

VIMA Interfaith Thanksgiving Message 2017-From Rabbi Lisa Hochberg-Miller

I am so happy you are here- *every one* of you. Your being here is more than nice; it is necessary. It is more than lovely- for coming together as a community in gratitude is profoundly different than each of us individually feeling gratitude for our blessings of life, health, family, work, prosperity and whatever else we prayerfully express gratitude for. No- your being here tonight raises “thanksgiving” to a whole, higher level. When I pray in my own community, I may be giving voice to the common prayers of my people. But when I pray in interfaith community, I am **humbled** and **strengthened** and **lifted up** by the truth that I am not alone – that none of us are alone, in our own bubbles, separate and cut-off from society as a whole. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of Great Britain, expresses it this way: this joy in expressing gratitude is something we only feel when we leave behind the separateness of each of us and become part of a *we*, an *us*, a community.

A story. About ten years ago, I went to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati. What I found standing in the lobby devastated me. It was a slave pen, 2 story, 20 feet by 30 feet, from 1830. Found fully standing in Kentucky, it had been transported and placed in the lobby of this museum. As I walked around I imagined, that within this wooden hut, men and women and children of African origin had been chained and shackled, and kept, to be sold to slave owners. The pain of standing in the presence of such evil history touched me in a way I had felt before- it felt exactly like when I had been to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and stood in the middle of a wooden-slat boxcar, a relic and reminder of the millions of Jewish people packaged like animals and sent to be exterminated. Perhaps some of you have been to either of these museums, but I think you can imagine what I’ve just described, and the human anguish they evoke, because the truth is, I don’t need to be African-American and you don’t need to be Jewish to understand at least a portion of the pain, these places evoke. One need only be human, and as Judaism teaches, each one of us is created *B’tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, carrying godliness within us. That godliness is what gives us our shared humanity.

There was another truth I learned that day standing in front of that shack, and it is a lesson that we each must learn over and over again in our lives. That each of us has a different

story and a different truth and that sometimes, more than telling our own story, we need to be quiet and listen to other people's stories. And stories often reflect truths that are very different from our own, yet they are demanding of attention and respect. Our very humanity is wrapped up in how we chose to listen, and how we choose to respond to the stories of others- that which is real for those of different backgrounds, different faiths, different nationalities, genders, race, culture and economic class.

Listening is a powerfully humbling tool. When I listen, I have to set my own assumptions and beliefs aside for a while, I have to stand in your shoes, and hear your truth. Listening means I must reflect, and consider beliefs and experiences that are not my own- perhaps deeply different than my own. Listening challenges me to understand, and grow in knowledge, and become wiser. Those are lofty goals- no wonder most of us are better at talking than at keeping silent and listening!

Many say that we are in a time where people are not listening to each other, that we are huddling and taking refuge in our communities of same faith, same world view, our "bubbles," our "tribes", as it were. This may be, but I say, no one can create the future but us. Is that the bright tomorrow any of us want to see?

And so we pray to you, God of All, on this evening that brings together good people of many faiths, many backgrounds, many stories and many truths:

May we be filled with less certainty in ourselves and more certainty in You, the one who is present in all, even those most different from ourselves.

May we be filled with less talk, and more quiet- that we might hear other's truths.

May we be less quick to critique, and more quick to compassion- for each one of us is created in your image.

May we be less ignited to condemn and more ignited to question, and learn.

May we be inspired to rise to the best of our faith, not to the lowest of our fears.

May we be filled with fewer words, and more wisdom.

May we always be filled with gratitude, not just for our gifts, but for the gift of each other, of the community beyond our own doorsteps, who Presence keeps us from being alone, and who reminds us that we are here to be here *for* each other, and *with* each other.

Amen.