

Last Sunday, at our morning minyan, we included the Prayer for Our Country, a sacred tradition in which we petition the Divine for the health, safety, and security of our political leadership. These words expressed the need within us to denounce the violence against former President Donald Trump. And they offered language for the health of the former president and all of those injured in the assassination attempt. We want to reiterate our solidarity with the firefighter who was killed as he shielded his family, offering our words of comfort during this difficult time. May his memory be a blessing.

It's important to note that our prayer for our country is not a political statement but a reflection of our commitment to peace and wisdom.

In moments like these, exploring how we can react is essential. What should we do next? How can we move forward individually, communally, and nationally?

With these goals in mind, our tradition offers a rich well from which we can plumb the depths. Through our textual history, we can discover the enduring messages and instructions for moving forward with a united goal.

We are moving forward from a terrible moment within our nation. It was a time when violence usurped dialogue, differences were treated with hatred, and the value of humanity was not only ignored but attacked. In the transition from immediate shock to the week after, we are tasked with the enduring Mishnaic instruction to be *Ohev Shalom v'Rodef Shalom*—lovers of peace and pursuers of peace.

It is impossible to seek singularity. We are far too complex for that. But if we can hold two thoughts simultaneously, we can offer an open ear and heart to those with whom we disagree - as long as there is a foundational relationship.

The more we value the person with whom we disagree, the more open we are to hearing and understanding their perspective. So, seeking that value is essential to pursuing peace. Many rabbinic leaders turn to the origin text of humanity to describe the inherent value in each of us.

God said, "Let us create human beings in our image."

In other words: Let us craft every person in such a way that they will reflect the divine nature of us - those who dwell in the heavens.

However, there are those who forgo that sacred nature with violence, hatred, and malice. And, of course, when that value of humanity is cast aside - how could we ever internalize what they do and say? The only attention we should give to these people is condemnation. Which we absolutely do.

There are those who turn to violence. There are vehement antisemites and racists, and how could I authentically and justifiably stand here this morning encouraging us to bring their

opinions into our hearts? That would cause damage not only to us but the entire world as they do.

I am reminded in this moment of the horrible language and violence that anti-Israel protestors used over the past year. Making our Jewish and Zionist youth of all faiths feel unsafe in their learning institutions. Walking to class became dangerous; if not physically, it was potentially emotionally damaging.

How could we ever engage the person on the NYC subway who led a crowd in chanting for the obliteration of the Jewish state and demanding to know who on the train was a Zionist so they could do who knows what to them?

As we know so well, there are those with pervasive and abhorrent views with whom we emphatically disagree, and we should not give those arguments - and their shouting - precedence or internalization.

Concurrently, we know that there are those we care deeply for and trust, and their perspectives may differ from our own. As long as there is a foundation of respect and honor, we can accept our differences and find a way to unite.

I call this morning's reflection "Unique and United," a concept that acknowledges our individuality and the diversity of our perspectives while emphasizing our potential to unite behind a common goal and a standard message of peace and understanding.

Some perspectives, different from our own, can enrich our views and help us formulate a stronger foundation for what we believe. We should not dig our heels in the ground but grow, expand, and reach far and wide.

In this week's Torah portion, Parashat Balak, we come to understand what happens when there is a shift in perspective and openness to differences. Balaam, the prophet, ascends the hilltops to mystically curse the Israelites three times in service to the King of Moab Balak. Balak wants the Israelites incapacitated to achieve military victory over them.

However, each time the prophet Balaam utters a curse, it emerges as a blessing. Instead of petitioning for their defeat, Balaam praises the Israelites. In fact, this is the origin of the beautiful verse that we offer each time we enter the sanctuary:

*"Mah tovu ohalecha, Yaakov - how beautiful are your tents, oh people of Jacob?"*

Balaam is correct. How beautiful are the tents of Israel, and how unique are human beings?

With Divine help, Balaam is open to change and growth.

When we believe that someone else needs to be wrong for us to be right, we are playing a zero-sum game. We are far too complex for that. Again, we can hold differing views simultaneously, and that's what makes humans so unique.

The violence against the former president highlights just how dangerous it is to ignore the sanctity possible in others. It also highlights the significant divisiveness in our nation. What is essential to say, though, is that we cannot place blame for political violence on divisiveness. However, we can combat dangerous opposition culture by pursuing unity and peace.

Our commitment to peace is unwavering despite our political differences, uniting us in a common goal. Let us stand together in pursuing a more just and righteous society, casting aside divisiveness and hatred. And may God speedily create peace on Earth as in the heavens.