

Kol Nidre 5763
Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen

Our lives are filled with symbols

Our lives are filled with symbols. They help us define who we are or what we believe. We wear our symbols around our necks or as other pieces of jewelry stating that we belong to a certain group. This evening, who amongst us is wearing a Jewish star? A chai? A kippah? All of which are symbols of our Judaism. Symbols are not just what we wear, they can also be places. Our homes, what do they symbolize? They may be a symbol of success or by what is found inside a representation of who we are and where we come from.

Tonight, we gather in this great building, our synagogue. And what does it symbolize for us? For some it is a quiet place of worship - a place in which one can meet with God and search for that prayer deep within the soul. For others, the synagogue is a symbol of learning and gathering. It is where we come to meet our peers, to learn from our teachers, to create a sense of community. Yet, still for others, the synagogue is a symbol of greatness, creating apprehension in trying to approach it's sacred space. No matter what our perception of what this synagogue symbolizes, each of us agree that it is an important place in our lives, otherwise, we would not be here together on this holiest of nights. We might all agree that this synagogue is more than a building it is a symbol that represents who we are, what we do, and what we believe as Jews. Whoever thought a building could hold so much meaning?

One year ago, a group of people attacked great symbols in our nation. The attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were not only an attack on buildings, it was an attack on an idea. Think for a moment, what did these buildings symbolize for you? Were they symbols of strength and prosperity? Were they symbols and expressions of a community?

The Twin Towers were constructed by the hands of men and women who worked with a design then steel and glass to create a community that was built by people with a vision. Not withstanding a shared goal of financial achievements, this vision included creating a greater cooperation amongst individuals and even striving toward human's supremacy over nature by creating structures of such great magnitude that touched the sky. Although when we tried to do this the last time in Babel with the great tower, our efforts were diverted by the gift of many new languages. The Twin Towers were a symbol of achievement in that we were able to overcome language barriers and create a place in which many languages and cultures came together to create this vast community.

As author Suzanne Goldsmith says, such communities are not built of friends or of groups of people with similar styles and tastes, or even of people who like and understand each other. Communities are built of people who feel they are a part of something that is bigger than themselves; a shared goal or enterprise, like righting a wrong, or building a road, or raising children, or living honorably, or worshipping a god. To build community requires only the ability to see value in others in order that we may see value in ourselves. By looking at them we see a potential partner in our enterprise.[\[1\]](#)

However, today, although we are encouraged to see the value in others, our lives have changed and in our own communities we are looking at others in a new light and with new skepticism.

One year ago the enemy was identified as a shadowy group of terrorists who came from many nations. Because all of the suspected terrorists were identified as Arabs or Muslims, many people viewed every Arab, every Muslim, and sometimes every foreigner with suspicion. Were you one of those? We all walked around looking into the faces of those around us wondering who they were and what they wanted. We became a nation afraid of our own neighbors who were living right next door to us all the time.

In Fremont, in Northern California, the answering machine at the Islamic Center was filled with words of hate, curses and threats. The Pamir Food Market had a bottle and rock hurled at its windows. Two fights broke out at

local high schools. Yet in Fremont, the city with perhaps the country's largest concentration of Afghans, there was also understanding. Afghans said they understood Americans were angry - they were equally outraged over the terrorist attacks. However, the unelected Taliban rulers did not represent most of their people and neither Islam nor the people of Afghanistan are the enemy.[\[2\]](#)

Unfortunately, in times of crisis, no matter how well intentioned, we become suspicious of one another. Whether we like it or not we are a nation engaged in Racial Profiling - a term often used to describe the practice of targeting whole groups of people because of their race or ethnicity without probable cause. Think for a moment. The last time you boarded a plane or any kind of public transportation, what was the first thing you did? Most likely, we looked around at the people. We were curious about who was on a flight with us. If we saw someone that "looked" Middle Eastern we might have kept a careful eye on this person during the flight. We might have been cautious when seeing someone wearing a traditional Islamic head covering, such as a turban or the robes of an Imam. Maybe we even took care to not walk too closely in fear of who they were or what they might do. A New Yorker told a reporter that she regarded a man in her neighborhood as "suspicious" because he was wearing a turban. "I'll be honest," she said, "I stared him down as if to say 'What do you think you're doing?' There was definitely a look of hate in my eyes. There was definitely a look of blame."

Yes, we have enemies. And yes, some of them are even in our midst. But, how do we temper our suspicion and legitimate fears and stop short of automatically identifying everyone who looks a certain way or dresses in a particular manner or worships God in a different way as our enemy?

Following the events of 9-11 we understand the need to feel safe in our own land. However, David Cole of *The New York Times* says, "history suggests caution, for in times of fear we have virtually always overreacted, loosely targeting whole groups of people for suspicion rather than narrowly focusing on those engaged in criminal conduct. Such responses now would be likely to prove counterproductive in the fight against terrorism." President Bush has taken the moral stand of calling upon all Americans to unite at this time of crisis and not allow our fears to turn us against any ethnic group or religious faith. We must heed the President's words.

