

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 2015/5776

Why are we here? That's the theme of my sermons for Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur. I originally hesitated having this as a topic because of a concern that a whole raft of members might think "Why on earth AM I here?" and, suddenly thinking that they actually had much better things to do, might stand up and leave! Rabbinic insecurities aside, though, I think it's an essential question at this time. Why are we here?

There are potentially problematic answers to this question, and there are positive answers. Amongst the potentially problematic answers to "Why are we here?" are responses that include (1) lack of anything better to do, (2) tradition and (3) to assuage guilt. Those who know me know that I'm not one to hold much sway by tradition. Just because we've always behaved a certain way doesn't mean we should continue to behave in the same way, because society is always in flux and because people develop and change. Yes, constancy can be very helpful in a world of change, but the problem with clinging to tradition is that it often means denial of the modern world and clinging to something antiquated and increasingly irrelevant. Tradition for tradition's sake is not a good thing. For a tradition to continue into the future, it has to have meaning. Assuaging guilt also isn't a good reason to be at services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This isn't a season of being wiped clean, it's a season of transformation first and foremost. Transformation precedes forgiveness, not the other way round.

But there are many positive answers to the question Why Are We Here? We might be here in search of something. We might be here to atone. We might be here to see members of the community or to meet with God. We might be here to grow. Or

we might not be able to put our finger exactly on why we're here, but we just know we should be and that it benefits us to be here.

I would like to suggest another reason why we're here, and it's a reason you may have not considered. We are here to change the world. This is why, ultimately, I am a Rabbi. In order to change the world we have to honestly look at the world to see what needs changing. In his book *Caring For Creation*¹, author Max Oelschlaeger talks very powerfully of two ways of thinking, starting with what he calls the Dominant Social Matrix. This is everything that we think, say and do now. We live and act within a framework of agreed social norms, defined rarely by ourselves as a global community but, rather, by those with power, and we know that the Dominant Social Matrix is extremely unhealthy. We look at rates of depression and of suicide, we look at global injustice, we look at the poverty gap, we look at war and famine. We know that the Dominant Social Matrix, which is the way of thinking and behaving that leads to these terrible things, is unhealthy. And yet we hardly try to change it at all. Most of the time we consider and challenge only the edges of the Dominant Social Matrix – the mass obsession with celebrity, the mass obsession with fashion.... that kind of thing. But we don't seek to fundamentally change the Dominant Social Matrix because to do so would cause major upheaval in our lives. For example, we talk of the need for a sustainable society but few of us want to give up cars or pay taxes on our carbon use. Or perhaps we talk of the need for greater distribution of wealth, of reducing the gap between the haves and have-nots, but we know that if it were truly addressed, we would probably have to sacrifice some of the comforts we currently enjoy. So the Dominant Social Matrix remains inextricably part of what we do and how we identify ourselves. So the extraordinary thing is that despite knowing that it isn't

¹ *Caring for Creation – An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis*, Max Oelschlaeger, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1994, p.26

healthy for ourselves and for our planet, we continue to live within it. And because of that, we then try to justify it. We live within the Dominant Social Matrix, we know it's bad for us but because we can't see our way out of it, we instead justify it, the same way abused individuals can sometimes end up justifying the actions of their abuser. And we justify it because we feel like we have neither the power nor the vision to create something new, a New Social Matrix. Most people around the world lament the state of the social order and yet there is no dramatic social upheaval. Why is that? It seems to be because those who are able to make substantial changes have been convinced by those who profit from the Dominant Social Matrix the most that mere changes to the window-dressing will suffice, so long as we all chip in. For example, we know that our society is perilously unsustainable in its use of fossil fuels, and yet the changes we make include mere window-dressing like turning off light-switches. Does that help? Yes. Is it anywhere near enough? No. So, why the window-dressing? It's because we're still thinking the same way. We still think as *homo economicus*, as beings who are part of an unchangeable economic order that values profit over personhood. We act as economic agents more than anything else because we define ourselves that way and that's because we're not used to thinking about ourselves differently. And it's impossible to change a mode of behavior if you still think in the way that is essential to maintain that behavior.

What we have to remember is that we live in our own narratives. What that means is that the words we use to describe ourselves and the world are essentially and intrinsically connected to how we behave individually and communally. We can't expect to change the world, to improve society, if we're still thinking and talking and acting the same way. We can't shop our way out of social crisis. We have to reshape society which means that, first and foremost, we have to reshape ourselves.

And this is where Oelschlaeger talks of the New Social Matrix, a new way of behaving and talking. He says – and I agree with him - (p.57) that religion, when expressed democratically, offers the possibility of creating that New Social Matrix. The democratic expression of religion is, of course, essential to this endeavor. Extremism and fundamentalism by their very nature cannot form an inclusive global community. Progressive, democratic religious narrative therefore has an essential role to play in creating a New Social Matrix.

