

**Rosh Hashanah 5777/2016
"Tribe"**

Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

I would like to welcome you to the annual tribal gathering of the Temple Beth Sholom chapter of the ancient and sacred order of Jews. There are tribal gatherings like this one being held, at this very moment around the neighborhood, around the country and around the world. We gather today in compliance with the demand of our sacred tribal charter, the torah, which explicitly states: *b'hodesh hashvii, b'ehad lahodesh, mikra kodesh yiyeh lachem* --- and for those of you who are not conversant with our ancient tribal language, allow me to translate: "In the seventh month on the first day of the month, you shall convene a sacred convocation..." And so, once again, in compliance with this ancient command, the tribe has gathered.

So how does it feel, to be part of a tribe? While for some of us, many of us – this tribal affiliation does not present any major problems, I suspect for some, it makes you a bit uncomfortable to think that is what we are doing today – being tribal. I would further not be surprised if the older you are, the more comfortable you are with it and the younger you are, the more uncomfortable this tribal concept makes you. But at least **you** are here, comfortable or uncomfortable as you may be. Many, too many Jews, no longer feel **any** tribal loyalty, no longer feel the need to answer the tribal call, to fulfill their tribal obligations.

In an era of the global village – where what happens in the financial markets of Japan reverberate immediately in the canyons of Wall Street – in an era where nationalism is becoming a dirty word and the language of universalism animates our college campuses – is there still a place for a convocation such as this one? Is there still a relevance to being a member of a tribe – no matter how old and how sacred that tribe may be?

Over the summer, I read a small book written by Sebastian Junger titled, "Tribe" – and Mr. Junger argues that in 2016 tribes may be more important than ever. He suggests that tribal connections have been largely lost in modern society and regaining them may be the key to our social and psychological survival. He argues that there is a direct correlation between the loneliness and alienation that so many of us feel, and the breakdown of our tribal affiliations – the sense of belonging and homecoming that are the product of a tribal identity.

Here is an example of what he means: In 1753, in a letter to a friend, Benjamin Franklin observed a phenomenon he could not explain. Since the early days of our arrival to these shores and our confrontation with the Native Americans who were living here before us, Franklin noticed and lamented that English settlers were constantly fleeing over to the Indians, but Indians almost never did the same. Here is what Benjamin Franklin wrote: "When an Indian child has been brought up among us, taught our language and habituated to our customs – if he goes to see his relations and make one Indian ramble with them, there is no persuading him ever to return." On the other hand, Franklin continued, white captives who were liberated from the Indians were almost impossible to keep at home: "Tho' ransomed by their friends," Franklin wrote, "and treated with all imaginable tenderness to prevail with them to stay among the English, none the less, in a short time they become disgusted with our manner of life...and take the first opportunity of escaping again into the woods."

What exactly was so appealing about Indian life – which by all accounts was so primitive? And what was so "disgusting" about English life that was arguably so much more sophisticated?

Is it possible that the sophistication of "modern" life comes at the cost of some basic and fundamental human needs – needs like loyalty and belonging, and the eternal quest for meaning; needs that are so basic that a "primitive" society that has them is preferred over a "sophisticated" one that does not?

By now, some of you are lamenting that I have not chosen to speak about the presidential election. I will not be telling you who I think you should vote for because, well first of all because I don't think I should use the privilege of this pulpit to impose my political beliefs on you. And secondly, because I want this place to be a sanctuary – a refuge from the craziness of the world – a place you can come to and find peace and encouragement, strength and hope – and if I spoke about politics I would achieve precisely the opposite. But while I will not be speaking about the candidates, I will be speaking about some of the issues that these candidates have raised, in the hope that whoever will be our next president, we sitting here in this sanctuary – will have a clear vision of the values upon which she or he should stand.

