our 25th year of that partnership. As Jews, we do not see the world the same as do our Catholic friends. There is much on which we cannot agree. But in the course of my career, I must tell you that I have learned a great deal about what inspires me as a Jew from my encounters with colleagues and fellow wanderers of different faith traditions.

But there was a time when Jews and Catholics would have nothing to do with each other. Jews and Catholics feared each other. We hated each other. We didn't know each other. But the more we got to know each other, the more we saw that there is far more that unites us than divides us.

Moses gave our people an admonition thousands of years ago that teaches us the core of what it means to be Jewish. "Sh'ma" he said. Listen.

Listening is different from hearing. In order to listen, we have to open more than our ears, but our minds and our hearts as well. We need to be open to the possibility that there is more than one right way to act, to believe, to be.

Our watchwords tell us: "Listen! Adonai is our God, Adonai is One!" God is one but we are many. And if we truly seek to know God better than we will endeavor to understand each other more completely. We will see that we have much to learn from those who look at the world differently from us, and that our own wisdom will grow only if we are open to learning from one another, if we ask questions of the each other and allow our core beliefs, ideas and ideals, to be questioned by others.

We need to break out of the echo-chambers that reverberate only one set of ideas and listen to the voices of the other. We need to make it safe again to talk about religion and politics

with one another, to dare to say what we believe and then listen carefully to what others have to say. We need to restore a sense of civil discourse in our world where we can challenge an idea without denigrating the humanity of the one who offered it.

Tonight we are gathered in our sanctuary as one congregation - old and young, men and women, conservative and progressive, beholden to the sanctuary and loyal to FAU. But if this sanctuary is to be more than just a room, then it needs to be a safe place to question our beliefs, to wrestle with who we are, to challenge each other to grow. If we want real community, and not just feel-good community, then we have to risk having our beliefs challenged and our feelings hurt.

On this Rosh HaShanah, let us cast off the blinders that lead us to a narrow-mindedness of mind and spirit. Let us consciously strive to seek out new ideas, new opinions, new ways of looking at our world. Let us reach out our hand to those who are different than we are, and look for the common ground we all share.

In this New Year, let us read the biography of our enemies, for in reading the story of the Other, we will better come to understand the story of our selves, a story that will lead one day to a world that is one with itself, and a world at peace.