

**“AND Where are the others who might have stood side by side
in the common good?”**

In 1954 Maurice Ogden wrote a harrowing poem called the “Hangman” which haunts me still, and today more than ever!

His words are more than just a cautionary tale; they are writ large upon the backdrop of a nation in peril, a nation being torn apart by fear, political polarization, domestic terror, lawlessness and sedition. We live in an age where institutions and the people who devote their lives to serving them are delegitimized, discredited, demonized, and threatened with violence for doing their jobs. The left cries defund the police, while the right calls for abolishing the FBI. Judges, FBI agents, and the Capitol Police have become prey to extremists.

Vice President Pence hid from a mob who sought his execution by hanging, while lawmakers barricaded themselves in their offices, cowering before the racist, anti-Semitic, hate filled mob of Xenophobic

loyalists, who bow obsequiously before a cult of personality, rather than the rule of law.

Judge Reinhardt who issued the search warrant for Mara Lago became an overnight target so much so that his synagogue was closed for fear of a violent attack.

Let Ogden's words sink in; let them shake you up and break your heart, for if past is prologue then we are already auditioning for the dress rehearsal.

The background of the plot concerns a hangman who arrives in a town and executes the citizens one by one. First the immigrant alien, then the Jew, then the one who protests and then the Black man too. As each citizen is publically hung, the others are afraid to object out of fear they will be next. Finally, there is nobody remaining except the hangman and the narrator of the poem. The narrator is then executed by the hangman, as by then there is no one left to defend him.

A small sampling of the accusing poem is as follows:

Yom Kippur morning

Into our town the Hangman came,
Smelling of gold and blood and flame,
And he paced our bricks with a different air
And built his frame on the courthouse square.

The scaffold stood by the courthouse side,
Only as wide as the door was wide;
A frame as tall, or little more,
Than capping sill of the courthouse door.

And we wondered, whenever we had the time,
Who the criminal, what the crime,
The Hangman judged with the yellow twist,
Of knotted hemp in his busy fist.

Yom Kippur morning

And innocent though we were, with dread

We passed those eyes of buckshot lead;

Till one cried: "Hangman, who is he,

For whom you raise the gallows-tree?"

Then a twinkle grew in the buckshot eye,

And he gave us a riddle instead of reply:

"He who served me the best," said he,

"Shall earn the rope on the gallows-tree."

Then through the town the Hangman came

And called in the empty streets my name –

And I looked at the gallows soaring tall

Yom Kippur morning

And thought: "There is no one left at all

For hanging, and so he calls to me

To help pull down the gallows-tree."

And I went out with right good hope

To the Hangman's tree and the Hangman's rope.

He smiled at me as I came down

To the courthouse square through the silent town,

And supple and stretched in his busy hand

Was the yellow twist of the hempen strand.

And he whistled his tune as he tried the snap

And it sprang down with a ready snap

Yom Kippur morning

And then a smile of awful command,

He laid his hand upon my hand.

“You tricked me, Hangman.” I shouted then,

“That your scaffold was built for other men,

And I’m no henchmen of yours,” I cried.

“You lied to me, Hangman, foully lied!”

Then a twinkle grew in the buckshot eye:

“Lied to you? Tricked you?” he said. “Not I.

For I answered straight and I told you true:

The scaffold was raised for none but you.

“For who has served more faithfully

Yom Kippur morning

Than you with your coward's hope? said he.

“And where are the others that might have stood

Side by side in the common good?”

“Dead,” I whispered: and amiably

“Murdered,” the Hangman corrected me:

“First the alien, then the Jew . . .

I did no more than you let me do.”

Beneath the beam that blocked the sky,

None had stood so alone as I –

And the Hangman strapped me, and no voice there

Cried “Stay!” for me in the empty square.

“And where are the others that might have stood side by side in the common good?”

This line cries out to us – before it is too late, to stand side by side in the common good. But what impedes our collective will to address not only the attack on our democratic institutions but also other critical and existential threats to our country and our world?