So instead of Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, I would like to speak about Martin Bauman. Who is Martin Bauman? Well to be honest, I did not know him, although I would not be surprised if some of you did, as he lived in Sands Point. Martin Bauman died this past year and I learned about him by reading his obituary in the New York Times – that's something I do as a rabbi, I read obituaries – or as George Burns used to like to say, "The first thing I do each morning is to read the obituaries in the newspaper. If I don't see my name, I go make breakfast." Let me tell you what I learned about Martin Bauman and why I have chosen to speak about him rather than the presidential candidates.

Martin Bauman died peacefully this past December at the age of 85. His obit told the following story: Mr. Bauman had joined the army in the 1950's, contracted polio while in the service, graduated college under the GI Bill, and eventually started a successful job placement firm in New York City. The firm found people for top executive positions around the country, but that didn't protect it from economic downturns, and in the 1990's, Bauman's company experienced its first money-losing year in three decades. According to the notice in the Times, Mr. Bauman called his employees into a meeting and asked them to accept a 10% reduction in salary so that he wouldn't have to fire anyone. They all agreed. Then he quietly decided to give up his personal salary until his company was back on safe ground. The only reason his staff found out was because the company bookkeeper told them. Clearly Bauman felt that true leadership – the kind that lives depend on – may require powerful people to put themselves last, and it seems that Mr. Bauman was one of those people. Martin Bauman voluntarily served his country, served his employees, and served other handicapped people by establishing a scholarship fund in his name. Martin Bauman clearly understood that belonging to society requires sacrifice, a sense of solidarity and concern for the welfare of others, even before your own. That satisfaction and fulfillment in life comes not from what you get but what you give; not what you win at the expense of others but what you are willing to lose for the welfare of others. There is a story told of the fabulously wealthy Edmund de Rothschild, of the famous Rothschild family. He lived to the ripe old age of 93 and when he was in the final days of his life and confined to his bed, he was asked by a friend, exactly how much he was worth. He motioned to his aid to bring his checkbook. The aid, thinking he was confused, tried to correct him and said, "Sir, you mean your bank book?" "No, said Rothschild, my bank book merely states what I have, my check book records what I have given – the question was what am I worth – and I am only worth that which I have given!"

That is why I chose to begin with Martin Bauman, On this sacred Rosh Hashanah day, I would humbly suggest to you that his sense of responsibility for the welfare of others, this understanding of his tribal obligations, which was so clearly at the core of Martin Bauman's identity, must be at the core of what it means to be a leader, it must be at the core of what it means to be an American, what it means to be a Jew, what it means to be a human. And absent this sense of responsibility for the welfare of others – we will not survive, as a nation or as a people.

Remember the days when UJA could promote its fund raising campaign with the motto: "We are one!" The campaign was predicated on the notion that if you feel one with someone, you would also feel a sense of responsibility for them and give generously. So if we felt a oneness with all Jews, we would feel a sense of responsibility for all Jews. But things have changed, and there is very little oneness,

very little unity in today's Jewish community. And it appears that when you don't feel that oneness you don't feel much responsibility for Jews who are different from you.

Remember when we stood as kids, placed our hands over our heart as we started our school day and pledged allegiance to: "one nation, under God, indivisible – with liberty and justice for all?" Our nation does not feel very united these days either – and indivisible? We have rarely been more divided – on race, on politics, on gender, on issues like gun control and immigration and foreign policy. And here too, we feel little responsibility to promote the welfare of those who are so different than us.

When I was a kid, all Americans were *my* people – do you feel that today? When I was a kid, all Jews were *my* people – do you feel that way today?

What has happened?

I think two things have happened simultaneously – and neither of them has been helpful. When I was young, I felt part of an American tribe that included all Americans and a Jewish tribe that included all Jews. But, today we are confronted with an American and a Jewish tribalism that is so narrow and so extreme – it repulses many of us. We see ultra-Orthodox in Israel violently protesting the very notion that we are Jews and we feel they are not us. We watch rallies in this country that promote hateful ideas and we feel they are not us. This is tribalism at its worst and it repulses us.

