

It's Time to Cleanse Our Religious Communities of a Dangerous Form of "Bacteria"

An Erev Rosh Hashanah sermon by Rabbi Moshe Tom Heyn
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A rabbi boarded a flight to Miami. He was looking forward to reading and preparing a sermon, so he was not trying to encourage any conversation with the man seated next to him, but that's not how it worked out.

When he brought on his reading material, the man next to him took notice and introduced himself. It turns out he was an astrophysicist. After a few minutes of pleasantries, he decided to share his conclusions on the topic of faith. "Rabbi," he mused, "I know very little about religion or theology, but doesn't it all boil down to the Golden Rule? -- that you should do unto others as you would have them do unto you?"

The Rabbi thought for a moment then replied, "You know, I've never studied astrophysics or astronomy but doesn't it all boil down to 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star'?"

Just as there are stages of learning when it comes to astrophysics and astronomy, the same is true when it comes to faith and religion. The Golden Rule in its original formulation -- "Love your neighbor as yourself" -- comes from the book of *Leviticus* and is later affirmed by Rabbi Akiva as the Torah's most essential principle. A generation before Akiva, Hillel the Elder rephrased the Torah's most essential principle in slightly different terms when he said, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow..."

Sure, that's a good beginning. But Hillel himself knew it doesn't end there, which is why he said that even though "the rest is commentary," one needs to "go and study it." In other words, even if you master the most fundamental principles of your faith, our personal and communal obligations to grow and evolve does not end there.

In fact, we now know that there are stages of learning in the understanding and practice of any faith tradition. This fact has been well-researched and documented over the past century by developmental psychologists such as Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg and James W. Fowler, who wrote at length about the stages of faith development.

Without going into great detail, these social scientists determined that there are distinct and identifiable stages through which individuals and communities must pass in the development of faith. Just as we might learn "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" in

kindergarten, there are ideas we learn about faith and religion in our own infancy, or in the infancy of a religious community. Whatever we learn in these earliest stages forms the *basis* of our religious understanding, identities and worldview. But all too often, our development slows or stops altogether -- often at the kindergarten or elementary school levels.

If the head of NASA had not passed through intermediate and advanced stages of study and practice in the field of astrophysics, we'd be in trouble. And the same is true when individuals or communities do not pass through the more advanced and complex stages of faith development. James Fowler -- a professor at Emory University in Atlanta -- is well-known for his book *Stages of Faith*, in which he identifies six distinct stages. These stages are not hypothetical or based on conjecture but are clear as day in relation to our personal observance of this first day of the Jewish New Year. And they are clearly evident in the dynamics underlying our world's most serious problems. First allow me to demonstrate how stages of faith development relate to our observance of this Holy Day.

So here we are again, at the beginning of a New Year. Now that last year has ended and a New Year begins, we hope that we're not back in the same 'place' we were last year, or several years ago. I'm happy you're here, but that's not what I mean by 'place.' We hope that over the past year we've grown, we've learned a few things, we've changed, we've evolved. We think of the round *challah* as a reminder that the New Year is like a circle that goes 'round and 'round. But I think another good image is that of a spiral. When we return to that same 'place' in the cycle of time, we hope they we're somewhere a little 'higher' than we were the year before. Hopefully, our understanding of our rituals and ourselves has grown or deepened.

So that's how these stages of faith pertain to us in our observance of this day, from one year to the next. We grow in our lives from one year to the next and, hopefully, from one stage to the next. Now I want to tell you how they relate to the most serious problem we're facing today.

Our world is afflicted by many problems: poverty, inequality, climate change, the Ebola epidemic. We could talk about the resurgence of anti-Semitism and the scourge of terrorism and many, many other issues, but I'd like to suggest that there's one problem that deserves our attention the most right now. As we the tremendous upheaval underway in the Middle East over the past year, it's become more obvious that Israel is not really the cause of this upheaval. In fact, I'll go even a step further to say that the

violence and terrorism, whether directed against Israel, Jews, Christians or Muslims -- even the violence is not the problem.

I'm here to break it to you that violence is only a symptom; a symptom of a deeper and more pervasive problem. It's a quiet and invisible problem, because we can only see it when it eventually erupts in acts of intolerance and violence. It's like a bacterial infection that can be passed without us really knowing, until it's too late. I can tell you what that problem is, but first I want to tell you about Ignaz Semmelweis.

