

Rosh Hashanah 2017
“Living in a Crazy World”
by Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

A story that was told by the great Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav:

Once upon a time there was a king who discovered that *all* the grain, in his *entire* kingdom had been contaminated by a strange mold. The grain looked the same and tasted the same as normal grain, but it was not. Anyone who ate this tainted grain went mad! They lost all contact with reality.

Being the only one who knew about this, the king was in a bind. His storehouses were rapidly running out of uncontaminated grain and the only food left to feed his people would make them crazy. What is a king to do? His first thought was to let the people eat the bad grain but not partake of it himself so that at least one person in the kingdom would maintain his sanity. But a sane king could never rule an insane people. He would not understand their craziness and they would think his sanity was a form of madness for acting so different from them. So, reluctantly the king concluded that he had no choice. If he wanted to rule a kingdom of insane people he had no choice but to eat the grain as well. Only an insane king could rule an insane people. But in one last desperate attempt to guarantee a better future, the king issued a decree that everyone was required by law to put a mark on their foreheads. After everyone complied they opened the storehouses, everyone ate and everyone went mad. But every morning when they saw that mark on other people's foreheads, they would ask themselves, "What does this strange mark mean?" Then they would shrug and go along their merry insane way. The crazy king's last sane act was a hope that one day someone might come to the realization that the mark was a sign and intended as a reminder. "A reminder of what?" The people would ask – and maybe, someone, someday, would realize it was a reminder that they were crazy – and this would be their first step back towards sanity.

Most stories that begin with "once upon a time..." end with, "and they lived happily ever after." But not this one. No, this story ends with everyone being insane – and that is not a happy thought at all. In fact, the story ends before we even find out what happened to the king and his people. Did they ever realize that they were all crazy? Did they ever find their way back to sanity? I think the reason the story has no ending is because this "once upon a time," is "our time!" We are living their story. Those people are us. And every day we wake up in a world that seems to have gone mad. We have a mysterious mark within us that continually has us asking the question, "Is this real? Is this the way life is supposed to be?" But so far, we, like the king and his people – have not figured a way back to a sane world.

The cover article on a recent edition of The Atlantic Magazine promises to explain, "How America went haywire and lost its mind." You can decide if it has any answers – but it certainly seems to be starting with the right question. I doubt that I am the only one here who wakes up each morning, reads the newspaper and wonders if the world has gone mad. What is that old saying: "Me thinks the whole world has gone crazy except me and thee...and sometimes I wonder about thee!"

Some, sitting here today, think our president is crazy. Not that he is wrong, not that you disagree with him – you think he is crazy. And some, sitting here today, think that those who think our president is crazy, are crazy. Not wrong, not misguided – crazy.

There are things going on in Israel that seem to be, well crazy. An ultra-Orthodox rabbi suggests that Reform Jews are worse than Nazis. A Religious member of Knesset is forced to resign by his ultra-religious party because he attended a beloved nephew's same-sex

wedding. When our Temple Beth Sholom group was in Israel this past March, we went to participate in an egalitarian minyan near the kotel and so called “religious Jews” spat on us and cursed at us. This is crazy. Here in America, Neo-Nazis are once again marching in the streets shouting terrible things about blacks and Jews. There is unrest in St. Louis, demonstrations and counter-demonstrations all around the country – it really does seem to be, well, crazy!

Hate seems to have permission to express itself in ways we thought had been put behind us. No matter the issue: immigration, global warming, economic trade, taxes, health care, we no longer argue with each other – we no longer disagree with each other – we shout at each other, we resent each other – and dare I say, we hate each other. The President does not trust the media, and the media does not trust the President. The right does not trust the left and the left does not trust the right. Minorities fear the authorities and the authorities fear the minorities. No matter where we look, civility has been replaced with hostility; respect by chauvinism; tolerance by bigotry; truth by fabrication and deceit; privacy by exposure; modesty by exhibitionism; achievement by fame; shame by shamelessness and bridges by walls.

Like the townspeople in Rabbi Nachman’s story – we look at each other and we have this gnawing sense that something is wrong. We sense that this is indeed crazy – but we are not sure where to go from there.