But at the same time, there are those on the other extreme that we find equally troubling. There are many Americans and many Jews who have come to embrace a universalism that sees any and all expressions of tribalism as passé, outdated, primitive. In rejecting the worst of tribalism they reject all tribal affiliations. But if a narrow tribalism is not the answer, neither is an unqualified universalism.

And we live at a moment where these two opposite trends are happening with a fervor that threatens our way of life. Tribalists insist that it's about *my* way, *my* group, *my* people. We see 49'er's quarterback Colin Kaepernick refuse to stand when the National Anthem is played to protest what he believes are wrongdoings by this country against African-Americans, against *his* people. Kaepernick no longer feels, no longer believes that this country and this nation are his people. We see a presidential candidate who for years questions the birth status of the President of the United States to suggest he is not one of us. We see candidates of both parties making calculations – well, Hispanics will not vote for me anyway so I can afford to say disturbing things about Mexicans, I can disparage immigrants because – well because they will not vote for me anyway. I can call my opponents supporters, "deplorable" because they are not mine. They – whoever they may be – the media, the political elite, the immigrants, the whites, the blacks – they are not us. I suspect Martin Bauman, may he rest in peace, would not have been pleased. It is certainly not the America he grew up in and not the one I grew up in either.

But, at the same time we see this dramatic and disturbing rise in a perverted tribalism, a me firstism; we find an equally disturbing belief in globalism and universalism. Centered on our college campuses, many of our young people increasingly believe in a vision of the world in which there is no me, no mine, a world that can best be summarized by the late great John Lennon in his song *Imagine*. But, when John Lennon sang about the possibility of such a world, at least he had the good sense to call it "Imagine". He may have hoped for a day without division – without countries and nothing to live or die for – a world without religion where everyone could live together as one – he may have imagined all the people sharing all the world – but at least he knew it was a world that existed only in his imagination. What am I to say in the face of those whose naïveté is so great that they would tell us that all we have to do, today, in 2016, is just give peace a chance. If Israel would just lay down its weapons – they will see that the Arabs and the Palestinians all really want the same things we want and if we just tear down the walls that separate them from us – we can all live together in peace. I recently asked one of these young people, "What if you are wrong? What if we do everything you and they demand and the result is not peace, but the destruction of Israel as a nation and the death of tens of thousands of our people?" "Well, that is a risk I am willing to take," she replied. Sadly I responded, "Well, that is where you and I part ways – as that is not a risk I am willing to take."

Ari Shavit, the Israeli author of the remarkable book *My Promised Land* – has spent the last year or so taking his case to the college campuses. He visited over 40 universities and spoke to tens of thousands of our children. And this is what he said: “I listened to thousands of students express their fears and doubts regarding Israel and the Jewish establishment. I saw firsthand the animosity of BDS, the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement and I heard the pain of liberals who find it difficult to side with Israel, much less admire it. I watched thousands grow further and further from Zionism, and sometimes even from Judaism.

At Stanford, Berkeley, Northwestern, Princeton, Brown, Harvard, Columbia and dozens more academic institutions, I held heartbreaking conversations with a new Jewish generation, intelligent and impressive, experiencing an identity crisis. With my own eyes I saw, and with my own ears I heard, how we are losing our future. This sustained experience shook me to my very core. I came to recognize that the most pressing existential threat we face is the clash between Zionism and the zeitgeist of the 21st century. The fact is that while most young people in North America and Europe have adopted universal values, both Israel and the organized Jewish world are perceived as tribal. The fact is that in an era in which the three gravest sins are Power, Privilege and Particularism, we are distortedly perceived, as Powerful, Privileged and Particularistic.”

So this then is the dilemma that confronts us –today’s universalists believe that tribalism has become a dirty word. And today’s tribalists reject any notion of universalist values as they retreat further and further into a world of us versus them and spend their time praising us and denigrating them.

