

# Appealing to our highest selves

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This past Sunday, I had the fortune of attending a showing of Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" put on by the Elements Theatre Company in Orleans on the Cape. It was an excellent production in every way (acting, set, costumes, etc) and afterward there was a panel discussion in which I was privileged to participate.

A large part of the play focuses around the character of Shylock, who is Jewish and a moneylender. Shakespeare, of course, could never have met a Jewish person because Jews were banished from England in the year 1290. Nevertheless, there was a great deal of anti-Semitism expressed by many of the characters towards Shylock in the play and, at times, the level of venom was painful to watch. However, Shakespeare had the ability both to perceive Shylock's humanity and to give him lines that communicate that humanity to the audience.

Part of Shakespeare's genius (a word I don't use lightly) was to make his characters exceptionally nuanced in their range of qualities and emotions. For example, a character could be quite loving and caring for a friend and at the same time full of hatred for "the other" — who in this case was Shylock — simply because he is Jewish.

One of the reasons the theater put on a production of Shakespeare's "Merchant" was because the question of prejudice is so relevant to our lives as Americans today. When people feel fear or feel their security is threatened, their distrust of the "other" — a person or group of people who are perceived as different — becomes magnified. While the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes is always difficult, it becomes particularly so when fear enters the picture.

In these last few weeks, we have been witnessing terrorist violence around the globe: Paris, London and San Bernardino, California, most recently. We feel vulnerable. When violence occurs in such a seemingly unpredictable manner, that escalates our feelings of vulnerability, and the desire to exercise some control gets stronger and more desperate.

Another reason that the Elements Theatre Company decided to put on "The Merchant of Venice" now was because of the time of year — the production coincides with both Hanukkah and Advent. Both of these holidays are celebrations of light. Darkness, however hauntingly beautiful it might be, also contains within it an element of the unknown which can be frightening. Since I know much more about Hanukkah than about Advent, I'll focus more on Hanukkah.

Many cultures in antiquity observed festivals of light around the time of the winter solstice. In ancient Rome, for example, Dec. 25 was celebrated as the birthday of the Unconquerable Sun. In the Jewish calendar (which, as I've mentioned in previous columns, is primarily a lunar calendar adjusted to be in sync with the solar year), the 25th day of the winter month

of Kislev marks the beginning of Hanukkah. The first day of each lunar month is the new moon, so Hanukkah begins around the darkest time of the year. The days are the shortest because it occurs around the winter solstice and the night sky is also darkest because the moon is near the very end of its monthly cycle. Since the holiday is eight days long, it extends beyond the New Moon, during which time the moon begins to wax, increasing the light of the night sky.

The most well-known tradition of Hanukkah is the lighting of the Menorah (candelabrum) starting with one candle on the first night and adding one additional candle every night so that the light is always growing.

Light is universally perceived as symbolic of knowledge and understanding. Even one small candle can significantly illuminate a very dark place. Suddenly you can see what was invisible and be much more knowledgeable about what is going on around you. Religions often use symbols of light. The people who agree with us, we may see as "enlightened" and those with whom we strongly disagree we often think of as "benighted."

Religion can touch very deep places within us, even pre-conscious areas of the mind. Because of this, it can be a source of deep meaning and experience, reaching depths that the rational mind alone cannot. As in many cases, however, the very source of something's strength can simultaneously be its source of weakness.

Similarly because of the depths in the human psyche that religion can touch, it can also provide very fertile ground for human neuroses. Therefore, religion should ideally be tempered with a great deal of rationality. If it only speaks from the rational mind, it becomes dry and cerebral, lacking the ingredients of awe and wonder. If religious adherents suppress their rational side, they can veer off into areas of bias and prejudice, vilifying and oppressing those who don't share their beliefs.

Let us not fool ourselves. However certain we are of the truth of our convictions and beliefs, people who experience and believe differently from us are likely equally convinced of theirs. Back in 1908, an English Jewish writer named Israel Zangwill wrote a play about America, calling it a "melting pot." The United States throughout its history absorbed many different groups of peoples and upheld the ideal that you could practice your religion freely while pledging allegiance to this country.

We haven't always lived up to our ideals, but they must guide us. Throughout history there have been politicians who have exploited and appealed to people's fears, rather than to our highest selves. I'm afraid we're seeing that again today. How can we talk about America "rediscovering its greatness," and then ignore the very words that adorn the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free/the wretched refuse of your teeming shore./Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me./I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

I would like to wish all people of the Greater Fall River community a healthy and joyful holiday season and much light for the coming year.