From Us-Them to Us-Us
Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5781/202
By Rabbi Mark S. Glickman

There's an old story about two Jewish guys who were walking down the street, when they saw two obviously non-Jewish thugs walking toward them. "Uh-oh," one of the Jews said to the other, "we'd better be careful. There are two of them, and we're alone."

The story reflects something not only about being Jewish, but also about human nature. Sometimes we feel as if it's us against the world. Sometimes we feel as if everyone else out there has it in for us, and that we're left all alone. If you doubt me, all I'll do in response is ask you whether you shopped at Costco for toilet paper last March. If you did, my guess is that it was you against the world. That's just how those things roll.

Individually and collectively, we Jews have gotten very good at dividing the world between good guys and bad guys. It's understandable, of course. As a people, we have been at the receiving end of the bad guys' badness so many times through history that sometimes we can't help but assume that the world falls neatly into those two categories. Indeed, anyone who has ever felt the sting of human cruelty can easily slip into the trap of generalizing our experience of that meanness and thereby demonize huge swaths of humanity. "Uh oh," we say, "there are millions of them, and we're alone."

Sadly – but perhaps comfortingly – we Jews are far from the only ones these days who unfairly compartmentalize people as good guys and bad guys. Wherever we look, it seems, we see examples of this oversimplified thinking. Look at what's happening south of the border. Democrats call Republicans deplorables; Republicans argue that Democrats are bent on the destruction of Western civilization. People on the left argue that politicians on the right have COVID blood on their hands, and conservative millionaires point guns at peaceful protesters and are then invited to speak to a national TV audience and argue that the "out of control mob" could soon be coming for us all.

It happens here, too. Liberals demonize Conservatives; Conservatives would have us believe that Justin Trudeau is downright evil. Other voices weigh in, too, each with its own dark portrayal of their political enemies.

This us-them thinking can infect even the best of us – and it's getting worse. Think about how you respond to people who disagree with you. If you're anything like me, my guess is that it's getting harder and harder to say, "Well, we'll just have to agree to disagree." Instead, our opponents are increasingly becoming our enemies. "Can you *believe* it?" we cry. "They think X, when I know that Y is true. How *dare* they? The more people who think like them, the quicker we're all going down the tubes and reach the pits of hell."

Disagreement, of course, can be a good thing – we Jews have gotten very good at it over the years. But that's just the point. No longer can we see our disagreements as invitations to dialogue. No longer can we celebrate our ability to disagree as one of the greatest gifts of being

human beings. Instead, we turn to our opponents with a sneer, willing them and their offensive views into submission or non-existence.

In their book, *The Coddling of the American Mind,* authors Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff describe this trend in detail, particularly as it is playing itself out in American academia. Speakers with controversial viewpoints don't spark animated discussions, instead they bring out mobs of students and professors demanding that those lecturers be uninvited from campus speaking engagements, and, when that fails, the protestors resort to heckling, disruptions, and even violence. Provocative articles in scholarly journals are greeted not with letters to the editor or other articles disputing their points, but rather with demands that the articles be retracted – erased completely from the scholarly record. Professors who say something that students disagree with – often quite harmless things – are reported to their deans and often reprimanded by university administrators eager to avoid campus-wide conflicts.

This type of us-them thinking – whether in the academy, at a dinner party, in a political debate, or during an organizational board meeting – is horribly destructive. It's what despots and demagogues do to dehumanize their opponents; it's what warmongers to do rally their followers to kill other human beings; and most troubling, it's what most of us do at some time or another in order to justify ourselves to one another and often even to ourselves.

After all, arguing with another human being can be difficult. They're complex, those human beings, and they can be frustrating, too. Not only that, even when they're wrong, there are sometimes kernels of in what those people are saying. Plus, each of those frustrating, complicated human beings also carries inherent worth and is deserving of dignity precisely because of that very humanity. If we were arguing with bean bags, we could come out swinging and punching and insulting them for their bean-bagginess and for being bean brains, and something about that would be *so* satisfying. In fact, sometimes we forget about the humanity of our interlocutors, instead feeling like the human being we're looking at in our arguments are simply enemies to be vanquished. That's when we get ugly.

Judaism calls us to something better to be better than that. Of course, we need to stand up to bad ideas, we need to stand up to evil actions, we need to stand up on behalf of goodness and justice wherever we can. But never are we free to forget the humanity of our opponents. And when we remember that these are people with whom we disagree, our arguments can be transformed – transformed from a battle in which one side must be vanquished into an encounter in which both sides can be transformed.

"V'eyzehu chacham?" our rabbis asked, "who is truly wise? *Halomeid mikol adam.* The one who learns from all people." Note that the rabbis didn't encourage us to learn only from all of the people we *agree* with, they didn't have us learn from all of our friends in our social media echo chambers. They told us to learn from *all* people. Even the ones who we disagree with. Even they – even those who we're convinced are wrong – have something to teach us.

I find good lessons here in my relations with teachers of other religions. As I'm sure you'll be glad to know, I'm a proud and unapologetic Jew, and when you push me, I'll even say that I think that Judaism gets closer to the truth on most issues in which it disagrees with other

religions. Nevertheless, I have learned a *lot* from the other great religious traditions of the world. From Christianity, I have learned the value of charity, and the power of finding God's unconditional love. From Islam I have learned the beauty of using text rather than pictures to explore the nature of God, from Buddhism, the importance of serenity and quiet reflection. Now don't get me wrong, I'm still Jewish. Unlike my friends who adhere to these other religions, I don't believe that Jesus was the messiah, I'm not guided first and foremost by the teachings of the Koran, and my primary goal in life is not achieving Nirvana, even though I did live in Seattle for decades. It's just that so many of the people whom I've encountered who do embrace those other religions are smart, good folks, and because of the connections I've built with them, I've found that they, too have truths to teach.

Of course, sometimes people make it really difficult for us to acknowledge their humanity; occasionally, our opponents do become enemies, and we need to fight and fight hard against what they're doing. But as Jews, we must never forget their humanity at the same time. When the Egyptian army drowned in the Red Sea after our ancestors left slavery, the rabbis teach, the angels in heaven broke out in celebration. In response, God became furious. "What?" God cried, "my children the Egyptians lay dead on the shores of the sea and you dare to celebrate."

The Egyptians needed to be overcome, but the fact that things got to that point was itself a failure, and God mourned their loss. When we must fight, then so be it. But as Jews, we always must do so with tears in our eyes. That's what makes us a Godly people.

"There are two of us," those Jews said. They were right about that. And who knows what those other two thugs had in mind for them. Sadly, seeing them as enemies from the get-go, those two Jews set themselves up to miss what could conceivably have been an awesome and transformative encounter between four human beings. There were four people there. Imagine what could have happened if all of them had remembered that.

This year, during these difficult days, let's try to remember one another's humanity, even when we disagree. That way, we can all come through these difficult times as stronger, better, and wiser people.

Shanah Tovah.