

**We are the Ones Who Have to Live In It**  
Sermon for Yom Kippur Morning, 2013/5774  
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You may know the old story about Sam the carpenter, who had worked for one builder for 25 years, constructing house after house. But he was tired, and reaching retirement age. One day Sam went in and told the boss that he was finished. He had figured out that he could afford to retire, and it was time. The contractor was shocked. “I rely on you. Please stay on and do just one more house!” No, he really wanted to quit. “Oh, please,” said the boss, “as a favor to me after all these years!” Reluctantly, the carpenter agreed to do one more house. But his heart was not in it, and, frankly, he did pretty sloppy work, failing to measure the wood as carefully as usual, not as many nails per joint as he normally used, and so on. He just wanted to be done with it and relax. Finally the house was finished, and the boss, as always, came to look over the finished product. He gathered the whole crew around, called Sam forward, and made a speech about how much he would be missed. Then he handed the keys to the house to Sam. “This is yours,” he said, “in appreciation for all that you have done over the years!”

I have heard that tale more than once from former Mayor and State Senator Mike Moncrief as a parable about government. In any society, but especially in a democracy, we are always building tomorrow’s society. As we make decisions, individuals or legislative bodies, we can focus more on immediate needs or on the long-term; we can each look out primarily for ourselves and our group—an ethnic group, an economic class, business interests, and so on—or we can worry equally about other groups, even the homeless, the minorities, or others who lack political clout. There will never be sufficient resources to do everything we might wish we could

do. The point is—at least as I hear the story—at the end of the day, the keys are handed to us. We are not building somebody else’s home. We will live—we *do* live—in the society we build.

A couple of quick examples, either of which may infuriate or delight you, depending on your political predilections. We have, right here in Fort Worth and surrounding communities, tens of thousands of what some call “undocumented” immigrants and others call “illegal” immigrants, largely but by no means exclusively Hispanic. Many of them do important but low-paying work, washing dishes and making beds and mowing grass. Without them we would, in demonstrable ways, be in trouble. On a national basis we are talking about millions of people, far more than anyone realistically thinks we could deport if we were able to round them all up to do so. These are people who, when sick, or victimized by crime, are afraid to go to the hospital, or call the Police, for fear of being discovered and arrested. And fixing the problem should not be a partisan issue: first the Bush Administration, and now the Obama Administration, have tried.

The national Reform movement—Union for Reform Judaism, Central Conference of American Rabbis—has come out in favor of the proposed path to citizenship for illegal aliens, noting in our resolutions how both recently (many of your grandparents and mine) and in antiquity Jews have so often wandered from place to place (“My father was a wandering Aramean and he went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but the Egyptians dealt harshly with us . . . etc.) On that basis I went with several Texas rabbis to meet with legislative and legal aides to Senator John Cornyn several months ago to lobby him. I was

delighted to find how reasonable they were: the Senator wants to be compassionate, but he also wants stronger border security so we do not continue to have the same problem and debate every 15 or 20 years. Sounded fine to me! Then I watched as, in Washington, stronger border security was added. “Not strong enough,” said the Senator, and voted “no.”

In this as in so many other areas, it appears the age of compromise has passed. Democracy can only work if we and our leaders, when confronted by difficult issues with good arguments on both sides, seek common ground. But strict ideologues on all sides savage any elected representative who dares to work “across the aisle.”

Children were slaughtered in their school in a little town in Connecticut. With all the bitter debate of years now as background, no one dreamed that we would fully regulate the gun industry. But surely, after Columbine and now Newtown, we could limit semi-automatic weapons of no use to hunters, and have private dealers and gun shows operate by the same rules as retail stores. You know what happened: a couple of steps towards that goal in Connecticut and New York. But the pro-gun forces pulled out all the stops. They say any compromise at all would be a betrayal of Constitutional rights! The Bill of Rights says the right to bare arms should not be infringed because it is so important to maintain “a well-ordered militia.” So now we have an army of well-armed citizens prowling about—and you can’t know ‘til after-the-fact which of them are mentally ill enough to start shooting up schools, shopping malls and courthouses. So at the national level, and in most states, the danger persists. Our own Governor

crowded that anyone who was upset about new public safety measures up north should come on down to Texas; we just love guns! Come down here and shoot them!

We could go on to issue after issue. Health Care system reform. Gay marriage. Abortion. There is, in fact, progress in some of these—or regress, I suppose, depending on one’s perspective. But the legislative process, especially in Washington, seems to be broken. When something had to be done, but there was little agreement about what, leaders used to retire into “smoke-filled rooms” and hammer out a compromise. Today they huddle with their pollsters and publicists to figure out what will most please the true-believers in their party, aware that if they dare to speak of compromise the extremists will work to unseat them! And after they proclaim their sound-bite of the moment, armies of pundits analyze first what the politicians have said, and then what the other pundits have said! And ‘round and ‘round it goes until the public wearies of the debate and tunes out.