The following rabbinic midrash from the second century holds the key to our society’s intransigence, indifference, and polarizing paralysis.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught by way of a parable: several people were in a boat, one of them took a drill and started drilling under his seat. The others said to him: “what are you doing?” He replied: “what do you care?” I am making a hole under my seat, not yours. They said to him: “But the water will rise and drown us all.” (Yayikra Rabbah 4:6)

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Lewis Kamrass, commenting on this midrash wrote: “Today we navigate very different waters. We sail in a cultural zeitgeist of militant individualism, a landscape in which too

many lose sight of the common good because their focus is only on what is good for them, personally. That demanding voice of militant individualism drowns out the softer chorus of community and collective responsibility for one another.”

Indeed, my friends, the waters of greed and avarice, of profit and gain of lust for power and ego gone amuck drowns out the voice of conscience and the pursuit of the common good.

Like the canary in the coal mine, we Jews know all too well how this movie ends. Perhaps that is why so many of our most cherished values as taught by our inherited tradition seem counter cultural, the values of Tzedakah and Mishpat, and Chesed and Rachamim, the demanding voice of our tradition which calls us to righteousness, the pursuit of justice, equality under the law, compassion, and personal accountability and shared responsibility. As these values slowly erode before our very eyes, we are ever prone to the evils of extremism, polarization, violence and autocracy.

Four particular manifestations of this corrosion of societal values which threaten our nation now more than ever include:

Gun violence, the intrusion of government in our most private decisions regarding women's reproductive rights, climate change and the ongoing attacks on the rule of law and our democratic institutions.

Gun violence in our country, including mass killings has become an accepted part of our American culture. Oh sure we lament the murders of children at school and we feel personally vulnerable for a day or two when shoppers are gunned down in the grocery store, but for the most part as a society we are numb to the daily drumbeat of violent attacks claiming innocent lives at the hands of those who abuse their second amendment rights. And even though federal legislation for the first time in a generation was passed by congress to implement red flag laws, close the boyfriend loop hole and increase funding for mental health, still the ready access to fire arms and especially automatic

weapons without adequate background checks makes it all but inevitable that more massacres will occur.

Why is it that the overwhelming majority of gun owners believe that more can be done to keep guns out of the hands of would be criminals, but are stymied in congress because of special interests who represent the gun lobby. Why is it that the more killings, the more gun sales go up? Why is it that this vicious cycle continues to repeat itself?

It all goes back to the one who drills a hole in a boat under his own seat. In other words, what's the best for me outweighs what's best for the rest.

So we continue to descend into a self-made hell where children go to school and never come home, and gun manufacturers profit all the more.

“And where are the others that might have stood side by side in the common good?”

And what of a government that can now legally dictate what a woman can and cannot do with regard to her unborn child?

As I've said before the abortion controversy is not about being Pro Choice or Pro Life, it's about being Pro Woman and Pro Liberty.

The controversy is not about the question of when an embryo is considered to have the status of a person; that is a matter of religious belief and one's own conscience. If we argue over this, we have fallen into a rabbit hole where no one is right and no one is wrong.

The issue is when one view is imposed upon others who do not share that religious belief or whose conscience decides otherwise.

This is the definition of tyranny, when in matters of existential personal choice, we are forced to conform to a government decision that violates our freedom.

When draconian laws are enacted that force women to bear children who were impregnated by rape or incest or whose lives are put in danger by an ectopic or irregular pregnancy, then indeed it is as if one

Yom Kippur morning

man is drilling a hole beneath his own seat, unconcerned with the collateral damage it leaves in its wake.

Once again there is no concern for the common good, only the good that accrues to one side only.

Liberty and justice for all demands that women's reproductive rights must be restored. Otherwise one by one, lives lost and lives ruined, will grow like the gallows on the courthouse square begging the question yet again.

“And where are the others that might have stood side by side in the common good”

Finally, the world wide threat caused by climate change to our very existence and our way of life is no longer around the corner; rather it is an ever present danger. For 30 or more years, we have known this day would come if we did not take dramatic steps to reverse the tide of rising temperatures due to depletion of the ozone in our atmosphere.