As I did some research on Rabbi Nachman’s story – I found that it did not originate with Rabbi Nachman who lived in the late 18th century in the Ukraine. I found various versions of this story in other cultures at other times. Rabbi Nachman probably heard this story from his non-Jewish neighbors and appropriated it. (Not the first time a rabbi used someone else’s material – certainly not the last.) But, his telling was a uniquely Jewish rendition. All the other versions had one thing in common, the story ended with everyone in the kingdom going crazy. In those non-Jewish versions, the point of the story seems to be that the whole world is crazy and that there is nothing we can do about it. Such a conclusion was unthinkable for Rabbi Nachman. The thought that the whole world was crazy – was one Rabbi Nachman could probably embrace – but the idea that there was nothing we could do?! That, – was – well just not possible. So, he included the idea of the *mark* on our foreheads and the *hope* we would one day find our way back.

For Rabbi Nachman the thought of an irredeemably crazy world was inconceivable. We are Jews. We are partners with the *Kadosh Baruch Hu* in the betterment and perfection of the world – and while it *was* conceivable to the great rabbi, that we had lost our way – it was *inconceivable* that we would never find our way again.

I look at you and, well to be honest you seem to be acting a bit strange. You look at me and think that I am the one who is bizarre. I see the mark on you, you see it on me. Doesn’t it make you wonder how we got here? It certainly makes me wonder.

Jonathan Haidt in his remarkable book, “The Righteous Mind” makes a scholarly argument for a proposition that most of us are slowly coming to on our own. He argues that people are fundamentally not rational. I suspect Rabbi Nachman would have agreed.

But it is a question that many of us have been asking as well, on a whole host of issues: “Why doesn’t the other side listen to reason?” Haidt’s response is that we humans, were never designed to listen to reason.

When you ask people moral questions, time their responses and scan their brains, their answers and brain activation indicate that they reach conclusions quickly and produce reasons later only to justify what they already decided. Most of us assume that first come facts and then come opinions – Jonathan Haidt suggests that it is the other way around – first come opinions and then we find the facts to support them.

For many years, Israeli's mistakenly thought that their cause merely suffered from poor *hasbara* – poor communication, poor PR. Clearly the facts are with us. The world does not know *our* side of the story. Justice is on our side. Right is on our side. We are the good guys. The Palestinians claim we Jews have no historical connection to the Land of Israel. We are a modern imperialistic imposition of the 20th century. We say – well that is just wrong. Anyone who knows history knows we Jews have a 3000-year relationship with the land of Israel. Anyone who has studied archeology knows that facts establish that relationship. And silly us, we thought that all we need to do is make sure the world knows these facts, knows our story – and they will see for themselves that we are right and our cause is correct. But as we now understand, that is not how the human mind works. Or as Rabbi Nachman would say, since the whole world is crazy, it is not so simple.

We listen to speeches in the UN where murderers and dictators, representatives of countries that are amongst the worst violators of human rights in history call us Nazis, oppressors and guilty of genocide. And we wonder – has the world gone mad. Can't they see the facts? Are they blind to the truth?

But, in a world gone mad, the facts no longer matter. Truth is no longer decisive in the creation of opinions. Opinions are decisive in choosing the facts we believe are true.

How many of you here today who see yourself as liberal or left of center – listen to Fox News on a regular basis to get your news? How many of you here who are politically conservative or right of center listen to MSNBC on a regular basis to get your news? We seek the facts that reinforce what we already believe. We watch the news that confirms what we already know to be true. A world in which our minds are made up and no amount of facts will change our opinions – is this not a world gone mad?

Not only do we listen to news stations that conform to our pre-conceived notions but it is getting to be that we socialize only with people who think like we do. Once upon a time parents hoped their children would marry someone with a similar socio-economic background, with a similar religion – now they hope they will marry someone with a similar political outlook. Studies show that young people now make “similar political affiliation” a quality that is very high up on their list of attributes they require while seeking a mate. Family gatherings have become quite the challenge – some have even decreed that Thanksgiving or Passover or Rosh Hashanah dinners be politics free zones. Our arguments convince no one and aggravate everyone. Rosh Hashanah 5778 – and the world is crazy or to paraphrase Winston Churchill: Never have so many been so aggravated by so much.

So, if there is nothing I can say that will move you and nothing you can say that will change me, where do we go from here? Are we all doomed to the beliefs we currently have? Is change and progress impossible? Are we doomed to remain in this crazy reality?