In the 1840s, hospitals were very dangerous places and in Vienna there was a hospital with an obstetrical clinic. The women who gave birth there suffered a very high mortality rate. As many as 20% – maybe even 30% – of them died. Consequently, expecting mothers were terrified to go there. They would rather give birth in the streets than be admitted into this clinic.

Now Semmelweis was an assistant there and was really upset by this high mortality rate and tried all kinds of experiments with no success. Then one day, a friend of his was accidentally poked by a scalpel while a student was handing it to him. It was a minor injury, but he very quickly became sick and suffered the same symptoms that these women were suffering, and died a few days later. Semmelweis began to think that maybe there was some kind of contamination that caused his death.

This was about a decade before Louis Pasteur's discovery of micro-organisms so Semmelweis had no way of proving why it made a difference but he insisted that doctors begin washing their hands with chlorinated lime solution before working with the pregnant women. The results were astonishing. In April 1847, the mortality rate was close to 20%. That's about one out of every five women. Semmelweis instituted handwashing in mid-May and by June the mortality rate had dropped to 2.2%. The next month it was even less and later that year it reached zero — for the first time ever.

You'd think doctors would be thrilled by Semmelweis's discovery. Instead, however, he was ridiculed, fired from the hospital, and forced out of Vienna because his observations conflicted with the established scientific and medical opinions of the time. Some doctors were offended at the suggestion that they should wash their hands and Semmelweis could offer no real scientific explanation for his findings. So physicians continued to practice as they did, and hundreds of mothers continued to die needlessly each year.

Semmelweis, by the way, turned to alcohol and his behavior became increasingly erratic until he was committed to a mental institution where he was beaten by the guards, placed in a straitjacket, and locked in a dark cell. He died two weeks later, at the age of 47, from an infected wound.

My friends, I am here to tell you tonight – almost 170 years after Semmelweis's discovery -- that there is a very similar situation going on right now. There is so much suffering and death around the world, particularly in the Middle East, and we're all looking around like those physicians who were too proud to wash their own hands while asking, “What's causing this? I certainly have nothing to do with it.”

I believe, like Semmelweis did, that there's something like an invisible bacteria that's infecting our religious communities and causing all this needless suffering and death. But, in this case, the bacteria is an idea; an idea that originates and grows in the early stages of faith development. It's the simple idea that “My path to God is the only path; my belief is the only true belief; my way of life is the only authentic way of life.”

In the early stages of faith development, in the life of an individual or a community, this idea serves a very important function. It helps to reinforce a sense of shared identity, purpose and solidarity. There's a special bond we feel when we are the only true believers, right? The idea is almost essential in the early stages of faith development, but it's an idea we must eventually move beyond.

In Fowler's model, this idea and the mentality it engenders is typically shared by those in the second or third stages of faith development. But any individual or community on the path of growth and development, such as ours, has to eventually work through these stages and embrace more enlightened, inclusive and pluralistic ways of thinking. They can never leave these stages behind entirely. Just as in the biological evolution of our species, we carry within us remnants of all the previous stages through which we've passed. We are able to see these remnants, recognize them, and even accept them on some level, but we are also able to see beyond them.

We have all been exposed to the idea that “my way is the only way.” If it were a form of bacteria, we all have it on our hands because it's embedded in our religious scriptures and communities. It seems to flourish, however, in very traditional communities which have generally not passed through the more complex stages of faith development.

The journey of faith must pass through tribal and mythic stages, to a conventional

stage, a reflective stage, then two additional stages which deal with modern, postmodern and global realities; along the way we realize that we are all travelers, and that there are many paths other than our own that lead to the top of the metaphorical mountain.

Those in the early stages of faith development often cling to the notion that their way is the only way “up the mountain” for the members of their own community -- as is the case for a high percentage of Orthodox Jews, or it's the only way for all of humanity -- as is the case for fundamentalist Christians and Muslims. The truth is, however, that we all start at different places around the base of the mountain. If we can climb the mountain without blinders on, we come to see that there are many paths up that same mountain. In other words, we realize that *all* human beings -- regardless of race, nation, gender or sexual orientation -- are created in the Divine image.

Now if we carefully re-examine the conflicts in the Middle East, we see that there is a singular idea which empowers groups like ISIL. (Some call the group ISIS. Some call it the “Islamic State,” but on a conference call with President Obama earlier this week, I noticed that he calls it ISIL, so I will follow his example here.) The idea which empowers or infects these radical groups is spread through a very traditional form of Islam known as *Salafism* or *Wahhabism*. It's the official state doctrine of Saudi Arabia.

