



Rosh Hashanah 2015

“HUBBLE AT 25”

by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

For many years I had a favorite sign that I saw posted on a Catholic church in Cincinnati. It read, “Noon mass, 12:10pm.” I figured they were running on Jewish-delayed time.

But now I have a new favorite sign. If you’ve driven down the West Side Highway you’ve probably seen it too. It is a big banner that hangs on the battleship Intrepid. It reads, “Hubble at 25 – An exhibition 13 billion years in the making.”

I chuckle every time I drive by. So much for the world being only 5776 years old. So much for the anti-science community who promote Biblical creationism, climate denial, and otherwise silly thinking. And so much for taking the short-view of history.

As part of his COSMOS television series, Carl Sagan famously depicted the path of history as if it all transpired during one year. Each month, essentially, represented the passage of a little over a billion years. Based on this model, it took the forces of the universe a very long time, until about September, the equivalent of some 5 billion years ago, for the sun to be born. It took another billion or so years for early life forms to appear. Dinosaurs finally entered the scene on December 25, but were extinct by December 30. Archaic Homo sapiens, the forerunner of anatomically modern humans, evolved between 400,000 and 250,000 years ago.

Then, in a flurry of action on the last day of the year and, even more compressed, in the last minute of that year, we take note of all the incredible developments associated with human beings including the cultivation of agriculture, the invention of writing, music and art, the machinery of the industrial revolution, the amazing discoveries of science and medicine, and, to cap it all off, in the last millisecond, electing an African-American president, legalizing same-sex marriage, and, taking down the Confederate flag.

But let’s not get too cocky. Even as we say, with justified incredulity, “It’s amazing! I never expected these things in my lifetime,” we also know how long have been the struggles, how much blood has been spilled to get this far, how accomplishments are often met with hateful and painful retrenchment and an erosion of hard won rights, how symbolic changes are critical and important, but also how they don’t get at pervasive rage and hostility and systemic dysfunction, and how much more work there is to do.

On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant at the Appomattox Court House and brought an end to the Civil War, the bloodiest conflict in the nation’s history. But it was not until this past July 6, some 150 years later, that the New York Times saw fit to run an editorial that was titled, “The Civil War is Winding Down.”

“It has taken too long,” reads the article, “but even an overdue miracle can be stunning to witness.” But, as you know, just two days later, the removal of the Confederate Flag from the state capital in South Carolina wasn’t a done deal. After the South Carolina Senate rapidly and resoundingly approved the flag’s removal by a vote of 37 to 3, a diehard contingent of pro-flag lawmakers in the House of Representatives offered a raft of amendments that would have delayed the flag removal if not derailed the proposal altogether. This last ditch stand obviously did not succeed – in fact, it was decisively beaten 94-20 – but that does not mean that this “contentious issue” is “behind us”, as one Republican lawmaker said. To the contrary, it is obvious that generational hatred, animosity, and racist activism will not be simply voted away. This ferment and furor is stoked not just by an array of hate groups and right-wing militias, but by the rhetoric of fear-mongering talk show radio hosts, calculating politicians, and mainstream cable journalists who demonize illegal immigrants, disenfranchise and dehumanize African-Americans, and blame GLBT advocates, along with humanists and atheists, for the rest of society’s woes. Considering the fact that generations of Southerners have referred to the Civil War as the “War of Northern Aggression,” one can easily make the case that the Times was premature with its article. We have a long way to go, many miles to walk.

When Barack Obama ran for president in 2008, he spoke out in favor of patience. He said, “I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy.”

We also know that he has been criticized for being too well-mannered, cool-tempered and soft spoken. If only he would speak out more forcefully, show more passion, many have demanded. But we also know that Obama has assiduously avoided any tough talk or outrage that would feed the stereotype of the “angry black man.” The best, at least until recently was to occasionally express annoyance and nuanced indignation. Now, it seems, as Obama gathers strength for the final phase of his term, with the days dwindling and the finish line ever-nearing, he is less guarded, more out-spoken, speaking hard truths and throwing caution to the wind. As Maureen Dowd put it, in “the sunset of his presidency, Obama’s bolder side is rising. He’s a lame duck who doesn’t give a damn.”

When the relatives of the slain Mother Emanuel church-members confronted Dylann Roof and told him they forgave him and had mercy on his soul, they shocked a nation with the power of faith. They weren’t going to let hatred rule them. They would defeat the killer with the power of their love. The media immediately and uncritically extolled this narrative as if to bring us all along and challenge any of us for harboring ill will.

I believed that these family members were guided by the strength of their church and their teaching, but I didn’t trust it. I also thought it was the trained response to the shackles of centuries of enslavement and subservience, where the master always gets forgiven for his actions and obsequiousness and complaisance are learned survival strategies.

A few days later, I read an Op Ed by Roxane Gay, an author and essayist, who expressed better than I could what I had been thinking. Her article was entitled, “Why I Can’t Forgive Dylann Roof.” Here is what she had to say:

“Black people forgive because we need to survive. We have to forgive time and time again while racism or white silence in the face of racism continues to thrive. We have had to forgive slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws, lynching, inequity in every realm, mass incarceration, voter disenfranchisement, inadequate representation in popular culture, microaggressions and more. We forgive and forgive and forgive and those who trespass against us continue to trespass against us.” She ends by saying, “I, for one, am done forgiving.”

To this I want to add, “And how patient must we be?” How motivated and worked up will we get to continue striving to achieve even more social advances in our own lifetime, to fulfilling the imperatives of a just society that have been imbedded in our consciousness from the days of the Bible when it first talked of feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. What steps will we take to bring forth a just society where human rights are protected, where black lives matter, where all people are valued equally, where economic inequalities and lack of opportunities effect everyone?

In this congregation we frequently quote Rabbi Tarfon who said, “It is not your duty to complete the task, but nor are you free to desist from it. (Pirke Avot 2:21). This is a positive mantra, it’s motivational, but its one failing is that it doesn’t give voice to any sense of urgency. That’s why we must also combine it with Rabbi Hillel’s quote, which we’ll be reading and singing shortly, “If not now, when?”, which ought be punctuated not just with a question mark, but also with an exclamation point.

The list of issues is long – from gun control and background checks to a higher minimum wage and sustainable incomes, from a broken incarceration system to impending climate change, from restrictive voting rights to access to health care, from safe and affordable housing to inadequate nutrition, and on and on it goes.

There is also no shortage of organizations to join, to support with your time and your resources.

Nor is there any lack of candidates to work for, to support with your time and your resources.

The big question is: What trajectory are we on? Will we travel passively, sit idly by, fall into complacency, waiting for small incremental shifts, inch by inch, like glacial speed, like slow-flowing molasses – or get agitated, get passionate, get energized, and take action to speed it up and push things forward?

In Carl Sagan’s schema, time is of the essence. Every second counts.

Shanah Tovah.