

## YOM KIPPUR TALK

OCTOBER 2000

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This morning, as we stand on the brink of another war in the Middle East, I'm going to speak about tribalism and its many unpleasant ramifications in our modern world. But first I'd like to tell you about a couple of trips I've taken to Fiji and Australia and what I saw and learned there.

Seven years ago I wanted to take my son, who was a recent college graduate and had spent several months studying for the CPA exam, on a nice trip as a reward for his hard work. Since the trip would take place in November and December, I thought it would be a good idea to go somewhere south of the Equator. Looking at an atlas, I quickly eliminated countries and continents and decided on Australia, where no one was fighting, we could drink the water and communicate in English, we didn't have to worry about being kidnapped or getting food poisoning, and we would be welcomed as Americans. When I found out we could stop off in Fiji at no extra airfare, I decided to go there too. Some of you may remember my speaking about that trip five years ago. Then last year, when lots of people were trying to find somewhere special to go for New Year's (supposedly the end of the Millennium), my girlfriend Gail and I decided that Fiji, the first real place on the other side of the International Date Line and so the first place to celebrate the New Year, was the place for us to go. And since Australia is comparatively close by, we decided to go there as well.

If you really want to get away, Fiji and Australia are about as far away from here as you can get, and while they are relatively near each other, they are quite different. First of all, Fiji, a group of beautiful and lush islands, is not Tahiti, also a group of beautiful and lush islands. Fiji was originally inhabited by South Sea islanders who lived off the land and had no interaction with other ethnic groups until the British arrived in the 1800's. As was the case elsewhere, the British, who had modern weapons, proclaimed ownership of the Fiji Islands and proceeded to colonize them. They taught the Fijians English, converted them to Christianity, and outlawed cannibalism. They then decided the land was best suited to raising sugar cane, and finding fault with the Fijians' work habits and unwillingness to be subservient, the British imported people from India as indentured servants to work in the sugar cane industry. Many of the Indians stayed and multiplied, and so at present the country is made up of about 48% Fijians and 45% Indians, almost all of whom are Hindus, with the remaining population made up of an assortment of other ethnic groups. Although Fiji became independent about 35 years ago, there is still a strong attachment to England.

Broad generalizations can be misleading, and I have only a few minutes to tell you about this, but in general most stores and businesses are owned by Indians who live in the cities, and most farmers and laborers are Fijians. The government is, by law, jointly run by Fijians and Indians, with some national positions being reserved for a member of one group or the other. I found it particularly interesting that the Fijians describe the Indians

as money grubbers who don't care about preserving the country's natural beauty or ancient traditions, and the Indians describe the Fijians as lazy, backward, and all too willing to make use of public services without contributing to the economy or improving their economic condition. Every few years some Fijians become frustrated with what they see as undue control of the government by the Indians and attempt to gain more power, but I note that not one drop of blood was spilled in the latest episode of civil unrest that occurred only a few months ago. The two groups definitely have their differences, but they get along remarkably peacefully.

As a side note, my son and I went with about a dozen others to a Fijian village to take part in a traditional feast, and before starting the festivities the village chief asked us to join hands and bow our heads for a prayer. He said, "We're all Christians, right?", and my son and I looked at each other. I thought about the fact that these people were cannibals not that long ago and decided this was not the time or place to start explaining Humanistic Judaism. So we both shook our heads affirmatively and sat through the short prayer. This past New Year's day Gail and I got up early and took a walk past that same village. The villagers, who were all gathered together and playing taped music, saw us passing by and invited us in. We joined in their dancing and to be polite I had a bowlful of kava, which is made of pulverized roots and water and tastes as bad as it sounds. One of the villagers explained to me that anyone is welcome in a Fijian village and that it is impossible to go hungry or homeless in Fiji because you will always be fed and given a place to sleep in one of the villages. Another day we went into the nearest town, where there is an old-fashioned central market where Fijians and Indians sell their wares side by side. Leaving the country, we were driven to the airport in a taxi owned by an Indian, who brought along his teen-aged son who was on his way to a private summer school in the big city where he would learn Japanese. The son's regular school was attended mostly by Fijians, and he told us everyone got along fine. I never felt threatened for a moment during either visit, and I thoroughly enjoyed both visits.