About a month ago, I was at a symposium with a dozen Muslim scholars from Saudi Arabia. They were very nice and friendly, but they believe very strongly that their way is the only way. They are very respectful here amongst us, but at home they won't hesitate to behead someone who does not accept their religious views. In their conviction, they are very much like Orthodox Jews and fundamentalist Christians who are intensely devoted to their beliefs and practices. The main difference is the degree to which their community condones the use of violence in enforcing their beliefs and practices. From a developmental perspective, however, they're very much in the same place insofar as they believe that their path is the only *authentic* and *legitimate* path.

We all know this way of thinking is common and widespread. You could say that this idea or mentality is harmless as long as it doesn't lead one to acts of violence. But I must respectfully disagree. You might say that a bacterial infection is harmless until you get sick and die from it, but we know better.

There are about 1.6 billion Muslims in the world and most of them are peaceful with no ill-intent toward anyone. But there is one idea in their scriptures that is too easily

hijacked by extremists. This idea is that Islam is the one true faith. Moderate Muslims who believe and promulgate this idea, as peaceful as they may be, will only be able to stand up against extremists when they can say that this idea is not true.

The only difference between moderates and extremists who believe this idea is the degree to which they are willing to defend it. Not all Muslims believe that Islam is the only true faith, but those who do will have to be ready to move beyond the mythic and tribal stages of faith development in which this idea proliferates.

In November, I plan to initiate a conversation with leaders of the local Muslim community and work with them to empower their communities to reclaim their religion from the hands of extremists. But if I ask them to stand up against the extremists in their faith tradition, it's likely they will ask me to stand up against extremists in our faith tradition. And there are plenty of Jewish extremists. Though they don't tend to be as violent, they do carry the idea -- the bacteria, as it were -- which, when transmitted, leads to regressive patterns of thought and behavior. In the Jewish community, they call it "Torah-true Judaism;" in their eyes, it's the only authentic and legitimate way of practicing Judaism.

I suggest that we examine these ideas when and where we see them. And I suggest that we empower the Muslim community by our example. There are denominations, such as Reform Judaism in North America, that have worked through the more complex stages of faith development. Progressive Judaism, as it is known worldwide, is firmly rooted in the Bible, especially in the teachings of the Hebrew prophets. It is founded on authentic manifestations of Jewish creativity, ancient and modern, particularly those that stress inwardness and a desire to learn what God expects of us: justice and equality, democracy and peace, personal fulfillment and collective obligations. Progressive approaches to faith can help reduce, if not eliminate, that very dangerous bacterial strain which persists in all religions. We should feel proud to be associated with Temple Israel of Greater Miami, with the Reform movement, and with its international counterpart, the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

I invite you to join me on October 11th for an event in Wynwood when we will be celebrating Sukkot as Reform Jews out in the community; not just within the walls of our synagogues but with all six Reform Temples in our community, to share the good news, so to speak, of Reform Judaism.

I also invite you to join me on November 16th for a Global Day of Jewish Learning, when

Rabbi Alex Dukhovny, the Chief Rabbi of Progressive Congregations in Ukraine, will be here to talk about the work he does in revitalizing Jewish life in Eastern Europe.

In closing, I return to the example of Semmelweis and the idea of bacteria that can spread. We might think it can remain latent and harmless but if it is allowed to grow and spread, it leads toward ethnocentrism, intolerance and -- in some cases -- violence. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "Some are guilty, but all are responsible."

The antidote is education and the support of those who can help us move through the more challenging stages of faith development. That's what we're doing here at Temple Israel, through our Spiritual Health & Wellness initiative and our other educational programs and services. And that's what we're doing now, at the beginning of this New Year: growing, changing, learning and evolving.

"Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" is only a beginning. The "Golden Rule" is only a beginning. And so, too, is the idea that "My way is the only way." It's only a beginning, but we cannot stop there. Faith and religion must go beyond this idea or we will forever be stuck in the elementary stages of faith development; and we will forever be stuck in tribal conflicts and exclusivist ideologies that foster intolerance and violence.

We must climb the mountain. This is the place and the time to begin, at the beginning of a New Year. Rabbi Akiva also said, "How greatly God must love us, to create us in the Divine image. Yet even greater love did God show us in helping us to become *conscious* of the truth that we are created in the Divine image."

May we all grow, in this New Year, to be conscious of this truth – that we, and all human beings, are created in the Divine image. I wish you and your families a sweet, happy, healthy and enlightening New Year.

L'shanah Tovah!