Hate should have no home here

This week, we mark the 16th anniversary of September 11.

We remember again, as we do every year, the way hatred and foul irrational sulphurous evil came out of what literally was a clear blue sky, a sky as gloriously cobalt as we’d ever seen, a sky almost impossibly blue.

And then unthinkable monstrosity came from it, death and pain and stench and loss, the courage of first responders and the unthinkable decision people at the top of the towers had to make as they chose between death by smoke or death by jumping and plummeting to the ground, pulled by gravity ever faster and faster.

Many people in this community – the local Jewish community and the larger north Jersey one – died on that day.

There was some good that came out of that nightmare, examples of courage and heart and healing, an attempt to understand each other better, to see past labels into hearts. People lined up to pourings of love and solidarity, “there are many obvious connections between magazine Charlie Hebdo only managed to displease the world”.

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But now the world seems again plunged into a morass. The situation in North Korea is terrifying. This country’s moral and physical fabric seems to be fraying. We are at each other’s throats. We are turning away the immigrants who were brought here as children and know no other home, young immigrants who are just like many of our grandparents and great grandparents, also dreamers, equal in their hopes but not in their welcome. And anti-Semitism seems to be crawling from the woodwork where they apparently have been flourishing in the feit darkness.

We cannot possibly let this happen. And we don’t have to. This is the month of Elul. Sh’mi is next Saturday night – September 16. It is a time for reflection, not only about ourselves but about our place in the world. We are a strong community. And our new year comes at a physically beautiful time, when the world is about to turn bright with vivid color, when the light is gold and the shadows are sharp and the sense of excitement and change is palpable in the air.

There have been grassroots movements springing up all over, declaring that hate has no home here. There have been vigils, outpourings of love and solidarity, visual representations of the truth that love can trump hatred, that goodness can overcome wickedness, that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was right when he said that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

As we remember September 11, it as we look toward an unclear future in a suddenly unfriendly world, let us keep hoping that the moral universe continues to bend.

Editorial

It’s not God’s fault

If you have not yet donated to the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey’s Hurricane Harvey relief fund, please do so. If you are able to give blood, please do so, as well. The need is monumental and so is the mitzvah. That being said – It was inevitable. Almost immediately after Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Texas, there came the voices from the Christian religious right blaming the storm on gay rights, abortion rights, and even transgender bathroom privileges.

The latter is how conservative pastor Kevin Swanson interpreted Harvey to his radio listeners. “Just last week,” he said, “the State of Texas failed to pass a ... bathroom bill that would have prevented cross-dressing men from using women’s restrooms in the State of Texas.”

While “we’re not saying that God sent the hurricane just because of this,” he said, God’s message nevertheless was clear, and “the entire State of Texas and the entire United States of America needs to take note of this.” There “is a God in heaven, He brings His judgments, and He calls nations to repentance, as He is doing right now,” Swanson said.

He also noted that Houston only recently had “a very, very, very aggressively pro-homosexual mayor,” Annise Parker, which was another possible cause for Harvey. Said Swanson, “unless Americans repent, unless Houston repents, they will all likewise perish.” That is the message God “is sending home right now to America. Is America listening?”

One-time controversial high school football coach Dave DuBamniere, a far-right favorite ever since the ACLU tackled him in court in the late 1990s, told his webcast followers that Houston was “one of the darkest cities” in America. “Houston,” he mused, “we got a problem here. Could some of the problems be the result of the judgment of God coming your way because of the slaughter of unborn children?”

The question was rhetorical because, after all, he said, Houston was under water, and water, as everyone knows, “is a sign of judgment and cleansing.”

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More about the eruv

T
be eruv fight in Mahwah is becoming uglier and uglier, and we watch it with dismay.

To some extent, it is a microcosm of the anger and fear and hatred and bigotry that is bubbling all around us. If even football players can be under attack (and to be honest, I’ve never understood the allure of the oversize over-padded waddling eye-blacked behemoths, running into each other and grunting, but I know I’m in a minority on that one), then why not eruv supporters?

But the situation is complicated, and we watch helplessly as it is turned into a black-and-white, good-versus-bad, cartoon version of real life. (And of course which side is good and which is bad, which is all virtue and which is the cartoon demon, entirely depends on where you stand.)

First, it is hard to explain what an eruv is. A few weeks ago, I wrote that an eruv is a legal fiction, and that I knew that no one would be happy with that wording, but it’s the most accurate way to explain this odd phenomenon, the stripes marking poles and strings connecting them that demarcate private space for observant Jews and allows them to carry things and push strollers and wheelchairs on Shabbat.

