

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5779– Day 1
All People Are Created In The Image God! –
What Does That mean For Our Lives and For Society?
Rabbi Michael Mishkin

Shanah Tovah!

It's great to see everyone here on this first day of the New Year—5779. May it hold great blessings for us, for the Jewish people, and for the world.

I heard a story from a rabbi. He said, he went to his car in the parking lot and realized that he had locked his keys in the car. So he said a prayer to God, "Dear God, please send someone to help me get into my car, and will give a lot of tzedakah." Just as he finished his prayer, a guy pulled up on a motorcycle, got off his bike, and shimmed the lock open." The rabbi couldn't believe his eyes and he said, "Dear God, thank you for sending this nice man to help me." The man replied, "I'm not nice. I just got out of prison." The Rabbis asked him, "What were you in prison for." The man said, "Stealing cars." The rabbi turned his head heavenward and said, "Dear God, thank you for sending me a professional."

Sometimes we need professionals. Sometimes amateurs cannot do the trick.

Earlier this summer, on June 22, 12 kids and their coach went missing in a flooded cave complex in Northern Thailand. It's a story, I'm sure we are all familiar with. This young soccer team, and their coach weren't found for 10 days! The only way they were discovered, and eventually rescued, was because expert cave divers—the best in the world—braved immensely challenging and hostile conditions—which included fully submerged passageways, freezing water, heavy currents, and zero visibility.

As the story played out live -- it was terrifying, nerve wracking, and in the end – unbelievably joyous.

One reason I want to talk about this event is because we are living in a time with great conflict, divisiveness, anger, and incivility -- and this story brought us a reprieve from all of that – with its narratives of kindness, sacrifice for others, and unity.

Most of us know the general story.

— The scrawny boys—ages 11 to 16 -- were huddled on an elevated plateau of the cave, when two British divers emerged from the murky water.

One shined his flashlight on the boys, while the other diver called out, “How many of you?”

“Thirteen,” a boy answered.

And as only the British can say—the response was, “Brilliant!”

The kids and their coach had finally been discovered. Amazingly, they were in pretty good shape considering that they had no food, and stayed alive by licking the condensation off of the cave walls.

However, the initial euphoria in Thailand and around the world that all 13 people had been found alive, quickly gave way, a few days later, to deep anxiety over the challenges of getting them out. The option of waiting months until seasonal floodwaters receded quickly became a non-option and so the rescue crew had to deal with the practical problems of ferrying 12 children and one adult safely through a nearly three-mile maze of great peril. On top of that, none of the children knew how to swim, much less use diving gear.

Sometimes necessity and an urgent deadline can create a miracle—which is what happened. The rescue team devised a plan – and then executed it to near perfection. Eight days later, through the heroic efforts of many people, the last of the boys and their soccer coach emerged from the cave.

This story reveals many important aspects of humanity, including the ability of strangers to come together when they have a shared goal. The number of people involved in the cave rescue operation are staggering: Overall 10,000 people were involved, including 2,000 soldiers, 200 divers, and representatives from 100 government agencies.

In addition to the cave rescue team, people from all over Thailand and all over the world, came together. With everyone holding their breath, hoping that the rescuers would be successful. For a moment, we all thought about what we as human beings share in common—rather than focusing on our differences.

I love this story first and foremost because it had a wonderful ending. Although, tragically, there was one casualty—Former Thai Navy Seal—Saman Kunan—died while placing air tanks along the escape route. May his memory be for a blessing.

I also love this story because it illustrated something amazing. What is it about human life—that we are so willing to contribute time, money, attention, and invest deep feelings for strangers on the other side of the world?

Why did so many people get involved in the rescue? And why did the world care so much?

While there are a lot of ways to answer this question—I like Judaism’s answer—which comes from the Torah—from the first chapter of Genesis. That answer is: Kol HaAdam Ba’olam, Nivra B’zelem Elohim – which means, “All people are created in the image of God.”

This is not just A core value of Judaism—it may be THE core value of Judaism. It’s certainly a value that inspires me.

There is a famous rabbinic debate about this—about what is Judaism’s most important teaching. The debate is between the Great Rabbi Akiva and his colleague, Ben Azzai. Rabbi Akiva says, the most important teaching is – “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Ben Azzai disagrees. He says, “I know a more central teaching than that, -- and then he says, “On the day that God created human beings, God created them –*tzelem Elohim* – in the image of God. . .”

Here is a rare case where Rabbi Akiva lost an argument. Why did he lose? Because as beautiful as “Love your neighbor as yourself” is, the teaching—as its phrased--has some potential limitations.