Consider that 80 years ago, the United States was shaken by a series of politically motivated bombings including an explosion at the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. In the "Palmer raids" that followed, 6,000 people, most of whom were immigrants, were arrested, beaten, detained and forced to sign confessions.

During World War II, the government interned 120,000 citizens and immigrants solely because they were of Japanese ancestry while not targeting those of German ancestry.

During the Cold War in the 1940s and 50s, we imposed criminal and civil penalties on individuals for mere association with the Communist Party, even if it was for legal activities like labor organizing. Because there were so many Jews who were identified with Communist and Leftist causes in America, many so called Patriots suspected anyone with a Jewish name to be a Communist and targeted them.

Unfortunately, in the wake of terrorist actions our anger and fear take hold and we act before we think. Instead of uniting together to reinstitute our high ideas of freedom of religion, speech, and the balance of powers, we busy ourselves too much with concern over who is standing next to us not as our brother or sister, but as our enemy.

We have an opportunity now to recreate our vision of community. Earlier I asked what do our homes symbolize. Now consider a vision given to us by Congressman John Lewis who described his vision by recalling an incident from his childhood in the 1940s.

On this particular afternoon-it was a Saturday, I'm almost certain-about fifteen of us children were outside my aunt Seneva's house, playing in her dirt yard. The sky began clouding over, the wind started picking up, lightning flashed far off in the distance, and suddenly I wasn't thinking about playing anymore. I was terrified. I had already seen what lightning could do. I'd seen fields catch on fire after a hit to a haystack.

Aunt Seneva herded us all inside her house which was not the biggest place around, and it seemed even smaller with so many children squeezed inside. Small and surprisingly quiet. All of the shouting and laughing that had been going on earlier, outside, had stopped. The wind was howling now, and the house was starting to shake. We were scared. Even Aunt Seneva was scared.

And then it got worse. Now the house was beginning to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend. And then, a corner of the room started lifting up.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. None of us could. That storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky. With us inside it.

That was when Aunt Seneva told us to clasp hands. Line up and hold hands, she said, and we did as we were told. Then she had us walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift.

And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of our small bodies.

More than half a century has passed since that day, and it has struck me more than once over those many years that our society is not unlike the children in that house, rocked again and again by the winds of one storm or another, the walls around us seeming at times as if they might fly apart.

The children never ran away. They came together and they did the best they could, clasping hands and moving toward the corner of the house that was the weakest. Children holding hands, walking with the wind.

Those children are all of us today. We have a choice as Americans - we can either divide ourselves in an effort to fend off the enemy or we can unite together as one community, as one nation and not be moved. On this night Kol Nidre, we lift up our voices and we look deep inside our souls. We recognize the times that we have sinned by prejudging those around us with no other evidence than the way they look or the language they speak.

Jewish tradition calls for the time of mourning to conclude after one year. The year has passed and now we must rise from our mourning, clasp hands with those around us and build a country and a world that cannot be moved. Last year many of us stood in the cathedral in Orange holding hands with our brothers and sisters from the Christian community, the Jewish community and the Islamic community and a host of other religious faiths. Then this past Wednesday, on the one-year anniversary of 9-11, we stood with our brothers and sisters again in numerous services throughout Orange County and the country. But is it only during these anniversaries or milestones that we will reach out our hands in peace to one another?

I challenge each of us to reach out to all those in our community and most importantly, learn more about one another. Unfortunately, our fear of others comes from our lack of understanding of different cultures and traditions and leads toward prejudice.

This year, let us take the time to learn more about those in our own community. There are many learning opportunities such as Rabbi Donnell's class, Judaism in Dialogue, in which we can examine the world's religions which trace their spiritual heritage to the patriarch Abraham.

This year, let us take the time to get to know our neighbor. Learn more about who they are and what they believe, in order to gain more respect and appreciation of the numerous peoples, cultures and philosophies that make up this amazing country of ours.

Finally, let us consider the symbols in our lives, from symbols that we wear that identify what group we are a part of to the symbols that are found in the institutions we create. Now consider the symbol of peace and strength. What is

that symbol for each of us? Where do we find it and how can we pass it on to those around us? And how can we share our symbols and ideas?

This year, may we work toward a world in which we ourselves do not divide others into categories and separate groups for this is what American patriotism is all about. This country of immigrants, this nation united in its diversity. Let us work toward increased tolerance, understanding and respect of all people throughout all communities and may this year be a year filled with Shalom, Peace.

[1] From *A City Year* by Suzanne Goldsmith (New Press, 1993), p. 277.

[2] From "Afghan Community in Fremont Angry, Uneasy," by Lynda Gorov. *The Boston Globe*, September 24, 2001. Copyright 2001 Glove Newspaper Company.