Non-Jews and less observant Jews cannot help but be put off by the idea of an eruv because they assume – and logic and common sense are on their side as they make that assumption – that somehow their own private property is less theirs if it is surrounded by an eruv.

That of course is not the case.

Observant Jews bristle at the idea that an eruv is a legal fiction – they insist that it is symbolic, not fictitious, making a distinction so fine that it loses its meaning easily – because if it is, they say, it does not work.

As I expected, I got an angry letter telling me that I am breathtakingly ignorant because I used the term legal fiction. It is exactly that approach – the I’m-right-and-so-you’re-wrong-so-why-don’t-I-just-call-you-names approach – that leads to so much trouble.

It’s not an I’m-right-and-you’re-wrong issue. Eruv supporters must understand that it is not inherently anti-Semitic not to want an eruv.

The eruv struggle is not happening in a vacuum. There is history just over the state border. The specter of the East Ramapo school district looms. It is a tragic story – the working class, striving, largely immigrant or minority parents who moved to Rockland County to give their children better lives, and found themselves in a school district stripped of most resources, apparently by a large chauvinistic community that at least seemed not to care about them. The story is murky, but the one thing that is clear is that it is not good.

No one wants her school district to turn into an East Ramapo.

It is also true that it is possible to fight against an eruv, bring in lots of outside lawyers, fight in court, lose, fight again, lose, fight again, lose, and eventually give up and get an eruv. And then watch as absolutely nothing happens. So there’s an eruv. What?

That’s what happened in Tenafly more than 10 years ago. The town fought the eruv, anti-Semitism spewed, lots of money was spent, and it lost, and now it has an eruv. And Tenafly continues to have a wonderful school district; it also has many Jews, some Orthodox, some Conservative, some Reform; many non-Jews, representing a wide range of ethnicities, and very few problems.

That could happen in Mahwah too.

On the other hand, eruv opponents must understand that it doesn’t sound like they’re opposing just an eruv. More and more, as tempers stretch and patience and understanding run out and old elemental hatreds bubble up, it sounds like they’re opposing Jews.

It is starting to sound like pure anti-Semitism. Social media just makes everything worse. It used to demand either middle-of-the-night stealth or pure brazen guts to call someone a name or leave a nasty or threatening note in someone’s mailbox. Now there’s another way. Go online, and let the venom spew.

This has to end. This is a dream, of course, a mad wild dream, but this has to be wonderful if the adversaries could talk to each other? Really talk? The eruv supporters could explain how the eruv would make their lives easier, and then watch them make that assumption – that somehow the streets with a maser paper dragon as they do in Beijing. And no, we won’t even have a Buddha-themed citywide water-fight the way the Thai do on Songkran.

What do we do? We pray.

For most of the day.

For two days straight.

It doesn’t sound all that much, and I won’t pretend that I enjoy it as much as Judaism’s most festive holidays, which offer a lot more celebration, singing, and dancing. But what I can say about the Jewish New Year is that it’s beautiful because on these days we re-commit to our relationship with God, drawing ourselves ever closer into his divine embrace.

But Rosh Hashanah is not meant to be a day where we wallow in sin and feel ourselves to be spiritually inadequate. Judaism has no concept of original sin or of humanity perpetually falling short, concepts that are central to Christianity. Would anyone really imagine that on the three holiest days of the year God wants us to see ourselves as worms who can do nothing right?

Still, there are those who see it differently. In an op-ed published last week in the Wall Street Journal, the former chief rabbi of England, Lord Jonathan Sacks, offered a more rigid conception of the Jewish High Holy days. The question posed by the festival, writes Rabbi Sacks, is not why we continue to have faith in God, but why God continues to have faith in us.

The Jewish high holy days, he argues, are less days of holy love than of holy judgment. They present “a courtroom drama like no other,” one where “the judge is God himself” and “we are on trial for our lives.” Stranger than the idea of Rosh Hashanah being only about trial and judgment is the fact that we may be found guilty. After all, “in an other-wise law-governed universe, we are able to break the law – a power that we too often relish exercising.” And so, all we can do is ask God to forgive us. Which he does, because he’s God, and he always gives us another chance. Thus, Rabbi Sacks argues, these days prove God’s incredible faith in us despite our “shabby and threadbare moral record.”

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Save Bennie and Josh

Two related stories in this week’s Standard by our science correspondent, Dr. Miryam Wahrman, beautifully told and scientifically complex, tell the heartbreaking story of Bennie Landsman, not quite 1 1/2, and his little brother Josh, about 5 months old. Both the brothers have Canavan disease; unless science stops and magic takes over, the boys are likely to die before they can turn 10.