The first limitation is about love. How can we be *commanded* to love someone? Especially someone who is a jerk, or worse.

The second problem with “Love your neighbor as yourself” has to do with the word “neighbor.” People can read this word in different ways—with some reading it in a very inclusive way, and others reading it in a very *exclusive* way. Who are my “neighbors” that I have to love?—Is it just my friends? Is it only people who look like me? Is it only fellow Jews?

But the teaching, “We are all created in the image of God”— goes back to Adam and Eve and includes everyone. *Every* human being is created in the image of God. Love them or not, we must try to treat everyone with a basic level of dignity and respect.

This teaching can have enormous implications in our everyday lives—if we use it to help guide us in interactions with other people.

Do we treat other people—family, friends, co-workers, and strangers – with a basic dignity and respect that is due to them simply for being human?

Rabbi Shai Held, a co-founder of Hadar a modern, co-ed Yeshiva on the Upper West Side, says that on Yom Kippur, we should add a sin to the list of sins that we say in the confessional prayer—“Al Cheyt.”

It would read: “*Al cheyt shchatanu l’fanechah* -- Forgive us God, for the sin which we have committed before You, by not treating other people as being created *b’tzelem Elohim* – in the image of God.”

This value also can have major implications for how we think about ourselves. Sometimes, we are very kind and respectful to everyone around us—**but not to ourselves**. There is a common phenomenon where people are very forgiving of others for mistakes and misdeeds, but not forgiving of themselves. For this sin, Rabbi Held says, we should say: “*Al cheyt shchatanu l’fanechah* -- Forgive us God, for the sin which we have committed before You, by not treating **ourselves** as being created *b’tzelem Elohim*—in the image of God.”

In addition to guiding us as to how we should relate to ourselves and how we should relate to others, the values of Torah should be taken into the public sphere.

In thinking about public policy and legislation, the value that “all people are created in the image of God” may not be the leading factor in crafting a position, but it should certainly be one of the factors that is considered. Said another way, when thinking about a piece of legislation, in addition to its other functions, we should ask: Does this law promote life, dignity, and happiness, or does it—in anyway—degrade life, demean dignity, and impede happiness?

The United States has some major challenges when it comes to immigration. There are important questions of how many immigrants we should take in; how do we deal with the large number of asylum seekers, and what should we do with them, while they are going through the legal process of seeking asylum? In addition, we also have millions of undocumented immigrants in our country. How should we treat them and what should their future be?

All of this screams for legislative action to create comprehensive immigration reform. Most elected officials in Washington DC know we need it, but most won’t touch it. There are very different views on what immigration reform should look like—and if a bill were ever passed, it would probably be a compromise on those positions. Tragically, we are living in a time when too many members of Congress are unwilling to compromise-- so there is very little discussion on this issue.

In this vacuum of inaction, many troubling things are happening.

There are way too many stories about people who have lived in this country for a long time, who have been honest, hard-working, tax paying, family-oriented and civic-minded — who are being round up and deported—at a moment's notice.

One response is to say—we are just enforcing a law on the books. Law and order are critically important to a healthy society. Judaism understands this very well. It's in our DNA. (It's also in our DNA to work to change a law – whether religious or secular – when we don't believe it aligns with the overarching values of Torah.) However a theoretical statement about the importance of enforcing the law, is very different from examining the consequences, of the enforcement of a specific law—and how that enforcement is affecting families and individuals—all created in the image of God. This type of a closer look at the actual consequences, could make us feel differently about this specific law.

In addition to reading some stories about families being broken up because of deportations, Tamara and I also personally know the story of one family, who lives just 2.5 miles from where we sit—they live in Manorhaven—and it's the story of a father of 3 boys (all U.S. Citizens), who was grabbed off the street by ICE one morning, while he getting ready to go to work.

But instead of telling you that family's story, I will share with you parts from another upsetting story.

Before sharing this story, I want to tell you that anyone who has been a member of TBI for more than . . . 2 weeks, knows Narvin Khan and Steven Davis—our maintenance staff. Steven is well liked for his hard work and friendly demeanor. We are very happy to have him as part of the TBI family. With Cantor Blum's retirement, Narvin now holds the distinction of being the longest-standing TBI employee. He got here about 2 years before I did, which means, he's been here 11 years. In those 11 years, we have all come to feel a deep connection to Narvin. Anyone who has celebrated a simchah here knows that he plays a critical role in making it a great success. He has endeared himself to members of all ages: preschoolers, religious school students, and adults with his decency, kindness, and love. Now imagine nearly doubling all of the experiences and memories that we have with Narvin. That is the number of years that a custodian, named Armando, served at Bet Torah, a Conservative synagogue in Mt. Kisco, Westchester. And earlier this year, Armando was given a week's notice by ICE, that he would be deported.

