

“We Are All Americans”

Rosh Hashanah Eve 5782

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At Appomattox Courthouse, after Generals Grant and Lee had negotiated terms of surrender, Grant assigned Ely Parker, an aide who was a full-blooded Seneca Indian, to prepare a legible copy of the agreement. According to Grant biographer Ron Chernow, Lee was astonished, imagining Parker to be Black. Chernow continues: “Evidently Lee relaxed when he realized Parker was a Native American. ‘I’m glad to see one real American here,’ he ventured, shaking his hand. To which Parker retorted memorably: ‘We are all Americans.’”ⁱ

Parker’s reply was extraordinary and generous, sending a clear message at the end of a brutal and bloody war that took hundreds of thousands of lives and split the nation—yes, north from south, but even more along fault lines regarding basic human rights, deeply held principles, and ingrained ways of life. Then and there, following Grant’s lead, Parker was insisting that North and South, Union and Confederate, Black and white—and of course, his own Native American people, too—all are Americans.

Americans are hardly less divided today. So many issues separate us. Let’s take the Black Lives Matter protests last summer. We can neither agree that the demonstrations were justified nor that the violence perpetrated by some protestors was wrong, even deadly. Then there is the Capitol insurrection on January 6. Americans of all political affiliations were horrified by it. Nevertheless, a May poll revealed that nearly a third “agree with the statement that the U.S. Capitol riot Jan. 6 ‘was led by violent left-wing protestors trying to make [President] Trump look bad.’” We can’t even agree on the basics of our constitutional democracy. After the 2016 election, many never accepted the legitimacy of a president who was elected by a clear electoral majority while losing the popular vote, not a terribly rare occurrence in our Constitutional system. Now, others refuse to acknowledge that president’s reelection defeat by both popular and electoral majorities. Worst of all, the same May poll “captured concerns among Americans that violence may be on the horizon. Asked what the most significant threat to the safety of the average American is, [the largest group], 42%, say ‘politically or religiously motivated domestic terrorism.’”ⁱⁱⁱ And make no mistake: that fearful group includes both Americans frightened by last summer’s Black Lives Matter protests and others who were terrified on January 6.

Our divisions have proved much more deadly than either last summer’s protests or the Capitol insurrection. Learning more about Covid-19 every day, we know that vaccines, however imperfect, are currently the best tool available to

prevent serious illness. However, many are hesitant to be vaccinated, having heard themselves called “a basket of deplorables” by a representative of the establishment that has sometimes oversold vaccine effectiveness. Or maybe the problem is inconsistent messages from the government. Think of the CDC’s spring announcement that vaccinated people need not wear masks. Then the CDC reversed its position with the summer surge. At the time, I wondered if the “masks-off-if-vaccinated” announcement was driven by science or was devised as a reward that would convince more people to be vaccinated. If I were more skeptical about the current Administration, as half of America is, I might have seen that as using Covid-19 to score political points.

America’s future is threatened by division that risks disunion and death, even violence. On this Rosh Hashanah Eve, I would like to suggest that we turn to our Jewish tradition for a key to bridging the gap.

My teacher, Micah Goodman, is thinking about the Israeli political scene, but might as well be talking about the U.S. in 2021, when he writes: “A disagreement between people each of whom believes that the other is wrong... That’s how a good political debate ought to work. But what if I think you are not only wrong but evil? Reasonable disagreement collapses.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Looking for a solution, Goodman points to the sages: “For three years, [the house of Rabbi] Shammai and [that of Rabbi] Hillel disagreed,” Each group insisted that its interpretation of Jewish religious law was the only correct one. In the end, “a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed:” Both Shammai and Hillel speak “the words of the living God. However,” the law is according to Hillel.^{iv}

If two opposing viewpoints are both God’s word—that is, “equally correct”^v—why and how does one side prevail?

Goodman explains the difference: Shammai and his followers lived and worked in an “echo chamber.” They “refused to hear or listen to the positions of ... Hillel. They would study and teach their own opinions exclusively.” Hillel and his disciples, by contrast, would examine Shammai’s teachings before making their own rulings. “In the end, God chose [the House of] Hillel ... because its scholars” were eager to learn from others. Ultimately, religious law is determined ... by the side that is willing to listen.”^{vi}

Goodman confesses, “Listening...comes at a price...” Hillel’s group often changed their position after hearing the other side. “Listening,” Goodman concludes, “means risking one’s own beliefs.”^{vii}

Americans must emulate the House of Hillel: We must listen to one another. Our resolution for 5782 might be to talk with people we know personally, people we respect, whose views diverge from our own. Our sages did that, even recording their disagreements in the Talmud. Rabbi Brian Stoller and Jewish legal scholar Jeffrey Roth explain that each person at Sinai heard the revelation of the Torah only partially, resulting in conflicting views of God’s will. Roth insists that’s a good thing, emphasizing that “controversy helps us get to better answers.”^{viii} Similarly, Americans today would do well to respect our differences, discuss them civilly, and find better answers cooperatively.

As we review this last year, we all know: America must do better. As we contemplate our own behavior in 5781, we painfully acknowledge: None of us stormed the Capitol on January 6, but each of us has harmed our shared society—some by being argumentative, by shutting out those on the other side of the political divide, or even by demonizing those who disagree with us; others, by remaining silent when we should have raised our voices.

Some nations live; others die. Today, we, the American people, are empowered to write our nation’s name in the Book of Life. What will be our fate? Well, our High Holy Day prayers tell us: “Repentance, prayer and *tzedakah* temper judgment’s severe decree.”

As we enter this New Year, let us repent, emerging from our echo chambers and remembering that those who differ from us are not our enemies. Let us listen to them, not demean them, and let us learn from one another.

Let us pray: In a moment we will hear beautiful music and important words, *Sh’ma Koleinu*, asking God to listen as we cry out during these High Holy Days. Tonight, even as we ask God to hear us, let us take this supplication to heart as if it were directed at us: Let **us** heed the voices of our friends and fellow Americans, when we agree and when we do not.

And let us be generous: The Torah teaches, “Judge one another fairly.”^{ix} Rashi interprets: “Judge each person with an inclination in their favor.”^x Assume that the person whose views diverge from your own has good intentions—that we all love America equally, if differently.

If we will change our ways by reaching out to people with whom we can disagree respectfully, pray for every American, and seek to listen and empathize with each legitimate viewpoint, then, with God’s blessing, we may again affirm: “We are all Americans.”

Amen.

ⁱ Ron Chernow, *Grant*, New York: Penguin Books, 2017, 509-10.

ⁱⁱ Mathew Brown, "Poll: A quarter of Americans say that Trump is 'true president' of the US," *USA Today*, May 25, 2021. [Poll: Quarter of Americans surveyed say Trump is 'true president' \(usatoday.com\)](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/election/2021/05/25/poll-trump-true-president/7241170002/)

ⁱⁱⁱ Micah Goodman, *Catch-67: The Left, the Right, and the Legacy of the Six-Day War*, Translated by Eylon Levy, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018, Apple Books (electronic) Edition, pp. 12-13.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 33.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 35.

^{viii} Rabbi A. Brian Stoller, "Sermons for These High Holy Days," CCAR webinar, August 4, 2021. Rabbi Stoller is citing Jeffrey I. Roth, "The Justification for Controversy Under Jewish Law," in Martin Goldberg, Ed., *Jewish Law and Legal Theory*.

^{ix} Leviticus 19:15.

^x Rashi to Leviticus 19:15. Text suggested and interpreted by Rabbi A. Brian Stoller.