We see the effects of climate change all around the globe in the vast

evaporation of our water supply out West and the hotter and hotter summers we experience year after year. We see it in sea level rise right here in South Florida due to the melting of the polar ice caps and the massive storms which destroy more and more lives and property with increasing regularity.

And while we can rejoice in the 369 billion dollars of investment in alternative energy resources recently passed by congress, it is in the opinion of most experts not enough, but hopefully not too late to change course and ease the ravaging effects of climate change on our way of life.

Why has it taken so long? Why is there still opposition to doing what is necessary to meet this perilous challenge?

The answer is simple. There are still too many special interest groups who sit and drill a hole under their own seat, unconcerned with the common good. Reversing the devastating effects of climate change is quintessentially a communal endeavor, demanding that we all row in

the same direction, not just in the US, but throughout the world. This is the most obvious example of the uncompromising voice of militant individualism drowning out the cries for a communal response and our collective responsibility for one another.

Once again if we do not heed the warnings of impending disaster for millions of people on our planet, if we do not listen to the wisdom of scientists and entrepreneurs who offer solutions, if we do not all do our part to preserve life for our children and grandchildren, then yet again lives lost and lives ruined will grow like the gallows on the courthouse square pleading yet again.

“And where are the others who might have stood side by side in the common good?”

So you may ask why today, Rabbi, why today of all days do you disturb our Holy Day with uncomfortable thoughts with matters best left to politicians, pundits and panderers.

Simply put because Judaism matters. The prophetic voice of conscience embedded in our most sacred texts matters; the preservation of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness matters. This day on the Jewish calendar more than any other matters.

Yom Kippur teaches us a dual narrative regarding collective responsibility and individual choice.

When we confess our sins we do so not individually, but as a community. We stand as one before the Holy One declaring our failures and shortcomings in the plural

“For the sin We have sinned against you”. We recognize that even if we did not commit some particular sin, we are all culpable, we are all responsible as it has been written;

“some are guilty; all are responsible”

The recitation of the litany of sins is a shared experience, voicing our shame, precisely because the destiny of all of us is dependent on all of us.

Yom Kippur morning

In other words, we are all in this together for better or worse.

On the other hand, Yom Kippur reminds us that the fate of the world today hangs in the balance, dependent on each and every individual act for good or for bad.

The scales of justice and compassion are evenly balanced; it is up to you and I to tip them in favor mercy and kindness, compassion and love.

Every choice we make is a decision that can affect not only our own individual lives but also the life of the universe.

Yom Kippur reminds us we have agency.

You and I can change the world, one good deed at a time, one vote at a time, one new electric car at a time.

Finally, Yom Kippur teaches us that T'Shuvah is possible, that the gallows on the courthouse square need not take root; does not have to grow to monstrous heights.

T'shuvah, the process of repentance, can cause us to confront our most daunting challenges as a nation, to recognize the harm caused by indifference, apathy, and resignation, to step up and be counted upon to do our part to preserve democracy, save lives by enacting common sense gun legislation, to defend a women's right to choose, and to hasten our efforts to build a clean energy economy to stave off the ever increasing horrors of climate change.

“And where are the others who might have stood side by side in the common good?”

The answer my friends is found in the opening words of the Torah portion we will soon read this morning:

“You are standing here today, all of you – side by side before the Lord your God – the heads of your tribes, your elders, and officers, everyone in Israel, men, women and children and the strangers in your camp”

We are summoned here this day, all of us even as we stood at Sinai eons ago, to affirm our collective responsibility to adhere to the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.

We are called to uphold the terms of the brit, the covenant, as taught by Isaiah – to unlock the shackles of injustice, to loosen the rope of the yoke of tyranny, to let the oppressed go free, to share our bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into our homes, and to never withdraw from the sacred charge to perfect our world.

It is we who will stand side by side in the common good, refusing to bow in cowardice and indifference before the challenges of our day.

It is we who stand here today side by side in the common good, choosing today to fulfill the command of God. Choose life, that you and your descendants may live. May this be God's will and let us say