Rabbi Aaron Brusso, the rabbi of Bet Torah, told Armando's story in a powerful article, that was published in *The Forward*.

The story, which is entitled: "Our Synagogue's Custodian Is A Member Of Our Family - And ICE Just Deported Him," can be found here

<https://forward.com/opinion/399614/our-synagogues-custodian-is-a-member-of-our-family-and-ice-just-deported/>

Rabbi Brusso writes:

[In February] . . . We got a call that Armando had been arrested over the weekend and was in the county jail. He was in a restaurant with family when a fight broke out. The police were called and they arrested a number of people, including Armando. Aside from being in the wrong place at the wrong time, he was completely exonerated in court. But during his time in the county jail, ICE was sent a list of inmates. An ICE officer came to the jail to let him know he was going to be brought into detention.

Armando came to this country nearly 30 years ago. In the 20 years he worked in our synagogue, he paid social security, Medicare, state and local taxes. As far as we were concerned he belonged in every way. But others apparently saw that differently.

As soon as Armando was in ICE custody, our community sprang into action. As a rabbi, it has been particularly moving to see my synagogue live out the value of *chesed*, or loving-kindness. Community members collected money, secured legal representation and wrote dozens of letters attesting to his character. We reached out to his family and assured them we would be there for them and would not let him be deported.

One family's letter mentioned that Armando was a guest reader in their child's preschool classes. Another parent talked about how Armando convinced her hesitant son to get out of the car and go inside for religious school. Then there was the parent who had a medical emergency and had to rush a child to the hospital with only time to ask the closest adult — Armando — if he would get her other son after class and stay with him.

I accompanied Armando's son to visit his dad while he was being held at the county jail. Armando looked at his son and said "I don't want you to stop your education. I want you to have what I didn't." I imagined the same conversation between my great-grandfather and my grandfather, just with a Yiddish accent.

. . . The ICE officer, who the lawyer informed us had complete say over Armando's fate, didn't return the attorney's call for days. A week after Armando entered ICE detention, he called his family from Tijuana, Mexico, his country of birth. He had been brought over the border and left without bank cards, cash, cell phone or ID. He was given no time to gather any belongings or to call his family to say goodbye. As Armando told his son, an

ICE officer who escorted him with others to the border told the group, “You’ll all probably get kidnapped.”

. . . the enforcement system [for undocumented immigrants] is now built for speed and efficiency, for maximum action and minimum thought. When we don’t feel the need to understand a person’s story, it becomes much easier to taunt them with fears of being kidnapped. In fact, it becomes necessary, because if we all realized immigrants were human beings, who could sleep at night?

The painful and problematic actions that are taking place in this vacuum from legislative inaction, creates a greater moral urgency for our elected officials to sit down and come up with new immigration legislation, but that doesn’t look like it is anywhere on the horizon.

So every day, another day goes by, and more hard-working, honest, and thoughtful families are broken up.

If you have difficulties with this law and the way it is being enforced — Just feeling bad about this isn’t enough! We have to do more than feel bad. We have to get involved.

Some ways to get involved include supporting a group called, Long Island Jobs for Justice, which has a Solidarity Fund that supports families if their loved one is detained. There’s also the Deportation Defense Clinic at Hofstra University, and locally, you can support the Outreach Program at The Catholic Church--Our Lady of Fatima--in Manorhaven.

If you like, you can be trained to go to court with an immigrant—to give him or her support. Long Island Jobs for Justice organizes that program as well.

Yesterday, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks posted a High Holiday message. In it, he wrote, “Long ago Jews pioneered . . . the politics of hope. Hope is born when we dedicate ourselves individually and collectively to justice, compassion, the sanctity of life and the dignity of the individual. That is what we are summoned to do on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. God does not ask us to be perfect. He asks us to try our best to love Him, our neighbour and the stranger. And when we fail, as we all do one way or another, He asks us to acknowledge our failures and try again.

May this New Year—some way, somehow – bring more unity to our country. May our government officials come together and pass meaningful immigration legislation. And separate from all that, may we all come together, and redouble our efforts, to build and maintain our beautiful community, striving to treat all people with the dignity and respect they deserve, having been created in God’s image. And let us say: Amen.