And the rest of us? Well, we have a problem. We reject the naïveté of the universalists and are repulsed by the narrowness of the tribalists and we wish there was a third way, a way to broaden the focus of the tribalists and narrow the vision of the universalists – some sort of universalistic tribalism. I have good news for you, there is, and it is called Judaism. For thousands of years, we Jews have pursued a way of life, a belief system and a life conduct that promotes us and them, that by nurturing us, creates a person who is more sensitive to the needs of them.

Here’s how it works: The torah teaches: (Deut 15:7) “If there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen, in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs.” From this verse we learn that it is an obligation, in Judaism, to support the needy. And, it is not just a nice thing to do, but it is a *mitzvah*, a religious requirement. The statement is clear and unequivocal. When someone is in need, you must open your hand and give him whatever he or she needs to survive.

Now as simple and straightforward as this verse appears, it does not take long before the rabbis reveal some fundamental problems in trying to live it. What if the needs of the poor exceed our ability to provide? Who gets the limited funds that are available? How do we decide which need is to be met first? What cause deserves priority? These questions are not addressed in the book of Deuteronomy. This verse was intended for a time and an age when people lived in small villages – and the people seeking your help were those who lived in your neighborhood, in close proximity to you. They were few in number and their needs were modest. But how are we to apply this verse? How are we to fulfill this mitzvah – in 2016 when we live in a global village? When the needs of the world are endless and the cry for help may be from half a world away – and there are literally millions in need and trillions of dollars that are needed to help them?

Certainly we as Jews must respond, and respond generously to those in need. The Bible tells me so. But, how much should we send? How many Syrian refugees should we open our doors to? And do their needs take priority over our needs? There is poverty right here in our country, our community, our area. And what about the needs of our fellow Jews – who will provide for them if not us – do we have the right to privilege our people over the desperate needs of Syrian children? The needs of the world are so

great and our resources are so meager - how does one begin, where does one start - and where does one stop?

In the *Mechilta of Rabbi Yishmael*, a collection of *midrashim* on the Book of Exodus that dates back some 2000 years, there is a discussion that centers precisely on these questions. The *Mechilta* deals with a number of situations and in each of them, two people stand before you in need and you only have you sufficient funds for one. Given limited resources the rabbis want to help us determine a hierarchy of need. Most of the cases are pretty straightforward – if you have a rich person and a poor person asking for money and you only have money for one – give it to the poor person. If you have demands from your family and demands from strangers – help your family first. But then it comes to an example that is relevant to our discussion: *Yisrael v'goi omdim lefanecha lelavot, ami kodem!* "If a poor Jew and a poor gentile stand before you to borrow money, the Jew should receive preference." Oy. I can see the protests already forming on our college campuses. How, provincial, how narrow, how particularistic can you be? *Yisrael v'goi omdim lefanecha lelavot, ami kodem!* "If a poor Jew and a poor gentile stand before you to borrow money, the Jew should receive preference?" Is this not the precise kind of Jewish tribalism that many of children and many of us find so distasteful? Is this not the exact spirit of American tribalism that proclaims America First that so many of us find troubling? No it is not. And if you permit me to explain what I believe the rabbis of this midrash are trying to teach us – I believe we may in fact have the solution to our contemporary dilemma. One that can unite young and old, and one that can unite all but the most extreme of the tribalists and universalists.

When a rich or a poor person stands before us - of course the poor person deserves special attention – his/her need is greater. But the idea that we help one person over another, simply because he or she is Jewish, and the other is not, just because he or she is American – just because he or she is us – well, that just does not sit well with our modern sensibilities, our global consciousness; not well at all.