When we talk about God, we by association talk about ourselves. If we call God “Creator” then we are immediately calling ourselves “created.” That’s not a small statement. So when we come together and explore liturgy or explore Torah, when we engage in God-talk, we are actually talking about ourselves and our place in the world. We are trying to answer the question “Why are we here?” Because, to quote Abraham Joshua Heschel, either God is supremely relevant or God is not relevant at all. Either God, however we understand God, is relevant to everything or there is no point in God-talk. And this is because God-talk, religious discussion, is not an academic exercise but is part of forming a personal, communal and thus social narrative. This is why a new *machzor* was so vital, and so overdue – because the way it spoke about God was so antiquated that it wasn’t really talking about us. And because it wasn’t talking about us, it wasn’t challenging us, it wasn’t moving us, and it therefore wasn’t helping set up a New Social Matrix.

It’s very easy to open up Torah, read of the Binding of Isaac, and say that it’s an antiquated story that’s a polemic against child sacrifice. That’s easy. What’s not as easy, but what is essential and what is the absolute reason for the narrative existing in the first place, is to then ask supplementary questions from it. “Torah understands God as testing Abraham. Does God test me? What does that mean for me?” or perhaps “Torah has God and Abraham in open dialogue. Can I speak to

God? What does my answer mean for me as a human being?” Or we can even move beyond God-talk and ask, “Abraham’s attempt to slaughter his son results in father and son never talking again. How have I inadvertently shut down relationships with those close to me?” or perhaps “Abraham is seemingly oblivious to the potential pain he’s about to cause his son. How am I oblivious to the pain I cause others?” These are questions that come from a fundamental narrative, a religious narrative and not a secular one.

But what is that narrative? It’s a narrative that transcends time. It starts at the beginning of creation and ends at total human fulfillment and global peace. It’s a narrative that says that everyone is a deliberate and cherished part of the created order and that everyone has a valuable contribution to make towards society’s perfection. That’s a totally different narrative to the one in the Dominant Social Matrix, in our society today, which is a narrative of personal fulfillment through economic means. Our narrative, the religious narrative, is of all of us being wonderful beings created in the Divine image who move communally towards perfection. And that’s got to be the narrative that underlines the New Social Matrix. It’s a narrative of a shared journey, of the equality of all, of our unique place in the created order and the need to preserve it and each other.

So, when we come together to pray, to study, to socialise, what we are doing is strengthening our own unique narrative and starting to create the New Social Matrix. We’re saying that self- and communal-fulfilment isn’t found economically, but personally and socially. It’s not found through personal wealth but through communal vision, through equality, through personal and shared liberty, through helping the weak and the oppressed in society.

Now you may be thinking, “Seriously, Rabbi Neil? I just came here to pray and go home!” If so, allow me to challenge you. What is prayer in Hebrew? *L’hitpalel*, which is a reflexive verb, meaning to judge oneself. If you are here to pray sincerely, you aren’t going to be the same person when you leave as you were when you came into services this evening. You’ve already changed. You’re already starting to live out the New Social Matrix. And that’s the point. We come to services to change ourselves and, in changing ourselves, we change the world because we cannot change the world without changing ourselves first. Our exploration of the religious realm is an exploration of a new narrative that opens up the possibility of a better world. We don’t have to take everything in the Bible literally or follow its ancient ethics to the letter because sometimes we find them lacking in the 21st century. But we can and must create a religious narrative to help create a New Social Matrix. Just because some parts of Torah may be antiquated does not exclude the entire text from guiding our lives. Ultimately, what is Torah? It’s the narrative of how we are more than the mundane. It’s the narrative of how people can transcend the ordinary and can find holiness in the everyday. It’s the narrative of how everyone is special and entitled to certain, alienable rights. It’s the narrative of personal and communal liberation. THAT is what should be underpinning the Social Matrix and it’s not. The Dominant Social Matrix says exactly the opposite, and that is why we need a new one, and why we are creating it today.

And the religious narrative of today, of Rosh Hashanah, is that we can move beyond the past. It is the narrative that we can grow and change and transcend. It’s the narrative that acknowledges how easily we can get caught up in trivialities but which also acknowledges that with determined effort we can transcend them. It’s the narrative that understands that the world gets better only when we get better.

So, why are we here? We're here to change ourselves which, deliberately and inevitably, means that we're here to change the world.

So, during this season of repentance, of reflection and self-improvement, let us understand that we are here not to make ourselves better but to make the world better. Let us change ourselves for the better as only a first stepping stone to changing the world for the better, and let us be successful in that change. May such be God's will, and let us say, Amen.