Fortunately, Rabbi Nachman's story had a different ending. It was those other versions that left us in a world gone mad with nothing to do about it. Rabbi Nachman's wisdom is deeper and offers a way out. Do you remember how his story ended? We all have this mark on us. And when we look at each other – it will lead us to wonder. When we look at each other we will begin to ask questions. When we look at each other we will begin to find our way back to sanity... **when** we look at each other.

According to Rabbi Nachman, the way out is to look at each other and see the face of the other.

I had a fascinating experience recently. A few of our members came to me and said they would like to meet with me to try and understand why so many Jews tend to be liberal. They had listened to enough of my sermons to sense where my tendencies lie. And these members who genuinely seemed to like me, maybe even admire me – for the life of them could not understand why I did not see the world the way they did, did not support their political views. Couldn't I see what they saw?

So, I invited them to sit down for a conversation. We met one Shabbat after Services. We sat around a table at Kiddush and I began by saying that rather than my trying to explain my position to them and them trying to explain their position to me – how about we turn the tables. I will explain why I think they like our president and they will tell me if I got it right. And then they can try and explain why they think I am not a supporter and I will tell them if they got it right.

As I began to describe their views, they started nodding – soon they were all smiling. When I was finished they, all felt I had captured their beliefs perfectly. Now it was their turn – and to my surprise they succinctly and precisely summarized *my* beliefs. And what was even more interesting – was that since they respected me and I respected them; since I liked them and they liked me, – neither of us said anything that was not complimentary of the other. My description was not a caricature of their beliefs but true to the way they saw themselves; and their description was not a caricature of my beliefs but true to the way I saw myself. I found a way to describe what was good about their beliefs and they found a way to describe what was good about mine.

At the end of the conversation I don't think that anyone's mind was changed but I think there was an appreciation that despite our differences we really loved each other and could manage to live with each other; that our beliefs did not make us bad people, even if they did make us appear a bit strange to each other. And all we had to do was take a few moments and look *at* each other.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moshe in a moment of anger criticizes the Israelites as being *am k'hei oref* - a "stiff-necked people." On Yom Kippur in the litany of our sins we recite over and over – *kishinu oref – we are stiff-necked*. What exactly does it mean to be stiff-necked? The modern Biblical Scholar Jeff Tigay says that stiff-necked means headstrong and stubborn. The great Spanish Biblical commentator of the 15th century Rabbi Ovadiah S'forno says that it refers to someone who is unable to look left or right, but has tunnel vision. Even though others point out the error of his ways, he is unwilling or unable to change. My son Ari, thinks of *kishinu oref* as the modern sin of "confirmation bias." Of interpreting everything, in light of what we already believe. Of stubbornly maintaining our beliefs even in the face of contrary evidence.

The beauty of my Kiddush meeting with those members - -is that there was not a stiff-neck amongst us. For a few moments, we each took the time to look left and look right – to consider views different from our own, to see the face of those with whom we disagreed. Health Care, Tax Reform, Immigration, Global Warming – the truth is that in each of these issues and so many more there are sensible compromises that could be made. Compromises that would make the world a better place, a saner place – if we would all just stop being so stiff-necked and stubborn.

As I walked away from my Kiddush encounter, I was more convinced than ever, that our goal should not be to persuade each other but to learn to live with each other, to learn to see each other, to learn to care for each other.

The king in Rabbi Nachman's story had a fascinating dilemma. There was a moment when he had to choose which was more important to him – sanity or community. He could remain sane, but he would lose his people or, he could choose to remain with the people he loved at the cost of his own sanity.

If you had to make the choice the king made, if you had to choose between sanity and community, between what you think is the sane choice, the right choice and a compromise that enables you to live with others – which would you choose? How important is it to you to be right? How important is it to you to be loved?

“Why can't I be both? Why can't I be right *and* loved?” Great, I hope you can – but if you had to choose, if it came down to one or the other, which is ultimately more important to you?

Do you think this is a silly question? I deal with it every day. Husbands and wives sit in my office and present what they believe are irreconcilable differences. Each sit there in a state of righteous indignation. They have been wronged and they want, they demand justice. And if they don't get it – they are out of the relationship, they want a divorce.