And that, my friends—it is Yom Kippur, let us recall—that is our sin #1. Not that specialists on all sides of the issue try to win us over, but that even though we know the system is broken, we applaud the nastiest attack dogs on both sides rather than voting them out because we are building the political house we and our children need to live in.

Our sin #2: Half the citizens do not bother to vote, and a lot fewer than half vote in local elections. Did you listen to the analysis after each presidential debate last fall? It was no different that the sportscasters after a ball game. Not, “did you notice the clear difference in

philosophy over this or that issue?” but rather, “he seems to be losing momentum,” and “boy, that ploy sure caught our quarterback—er, candidate—by surprise!” The Talmud observes, perhaps a bit cynically, “like generation, like leader.” (Arakim 17) Or more pointedly, “What can the great ones do if their generation is evil?” (Ta’anit 24) I am not convinced we are evil, but we have grown accustomed to, and accepting of, a pathetically low level of political discourse. You don’t solve, say, the health care morass—an incredibly complex and important subject and a large chunk of the economy, with sound-bites. “The American people don’t want this.” “The American people demand that.” People are smart enough to handle the truth, namely that everyone knows we can do better, but that it is going to take years of tinkering and revising to get it right. So we need to vote, and not just for the candidate with the best advertising agency, but for the candidate whose values, on these major issues, domestic and foreign, we most share.

Our sin #3: Does Congress seem more dysfunctional than ever, more concerned with ideological purity than with getting important things done? So how many of us have written a letter, or a two-minute email, to our representatives in the past year? Long, carefully-words arguments are not needed: they mostly count letters to gauge public sentiment. Allow me to suggest that in a democracy it is a sin to blame the government unless you have first expressed yourself. “Of the people, by the people, for the people,” wrote Lincoln. We are the government!

The great Hebrew essayist Ahad Ha'am, back in 1894, wrote an essay on two styles of leadership, entitled, "Priest and Prophet." Thinking, quite obviously, of biblical models such as Moses and Isaiah, he writes of prophets:

The prophet is essentially a one-sided man. A certain moral idea fills his whole being, masters his every feeling and sensation, engrosses his whole attention. He can only see the world through the mirror of his idea;... His gaze is fixed on what *ought* to be in accordance with his own convictions; never on what can be done consistent with the general condition of things outside himself. (*Selected Essays of Ahad Ha'am*, p. 130)

These days that is the type leader the ideological purists on all sides demand, the Rush Limbaughs vs the Rachel Maddows (or pick your own most and least favorites; they sure can get off those zingers!). According to the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible), though, where your favorite pundit, or candidate, of that style differs from Moses and Isaiah is that God talked to the biblical prophets. Lacking that, should not a little humility and flexibility be in order?

The other style of leadership is that of the priest—Aaron comes most readily to mind. The priest, wrote Ahad Ha'am, runs with the ideas that the prophets put forward, "but is not of the race of giants."

Instead of clinging to the narrowness of the Prophet, and demanding of reality what it cannot give, he broadens his outlook, and takes a wider view of the relation between his Idea and the facts of life. Not what *ought* to be, but what *can* be, is what he seeks. (pp. 131-2)

The priest, in other words, embraces prophetic ideas, but is then willing to compromise in the name of progress and harmony. Aaron, it has always seemed to me, was too quick to compromise. The people demanded a tangible god; he made a golden calf—though he may have been stalling for time ‘til Moses could get down the mountain. In any event, subsequent generations have quoted Pirke Avot about how to lead: “Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing it, loving people and bringing them closer to Torah.” (1:12)

My friends, we need leaders—we voters need to demand this—to bring us together, not to further polarize us. Vigorous debate is a great thing as long as we recognize that we live in the same house—if I may bring this back around to my opening metaphor. At the end of the day leaders worth their salt will risk alienating a few followers and compromise for the common good. A new prophet to trouble us once in a while about our all-too-easy compromises is a blessing. But when we all think we are prophets—that is our politics the last several years—little gets done. Whichever political party you favor, you know the *other* party is at fault for the gridlock. Nonsense. The Talmud had it right: each generation gets the leaders it deserves. The only way to get past our gridlock is for the citizenry—us!—to turn off the screaming pundits (that is why God gave us remote controls and delete buttons) and turn out even those in our own party who consistently refuse to compromise.

Amen.