

## President's Rosh Hashanah Speech 10-3-16

Like most of us who watch television or read the papers, my mind has been bombarded by all kinds of emotions about the presidential race. My emotions have ranged from laughter, disbelief, rage and disappointment, to name a few. I'm not limiting my emotions to criticism of any one person or party-reference my letter to the editor of the Inquirer published in yesterday's paper pointing out that the bloated \$85 million raised for the Democratic National Convention here included the largest "donor" being the \$10 million Pennsylvania taxpayers unwittingly forked out through a grant from the PA Dept. of Community and Economic Development. My research on their own website could not turn up any mention of this in their list of grants, even though their mission includes the promise that they will assure transparency and accountability in the expenditure of public funds.

This morning I'd like to juxtapose this crazy presidential race with our congregation's Vision Statement. How odd right? Have I lost it? What's the connection? For me, it's the use of words, their meaning, how they are perceived and acted upon.

We live in a world of words. Written and spoken. As Hillary Clinton said in debate #1, "words matter." What words are said or written, how they are said or written, the context in which they appear, all affect how the words are perceived. Sometimes words are not spoken and that absence also says something. Sometimes there are misperceptions of words. I have a funny example of how one's attitude at the current moment can cause a misperception of words.

My first cousin Shirley, who lives in Nacogdoches Texas, visited us this summer. In the course of trading stories, she related one about her older daughter Wendy. Wendy is a divorced mother of two grown children. She lives in Nacogdoches which is a small college town, home to Stephen F. Austin State University. Wendy does not have a wide range of dating options there which sometimes can be a downer for her. One day she was driving in the area and saw from a distance a new billboard which advertised "Singles Vacations." It gave the address and, since it was just what she needed, she drove over to the address. She parked and literally danced through the parking lot, ready to schedule a well deserved holiday with a chance to meet some men. With hopes raised, she walked up to the receptionist and asked to see some Singles Vacations brochures. The receptionist frowned and pointed to the sign to the left of her which said: "Shingles Vaccinations"!

In the context of the use, perception of words and action upon those words, I want to reference the Or Hadash Vision Statement. Let me read it to you:

Or Hadash strives to be a dynamic and innovative community that inspires us to deepen our connections to Judaism and to each other through tefillah (prayer), limmud (learning) and tikkun olam (repairing the world). We aim to achieve these goals in an atmosphere of mutual respect and intellectual integrity that welcomes everyone from all backgrounds. Through shared values and the egalitarian and progressive principles of Reconstructionist Judaism, we aim to evolve spiritually and intellectually as individuals and as a sacred community.

Very important to me is the part where we are inspired to deepen our connections to each other in an atmosphere of mutual respect and intellectual integrity.

Our Strategic Planning Committee is currently meeting for its second year and is tasked with making recommendations for the future of Or Hadash over the next 5 years. We aim to be proactive rather than reactive. These recommendations are to be in alignment with the current Vision Statement. So it's important to understand the import of our Vision's words. We need to remember how our synagogue functions and also what is not said in the Vision Statement, but what is understood from our history.

For me, in my years in lay leadership here, I have been awestruck by the level of mutual respect and intellectual integrity that is exhibited here. I think we also share values inspired by Reconstructionism, including being egalitarian and progressive. For me, our Vision Statement is not just words, it is a snapshot of our actions.

In this agonizing and ridiculously long political season, we are living through a war of words that falls far short of showing mutual respect and intellectual integrity. There has been a lot of inappropriate behavior that has led me, and many other people, to be sick and tired of this political season. I literally hate it. How do I deal with this strong emotion in these days of awe?

While this is the season of forgiveness, in my admitted limited understanding of the Torah, I think the Torah allows for not forgetting-not forgetting oppression, not forgetting injustice. To me, this whole political race, with all of its inappropriate behavior, is an injustice to the American people.

I have asked myself over the years, and struggled with the question, whether we should always forgive? Should we forgive in the face of injustice? Hate is a very dangerous emotion, which can lead to more hate and violence. So what is our obligation in this situation? I have read that if you don't act upon an obligation, then that can create negative energy and a negative outcome may result. What are our obligations as progressive Jews, and for progressive people who are not Jewish?

For me, hate is an emotion that is counterproductive. So, I think I shouldn't say I hate politicians; rather, I should say I don't like the political processes that drive politicians to say the odious things they often spew out and to pander to particular parts of the electorate. Many politicians use words in manipulative and misleading ways. The presidential race this year has underlayments of racism, veiled incitements to violence and flat out factual lying or, at a minimum, half truths. No matter who we support politically, if part of our mission as Reconstructionists is to repair the world, then should we forgive the politicians for their pandering and the people who fall prey to it? It's a hard question. However, I think we truly are stronger together. We should try to engage in rational, respectful conversations with those we may disagree with, politically or otherwise. It doesn't help to turn away from someone you disagree with politically. I think engagement is more meaningful and satisfying. I think that is our obligation as progressive Jews.

Our Vision Statement asks us to engage. We can't be "dynamic" if we sit still. We can't repair the world if we do not act. While the word "volunteer" is not present in our Vision Statement, volunteerism is at the heart of our dynamism and engagement. It is just understood that this is how we have always operated and a big reason why we enjoy belonging here. We connect in this way. I think we should strive to not just be observers. I hope we are not just observers in the political races this year. This year, voting is certainly engagement and our obligation.

We at Or Hadash are naturally givers and not observers. Thanks to those of you who have filled out the Gift of the Hand this year. If you have not yet done this,

please pick up the form and consider volunteering. I understand that this is difficult for many of you given family and work obligations. It took me many years to volunteer here. Do what you can when you feel you can. We do not pressure here. This is meant to be a safe, comfortable space. But at some point, please consider not just being an observer. Volunteering is the lifeblood of this congregation. It connects us to each other when we volunteer and forms strong bonds. Thanks to those of you who volunteer for so many things. I am always humbled by our hard working volunteers.

We are lucky also to have our devoted Rabbi, who is highly respected in the Jewish rabbinic community here. He holds positions in Bux-Mont and Philadelphia that reflect that. We owe Rabbi Josh many thanks. Thanks to our synagogue administrator, our bookkeeper, our innovative Education Director, our teachers, and all other staff and non-staff who make this place a giving, comfortable place.

Thanks to those of you on our Strategic Planning Committee who are working on taking Or Hadash into a successful future. Thanks to all who volunteer with the Interfaith Housing Alliance, cooking meals, sleeping over with the homeless families and supporting this effort year in and year out. Thanks to all of our hard-working committee chairs and their committee members who make this place work so well. Thanks to all of you who come out on work days and volunteer with your sweat, muscle and ingenuity. All committees are important. We have other committees recently formed that you will hear more about in the future, whose members are dedicated to the well being of Or Hadash and our larger community as well. We act on our Vision at Or Hadash and we can be very proud of what we do and who we are.

Shanah Tovah everyone!