Many of those who are promoting the notion of America First would, at first blush, love this midrash. And those that subscribe to this way of thinking would be the first to admit that they are in fact *not* universalistic, *not* global citizens – they are: Americans! America First! And rabbi, before you try and put this down, don't you frequently preach a Jewish version of America First – when you encourage our young people to date Jews, to marry Jews and if they do intermarry to at least raise Jewish children – isn't that a form of Jewish First?

A young woman, home from college for the summer shared with me her personal dilemma that she had while she was away at school this past year. She was out on a date with a young man, the third time she had gone out with him, and finally she got up the nerve to ask him if he was Jewish (having waited unsuccessfully for some hint before that). "Yes" he replied. "But, why is it important to you? What difference does it make if I am Jewish or not? I am who I am - does the fact that I am Jewish make me more worthy of your attention. And if I had answered no - would it have made me less worthy of your attention? Isn't it more important that I am nice and honest and a host of other qualities that you should concern yourself with before you ask about some accident of birth?" Unable to adequately respond, the young woman found her way to my office. Is being Jewish sufficient reason to give someone preferential treatment, or is this an archaic trapping that we best divest ourselves of if we wish to become full members of the 21'st century. In this age of globalism are we Jews still speaking the language of parochialism? Shouldn't we Jews become more universalistic and less tribal?

If you have been listening to me – 'lo these past 22 years – you will know that time and time again I have stressed the universalistic vision of our sacred Jewish tradition. The Talmud asks: *Lama adam nivra yechidi? Why was only one man created?* Every other animal and vegetative group described in the first chapters of Genesis were created fully populated with the exception of humankind - and this fact did not escape our rabbis' attention. And they answer that this was done to teach us an important lesson. "So that we would all realize that every person alive in the world today is a descendant of one man, Adam and therefore we are all brothers. And no one person may claim to be superior to another." Our rabbis taught that, our tribal rabbis. The ethics of Judaism is dominated by a spirit of universalism.

If we had more time I could multiply the teachings that prove this. All children of this world are at the same time children of God, qualified and able to realize the good and to extend God's dominion in the world. The messianic teachings of Judaism are recited every day, we will sing it out loud - when we sing *Aleinu: v'neemar v'haya adonai l'melech al kol haaretz bayom hahoo yiyeh adonai ehad u'shemo ehad - And there shall come a day when the Lord will be recognized as ruler of the whole earth. And on that day, all will accept that God is one and God's name is one!*" Imagine all the people sharing all the world...we Jews have had just such imaginings for thousands of years.

Moses Maimonides, the great Rambam, who lived over 800 years ago, summarized it this way: "As to your question regarding the nations of the world, know that God requires the heart and that all depends upon the allegiance of the heart and its intent. Therefore our ancient sages taught that the righteous of the nations of the world will also have a share in the world to come..."

"What race is honorable?" asks Ben Sira 2000 years ago, "The race of man. Which race is honorable? They that fear the Lord. Which race is dishonorable?" asks Ben Sira, "The race of man. Which race is dishonorable? They that transgress God's commandments."

I wish that young woman could have quoted this Rambam or Ben Sira as an answer to the young man she was dating. Judaism believes, Judaism insists that every person is ultimately judged by the goodness in our hearts and the kindness with which we live our lives. But the Rambam would still want you to be Jewish. And Ben Sira would still want you to raise Jewish children. Why? If what is really important is the goodness in our hearts, why demand tribal affiliation? Why do I continue to insist on Jews first when I so strongly reject the America First movement?

Look, I admit, there are Jews who teach Jews first and believe in a kind of narrow tribalism that says Jews are inherently different, Jews are fundamentally better, I think they are wrong. Just as I think that Americans who preach America First and mean a kind of jingoistic, xenophobic nationalism are also wrong.

To me – the idea of Jews First is a belief that does not contradict our belief in universalistic values and the worth of all people, it embraces it, as my notion of America first is one that does not look down on those who are not us, but embraces a vision of one nation under God indivisible. The deepest meaning of God's choosing the Jews is to understand that God has placed upon us a mission, a mission to share our torah with all mankind, a mission to be a light unto the nations by the way we live and lead our lives.