And I ask them this very question: “which is more important - to be right or to be loved?” “What kind of a question is that – rabbi?” “Well, you are going to have to choose – if you demand your pound of flesh – well then this relationship is probably over. But, if you are willing to settle for a less than perfect solution, if you are willing to live without total vindication – then maybe it still has a chance to survive – but you are going to have to make a choice.”

Parents and children – in some cases they haven't spoken for years, decades – in some cases they no longer even remember why they stopped talking – and in each and every one of these instances it is because they chose being right over being loved.

Every relationship that has ever been broken – has not been broken for a reason. It is not the act of betrayal that ruins the marriage; it is the inability to care enough, forget enough, and forgive enough – that ruins the relationship. But what my husband did was wrong! What my friend did was wrong! Yes, it was. And sometimes it was terribly, horribly wrong. Such is the reality of living in a crazy world. But, Rabbi Nachman would ask – can you face that person, turn to that person – can you, like the King in Rabbi Nachman's story say –“I would rather be crazy and with my people; I would rather compromise myself and stay with my wife; I would rather compromise and keep my friend – than to be right and be alone.” Because if you insist on maintaining your stiff-necked stubbornness that is exactly what you will be --- alone.

Am I being too harsh? Maybe a bit – sometimes differences really are irreconcilable – but sometimes, many times they are not.

The rabbis suggest that God confronts this very same dilemma on these High Holy Days. God weighs our deeds, balances the scales of justice to determine who is guilty and who is innocent. We call these days *Yamim Noraim*, days of fear and trembling – because we know we are undeserving, *ki ayn banu maasim*. It is what we sing over and over in the *Avinu Malkaynu* prayer – *ki ayn banu maasim*- the facts are not on our side – a reasonable God, a just God, a God who decides our fate based on the facts – will find us wanting. If God is like us, stiff-necked, we are doomed.

But, say the rabbis, on Rosh Hashanah we sound the shofar – we remind God of the near sacrifice of Isaac; the ram that Avraham offered in his stead – God remembers this incredible act of love – and, say the rabbis, God gets up from *kisey din* – His throne of justice and takes His place on *kisey rachamim* – His throne of mercy – and He forgives us.

That is crazy. We don't deserve that love. We don't deserve to be forgiven. For the sins we have committed before You: we have polluted, we have lied, we have distorted the truth, we have mocked, we have belittled, we have slandered and abused and for all these sins and so many more – we deserve God's harshest judgment – but still we pray: "Dear God, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement."

And, God does. God forgives us – because God loves us. "This is crazy," say the angels – "they are destroying Your magnificent creation – punish them! Eliminate them! Wipe them from the face of the earth!" "What can I do," says God – "I need them, I want them, I love them."

But, God makes one move that the king in Rabbi Nachman's story does not make. Because the king loves his people he wants to be with them – even if it means going insane. God who loves us, His people, makes a slightly different move: Rather than becoming crazy like us, God demands that we become sane like Him or Her. Both God and the king want to be with their people – but who will make the move?

Because God loves us, God and wants to be with us, so God demands we try harder, be better, learn from our mistakes, confront our shortcomings. God will tolerate our insanity but not join in it. And that is why a loving God demands we try harder. And so too, if we are going to live with each other – we too are going to have to learn to tolerate each other's insanity – but not join in it. If we are going to love each other, like God we too must challenge each other to be better and try harder.

The strangest commandment in all the Torah is Deuteronomy 6:5: "*v'ahavta et Adonai elohecha*- Love the Lord your God." How is it possible to command love? The second strangest commandment in the Torah is Leviticus 19:18: "*v'ahavta l'reyecha k'mocha* – love your neighbor as yourself." How is it possible to command love? And how is it possible to command me to love someone as much as I love myself? And this is not my wife I am supposed to love like myself, not my mother or my dearest friend - -it is my neighbor! A total stranger. Feelings can't be commanded!

That is true – say the rabbis and that is why they don't understand these commandments to be about feelings. When we speak of love we speak of that mushy feeling you get - the weak legs,

the racing heart. And that is a certain kind of love – but not the one the Torah is speaking about. When God tells us to love our neighbor, God is not telling us how to feel, say the rabbis, God is telling us how to behave. What is being asked of us is not an internal feeling but an outward behavior. If you love someone, you want them - you need them, to be better. And if they love you, they will want you to be better.