Now, Australia. Since the Olympics just ended I think most Americans now know that Australia is a lot like the United States in size, geography, population makeup, and lifestyle. In fact, many Australians think of their country as our 51st state. As far as its ethnic history goes, it is my impression that the British settlers treated the native Aborigines better than the white American settlers did the Native Americans, and of course, no slaves were imported to Australia. As a consequence, Australia appears to be a multi-cultural, multi-racial success story, in other words, a melting pot that is working. There are many Asians, Eastern Europeans, and Greeks, and the chances are about even that someone you meet on a city street is not a descendant of a British settler. In contrast to Fiji, there are quite a few Jews in Australia, some of them prominent. As a matter of fact, this last time I was there one of the headline stories was about an Orthodox Jew who is the head of the country's largest supermarket chain and had engaged in some highly questionable and probably illegal financial shenanigans. I guess the word "shondah" is not unknown among Australian Jews. In an out of the way city called Bundaberg, I saw that the proprietor of an internet café had a Jewish star on a chain around her neck, so I said "Shalom" to her, but surprisingly enough she was not very friendly to me. Later, while on a tour of Kangaroo Island, our guide showed us how the local farmers use old

refrigerators next to their mailboxes so groceries can be delivered by the postman and not eaten by kangaroos before they are picked up. As I was out on the road taking a picture of Farmer Ronny Cohen's decorated refrigerator, the French couple who were on the tour with us insisted that Cohen is not an appropriate name for an Australian but is actually an Israeli name. The guide refused to take the bait and calmly replied that it is an Australian name. I think Australia is a terrific place and I hope to go back soon.

Now, I have spoken before about what I call tribalism, which for me goes beyond its traditional definition. My trips to Fiji and Australia have caused me to think about the issue some more, however, unfortunately raising more questions than answers. Why is it, for example, that two very different ethnic and religious groups of equal population in Fiji, groups that don't really like each other that much, have managed to coexist pretty well, whereas ethnic groups in the Balkans, who are not that different except for their religions, have been killing each other for decades? How could relations between various tribes in almost every country in subsaharan Africa, who are so ethnically similar as to be indistinguishable to outsiders, become so bad that groups continue to slaughter each other no matter what efforts are made to stop them? What is the basis for the intense hatred that has so gripped Hindus and Moslems on the Indian subcontinent for decades that even separating out Pakistan and Bangladesh did not stop the constant and intense bloodshed that has been going on there for more than a generation? And I cannot ignore the Middle East, which deserves much more time than I could possibly give it today. Suffice it to say that it is intellectually dishonest to talk peace and foment war.

It seems to me that such behavior is not only allowed to go on all over the world, but is condoned and sometimes encouraged. Where do we cross the line between simple pride in our own group and disparagement of others? Let me give you a couple of examples. Those of us who attended summer camp will remember color wars, in which people are arbitrarily chosen to be on the blue team or the red team, and then whipped into a near frenzy not just to win, but to beat the other team. It seemed harmless enough to me, and lots of fun, but in Europe and South America there have been riots and killings by the fans of rival soccer teams. In some of our own cities, gang members kill members of other gangs, for no reason. Under our political system, a measure proposed by a member of one political party will usually be opposed by the other party just because of the party label. The public interest comes in a poor second to the goal of defeating the other side. And based on what I've seen in Fiji and Australia, I cannot conclude that it is human nature to behave this way; rather, I have to sadly conclude that this is behavior that is learned and is being passed on from generation to generation.

As Jews, we have not been immune to various forms of tribalism. Our history is full of stories of sadness when our ancestors were conquered by enemies and stories telling with great pride of their conquering others. I'm proud of our accomplishments as a people, but all too often we too are guilty of this less than admirable behavior. Sometimes, Jews even turn on other Jews, as in the recent case where a non-Orthodox synagogue was burned down by an ultra-Orthodox zealot.

Well, my trips to Fiji and Australia raised a lot of questions about tribalism, but I'm still working on the answers. Since this is a traditional day of introspection and contemplation, our day to resolve to do better in the coming year than we did in the past, I hope you'll spend some time thinking about how to eliminate this very destructive behavior so that the world can become a place where everyone lives in peace and harmony. Thank you.