And so I said to that young woman who came to my office – your boyfriend was right that the most important thing is that he be honorable and decent. But, it is also important that he be Jewish, for the price of unadulterated universalism is nothing less than the survival of Judaism itself and if there are no Jews, who will teach the world about honor and decency as we have for the past 4000 years? "People first" is what Judaism believes, "Jews first" was created by our rabbis to ensure the survival of a nation who put all different kinds of people first.

And when I proclaim America First, it is because I believe in an America that is a shining beacon to the world of freedom and justice – of openness and acceptance – a nation that proclaims on its Statue of Liberty – "Give me your tired and your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..." I believe in America First because if there is not an America to stand up for these values in the world, than who?

I believe that universalistic tribalism is Judaism's great gift to mankind and we cannot allow the conversation in Judaism or in American politics be reduced to us versus them. "Us versus them" is destroying the world.

Radical Islam has created a world-view based on us versus them and the result is hatred, vengeance and death. The name of the recent bomber, the self-radicalized Muslim who placed the pipe bombs in

New York City and in New Jersey – his name is Ahmed Khan Rahami – do you know what Rahami means in Arabic? It is from the same root as the Hebrew *Rachamim*, - Compassion. His name means compassion – but there is no compassion left in his heart for those who are not like him. Is that what you want to happen to us? To live in a world of us versus them –Republican versus Democrats, Americans versus Foreigners, White versus Black and Brown, heterosexual versus homosexual, men versus women – the list goes on and on; there is no end to the “thems” that “we” can hate.

Our sacred torah has a different way of looking at the world, a better way of looking at the world, one I hope you too will embrace. It is a world of us AND them – it is a universalistic tribalism that believes that there is no end to the “thems” we can love.

You know why all those Indians couldn't wait to get back to their tribes in the woods? Because the tribe offered them something missing in those fancy cities, something we have not discovered in the 250 years since then – the value of tribal affiliation, the value of being part of an us.

To be a member of the Jewish tribe is to feel a sense of belonging so desperately missing from our contemporary world, it means to have a sense of mission and purpose for your life and to have a sense of responsibility to others, the kind of responsibility that Martin Bauman felt for his employees. Soldiers returning from war frequently look back at their war experience not as the most difficult, challenging, dangerous days of their life – which they were – but as the best days of their life. When asked how is this possible, they speak of the comradeship they felt, the willingness to fight and die for the guys in their unit, a sense of belonging and being needed.

Londoners who lived through the blitz in WWII, speak of it, not as the most trying and difficult days of their lives, but the most beautiful as an entire city felt connected, and responsible for each other. Many of us had a glimpse into this after 9/11 or even after Hurricane Sandy – we too became, for a short while, a community of sufferers – and felt that bond of connection that we look back on as some of our finest hours. When a subway or LIRR train breaks down – I am always fascinated by what happens in the car as we suffer together. We become a band of brothers, sharing a similar fate: Stuck, together. People whom we would not normally even speak to, we joke with and commiserate with. Why can't it always be like that? For the truth is, we are all stuck here together.

I ask you on this sacred Rosh Hashanah day to reject the narrow-mindedness of those who would have us believe that it is us versus them. I ask you to embrace the value of us and them, us as Americans, us as Jews, us as Republicans and Democrats, White and Black, Gay and Straight, we are all part of God's plan – we are all necessary – we all have value and our value comes in being us.

Let me conclude by teaching you the secret of blowing a shofar. You cannot blow the shofar from the wide end. Nothing will happen – just lot of hot air wasted. But if you narrow the focus, and concentrate the effort, a loud and beautiful and strong sound will fill the world. By joining together as a tribe, a holy, ancient, beautiful tribe, on this sacred day of tribal convocation, we too can make a beautiful sound that will fill the world.