It is no coincidence that one verse before Leviticus 19:18, one verse before the one that expects me to love my neighbor is Leviticus 19:17 which requires me to do something regarding my neighbor that might be even tougher than loving him or her: *hochiach tochiach et amitecha* – Rebuke your neighbor! If you see them doing something wrong – say something. This was the original “see something, say something.”

In Judaism – rebuke, reprimand, criticism is an expression of love. Because God loves us – God demands that we be better, try harder. And in the same way, suggest the rabbis, we are commanded to show love for our neighbor by being involved in their life, not walking away. In Judaism, I am commanded to love you; and because I am commanded to love you, I am required to care for you; and because I care for you I should rebuke you when you do wrong. And hopefully you will do the same for me. If I think you are acting crazy, or you think I am acting crazy – our choices are clear: either we can choose to join in the insanity of the other, or try and get the other to act a bit more sane.

In a commentary on Leviticus 19:17, the verse that demands that we rebuke our neighbor, the *Kli Yakar*, Rabbi Shlomo Efrayim the chief rabbi of Prague who lived in the late 16th century told the story of a man who was drilling a hole in the bottom of his stateroom on a ship. The other passengers shouted at him to stop. He ignored them saying, “This is my room, I can do what I want.” “Yes,” say the passengers, “but if the ship sinks, we all go down with you!”

Modern society is based on the fundamental philosophy that we should each mind our own business.

After a long and arduous trial the judge asks Mr. Cohen, the jury foreman, if the jury had reached a verdict. “You honor,” Mr. Cohen stands up and declares, “Ve da jury have decided....not to mix in!” I know – it is an old joke – but, we laugh because it is absurd for a jury not to mix in and it is equally absurd for us not to mix in. If you pollute; my world becomes dirtier. If you hate the stranger and the immigrant; my world also becomes more hateful. Which way are we going to make our move?

Are we all going to start drilling holes in the floor of the ship? Or are we going to find a way to get ashore together? Hey, you, stop that drilling! In Judaism, we are commanded to mind each other’s business. Mixing in is the way we show love. “Put on a coat, it is chilly out!” “Mom...!!!!” When our mothers told us to put on that coat, were they being overly intrusive – or were they showing how much they loved us? And so, I can’t, I must not be quiet when I disagree with you. Love means that I will not leave you and I will not leave you alone. I will not walk away from you – but I will talk with you and argue with you. It means I will mix in – count on it.

Sometimes you make me so angry – sometimes you my family, you my fellow Jews, you my fellow Americans, you my fellow human beings make me so angry - but I cannot, I may not walk away – because I love you. Sometimes my family makes me so angry but I cannot, I may not walk away. Sometimes my fellow Jews make me so angry – sometimes they spit on me at the Kotel, or deny my right to pray as I believe is right, sometimes they pursue policies in Israel

and politics here in America I find troubling but I cannot, I may not walk away. Sometimes my fellow Americans make me so angry – how can they justify that behavior, how can they not care about immigrants, and the poor? How can they deny climate change? But I cannot, I may not walk away. Sometimes the world makes me so angry – the hunger, the oppression, the wanton killing, the injustice – it all seems so cruel, so callous, so unnecessary – but I cannot walk away, I may not walk away.

The world is indeed a crazy place. But the choice is ours. The next move is ours. I guess we could start spitting on them. We could start hating them – all those immigrants, all those brown people, black people, foreign people, all those people whose sexual orientation are different than mine –we could join in the hating. I could sell my Prius and buy a gas guzzler. I could make fun of those I disagree with, call them silly names, maybe even send out some sarcastic tweets, but, that will only add to the insanity.

I think God had a better idea. I think we need to try loving them a little more. All of them, even those we disagree with. Even those we don't understand. Even the ones we think are crazy.

You know, if we just take a moment and look at each other – we might notice a mark on our forehead. Look, you have one, and so do you, and you. And if you all have a mark, well maybe I have one on me as well. I wonder what it means. And so, begins the long, slow walk back to sanity.

I hope that these sacred days and this sacred place will provide a few hours of respite from a crazy world. I hope that here, in this sanctuary, you will find peace and serenity and love – and I hope that what you will find here you will take with you when you return to that crazy world.

V'ahavta l'reyecha k'mocha – On this Rosh Hashanah Day, now more than ever we need to find a way to love each other, and care for each other. It is our only way back.