

How Goodly ARE Thy Tents, O America?

Shabbat Balak 5775

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Thirty-nine years ago last month, on the eve of my Bar Mitzvah, Rabbi Samuel Karff delivered a sermon entitled, "How Goodly ARE Thy Tents, O Israel?" Rabbi Karff had deep concerns for the breakdown of Jewish family life, mirroring changes in American society that have only accelerated since 1976. The sermon was considered so important that the congregation published it and sent it to every member.

Rabbi Karff was playing off the blessing offered in this week's Torah portion, Balak, several weeks before that section would actually be read that year. The rabbi turned the proclamation of the sorcerer Bil'am into a question. In the Torah itself, Bil'am is praising the Jewish people. The sages were happy to receive the compliment, and included that scriptural phrase, "Mah tovu ohalecha Ya'akov," "How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob," in the daily worship.

At the same time, the rabbis of old asked, "What does Bil'am find so praiseworthy about the Israelites' tents?" Now remember, we really are taking about tents, since the portion takes place during the decades of the Israelites' desert wanderings. The rabbis posit that Bil'am sees the tents carefully arranged so that the entrance of one doesn't directly face the entrance of any other. No Israelite could see into the tent of another, thereby protecting the privacy of the intimate acts that would take place within each humble abode.

Privacy isn't the problem facing American homes today, at least not those anywhere near or above average price. But therein lies the problem, doesn't it? When we ask about the quality of the American home today -- not just the physical structure, but also the warp and the woof that knit together the people inside -- we must ask: Which America? Are we asking about the homes in the America where you and I dwell, and the ones we are likely to visit? Or are we asking about another America, a land where poverty and racism, homelessness and hopelessness, prevail? Are we asking about homes where you and I dwell, and where we are likely to visit, where religion and ideology, passionate as they

may be, are forces that build love and harmony? Or are we talking about another America, where religion or ideology is extreme and divisive, building walls and hatreds and suspicions?

Yes, my friends, as we celebrate America's 239th birthday this weekend, we must acknowledge with sadness the wide and expanding gulf which separates us from our fellow Americans. The openings of our proverbial tents aren't merely at slight angles, avoiding direct view from one into another. Instead, our homes exist in separate universes, albeit geographically united and largely embracing the same calendar, culture, and language.

If we had any doubt, events of recent weeks have sadly shaken our complacency.

We live in segregated America. Most Americans do. Yes, Central High School was long ago integrated, and an African American family may theoretically -- and in some cases, even actually -- live on your block. Still, with devastating

results, most Americans live at significant distance from people whose race and ethnicity, income and education levels, are quite different from our own.

Consider security for houses of worship. Perhaps the most difficult decision our Temple Board had to make in this last year was about security at Religious School. We know that synagogues and other Jewish community institutions can be vulnerable. But how do we afford it? Tough as the decision was, the reality was that our congregation had choices. Collectively, we can pay for what we value, at least when we feel we must.

But what of the African American church, likely more vulnerable than any U.S. synagogue today? What shall they charge their members, many of them desperately poor, to keep safe from the violent racism that reared its ugly head in Charleston last week, and in one church burning after the next?

We live in two different Americas.

And what of that racist extremism that erupted in mass murder in that Charleston church? Even in a state of the former Confederacy, our congregation is

made up of people who fought Jim Crow or at least were pleased that it ended. Those of us who had southern parents or grandparents may cringe when we recall some of the things they would say in reference to African Americans; but in our families, even in generations that have passed from this world, racism wasn't violent. Heck, even the people we would call racists in our circles don't wave Confederate battle flags. We may see hatred and extremism on social media, but most of us don't personally traffic with Americans who sincerely believe that African Americans or immigrants or same-sex marriage will literally bring about the ruin of this great nation. We live in a different America -- a kinder, gentler, more refined America.

In much of America, hateful views are common, taught at home and preached in church. Millions of lower income white Americans, in particular, have been convinced that the real threat to their future is not the wealthiest one per cent, who drive down wages, multiply executive compensation, and make profligate political contributions to assure that their taxes stay low. Instead, anger

has been misdirected, with extremist ideology and intolerant religion, focused on some of our nation's most vulnerable citizens.

Recently, Toni and I have been watching a rather violent series on cable television, *Ray Donovan*. Ray is a bad guy, a hit man and worse. One of Ray's criminal clients is Jewish: Ezra is an unethical attorney with a tendency to justify his evil with Jewish law. In a recent episode, Ezra is concerned that his entire criminal enterprise may collapse because Ray refuses to murder a reporter who is on the verge of exposing them. Ezra invokes the Jewish legal concept of the *rodef*, a person who seeks to kill you, and whom you are therefore required to kill. Ezra convinces an Israeli hit man, Avi, to carry out the nefarious deed, and Avi murders the reporter with a sense of religious justification.

Ray Donovan is fiction, of course, but the concept is all too real. When ultra-Orthodox rabbis branded Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin with the label *rodef*, one of their young, extremist followers got the message and assassinated the Prime Minister.

Similarly, Dylann Roof was radicalized with hateful ideology, waving the Confederate flag and claiming that African Americans are usurping European American power and privilege. Dylann Roof got that message, and he brutally murdered nine African Americans in that Charleston church. Nameless terrorists are hearing a similar sermon and torching African American churches. How long before extremist pastors, self-immolating and otherwise, get their message about gays and lesbians across to one of their vulnerable followers? How long before we are bemoaning another mass murder, this time with LGBT victims, in America at 239?

Finally, let us acknowledge that we live in an America where we and our friends either don't own firearms or are responsible, careful gun owners. In another America, a gun safe is too expensive, a handgun is a common birthday present, even the sensible background check legislation is a threat to basic freedom, and the right to bear arms is more precious than the right to life. How goodly are those American homes, where guns are worshiped like idols? How goodly are those American houses of worship, where gun ownership is praised

from the pulpit? How long before another weak worshipper gets the message, committing another mass murder with his right to bear arms?

On this Shabbat of celebrating America's 239th birthday, let us recommit ourselves not only to the sliver of this nation that we inhabit, but to all of America.

Yes, all lives matter, but this year we must proclaim, "black lives matter," because in another America, in very real American homes in 2015, black lives do not matter.

Yes, we celebrate the freedom of speech and freedom of religion which are among America's greatest gifts. At the same time, we must vigorously exercise our own freedom of speech and religion to denounce and decry, to combat and to counter, dangerous words of hate, hate that explodes into murder, in another America, in very real American homes and houses of worship in 2015.

This week, *T'ruah*, The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, asked for contributions to Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis, which hosts an interfaith

fund to rebuild African American churches destroyed by racist arsonists. I immediately sent donations from my discretionary fund and personally, from my home and from our synagogue home to houses of worship in another America, one which we do not inhabit, where there just isn't enough in the collection plate to afford the kind of insurance that would rebuild any Pleasant Valley house of worship, were such terror to strike here, G-d forbid. I invite you to join me. Celebrate this 4th of July with a donation to my discretionary fund for the "rebuild the churches" campaign; and we will reach across America to bring this nation's blessings to those who receive too few of those blessings.

How goodly are America's tents this July 4th? Not good enough. Together, though, we can reorient the tents and be worthy of praise once again.

Amen.