Their grandparents have devoted themselves to their care, and to raising money to fund the research that probably will not cure them but probably could prolong and comfort their lives. There are many lessons to all of us in this story, should we be able to dry our eyes and still our hearts enough to learn them.

To be clear, none of those lessons is theological. I have no idea what people whose minds go in that direction make of this story, and I do not want to know.

This story is about human love and perseverance and the ability to keep going; about the ability to take love wherever you find it and make more of it and keep going; about the ability to find hope in odd places and make more of it and keep going; about the ability to take love of this story, and I do not want to know.

The boys’ parents and grandparents are not giving in to despair, although who could blame them if they did? They are loving Bennie and Josh. They are giving them the experiences that all children deserve, no matter what we assume about their life expectancy. They are honoring their lives, listening to their laughs, playing with them, cuddling them, loving them. That matters.

Help the family. Go to the funding page — to get there, google “GoFundMe” and “save Benny and Josh.” It will help the family afford the experimental drugs that will keep their sons alive, at least for now. Every little bit adds up, and every little bit counts. That matters.

As this new year begins, as we leave perhaps the most contentious year most of us can remember, as we head toward a year that we fervently hope will be better, less partisan, less crude, less snarlingly ugly, we understand that we also are moving toward more light, and we hope that we also are moving toward hope.


We at the Jewish Standard wish all of our readers a new year of hope and love and peace.

— JPL

Don’t dismiss or ignore January’s ‘other’ new year

T here is a new year coming in January. No, not the one on January 1 – the one on January 31.

It is the New Year for Trees, also known as Tu b’Shvat.

Most Jews, children especially, will celebrate on January 1, but they will not even notice anything special about January 31. That is a sad commentary on Jewish life today, but it is not the only one.

How many people reading this column, for example, understand the significance of this past Thursday, December 26? It was the Fast of the Tenth of Tevet, Asarar b’Tevet, which marked the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Jerusalem in 588 B.C.E. The day, however, has a contemporary significance. It is the day set aside by Israel’s chief rabbinate to mourn the loss of all those whose dates of death are unknown, and particularly the victims of the Shoah. (It is likely this day was chosen because the Tenth of Tevet is the only fast day that is observed even if it falls out on a Friday.)

Then there is Shavuot. It is the second of our three pilgrimage festivals. Most Jews know that Shavuot marks the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, but it is much more than that. It marks the official birth of the Jewish nation, the day God declared us to be his “kingdom of priests and holy nation.” Until that moment, we were a collection of tribes. At Sinai, we became a unified nation with a sacred mission. Too few Jews even notice when Shavuot occurs, yet it is likely we all know when July 4 falls out.

There are many reasons for this diminution of Jewish knowledge, and for the diminution of observance that runs with it. This column, God willing, will deal with some of these reasons in the coming months.

For now, though, let us deal only with the imminent arrival of Tu b’Shvat, the New Year for Trees, which is classified as a “minor” holiday, but is (or should be) of major importance in our times. Tu b’Shvat, after all, is the ultimate Earth Day. This day underscores Judaism’s mandate to preserve and protect the natural world around us, for, in the Torah’s words, “Are trees of the field human to withdraw from before you.” (See Deuteronomy 20:19.)

Put another way, the environment cannot protect itself, so we have to protect the environment.

Based on that verse, as regular readers will recall, a principle of law was established — bal tashchit, “you may not destroy.”

In the Babylonian sage named Rav Zutra uses this verse to prohibit the wasteful use of fossil fuels or their derivatives. “He who covers an oil lamp or uncovers a naphtha [lamp] infringes the prohibition of wanton destruction.” The commentator Rashbi explains Rav Zutra’s statement this way: Covering an oil lamp or uncovering a naphtha one makes the fuel burn faster, thereby requiring more fuel than is necessary to produce light. This is a waste of resources, and therefore violates the ban on wanton destruction.

Maimonides, the Rambam, addresses the question of removing trees for aesthetic purposes. Says he, based on this simple verse (Responsa, No. 54), “The Torah forbid[s]...uprooting without any purpose, for that is wanton destruction.”

A 14th century rabbi, Aharon Halevy of Barcelona, in his Sefer Ha-Chinuch, said it “is the way of the pious and those of good deeds” to carefully adhere to the principle of bal tashchit; “not even a grain of mustard do they destroy, and they are grieved by any destruction they may see. If it is possible to save anything that is being spoiled, they