

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Can we find healing in 2021?



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As we close the book on 2020, there is no question that it has been a difficult year. What is our task as we enter 2021? An important Jewish concept is "tikkun olam," usually translated "repair the world." Is the coming year a time to repair or heal the world from the ills of 2020?

U.S. COVID deaths have surpassed 350,000, with single-day deaths often exceeding 2,000 or even 3,000. That is the equivalent of 10 or more 737 jets crashing every day. There has been recent controversy about the 737-Max returning to service because of the tragedy of two flights within a five-month period which killed 346. But the virus is currently killing more than six times that combined loss each day.

2021 does bring hope as we look forward to a vaccine that will slow that death rate, but at the same time overconfidence has led to relaxing the simple practices of wearing masks and practicing social distancing. Health care workers who are overworked and subject to their own exposure are expressing frustration with the large number of people who are ignoring these simple acts that help prevent hospitalization and death. Can we find healing for our bodies in 2021?

The political divisions persist not only in Washington D.C. but throughout our country, to the point where compromise and working together have given way to polarization and demonization of those with whom we disagree. Our divisions have become toxic. We have come together too often not by what we agree on, but on whom or what we hate. Have our belief tribes become so isolated and solidified that we cannot even have civil dialogue with those in a different camp? It has been observed that "Change doesn't come from Washington; change comes to Washington." Can the change in how we engage with one another and how we respect those with whom we disagree begin with us and then have impact on the national scene? Can we find healing for our political divisiveness in 2021?

The past year has made vivid the huge racial disparity in our country. We have had to face again the persistence

of structures going back to slavery and the Jim Crow era. We have been challenged by books like "White Fragility" and "How to Be an Antiracist." The coronavirus has further exposed the disparity of death rates for Black, Hispanic and Indigenous peoples that have been dramatically higher than for so-called whites. Unjust killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd have played out in the media and burned into our consciousness. Can we find healing for our racial disparity in 2021?

Frequent hurricanes, floods, and wildfires have made real what science has been telling us about how our climate change is coming close to a point of no return. Records have been broken on the number and severity of hurricanes. Wildfires in California have this year burned more than four million acres, doubling the previous annual record. Fires have also brought record-breaking devastation in Australia, the Amazon and other parts of the world. These fires add heat to the earth system as well as greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, making future fires likely to be more intense and frequent. Other parts of the country and world have experienced record-breaking floods. Can we begin to address the healing for our earth in 2021?

While we look to the new year with hope that the new vaccines will bring an end to the pandemic, we must realize that it will not come soon and some of the darkest days are projected for this winter.

Furthermore, we realize that there is no vaccine for the other challenges of political polarization, racial disparity and environmental change facing us in this new year.

The Kaufman Interfaith Institute sees the coming year as a time to focus our attention on what people of faith and goodwill can contribute to understanding and action in these challenges ahead. The interfaith movement has experience in bringing people together for understanding and acceptance when there are differing beliefs that tend to divide. Our various faith commitments all emphasize caring for the other, seeking justice, showing mercy and preserving the creation. Continuing a pattern started by

our founder, Sylvia Kaufman, every three years we focus on coming together around a common theme. In 2012 we introduced the Year of Interfaith Understanding. 2015 and 2018 addressed service and friendship respectively. The Kaufman Interfaith Institute is announcing 2021 as the Year of Interfaith Healing with the four themes identified above.

The events of this past year have made vivid these additional areas that need our attention. Healing must be an active practice. It is much more than resting or convalescing in hopes to return to our previous condition. Healing can and must be active in seeking better conditions for our future.

We must seek a healthier body, with more attention to staying healthy ourselves and actions which will preserve the health of others. We must do whatever we can to reach out to those with whom we may not agree. As we seek understanding and acceptance of all persons and their beliefs, we can help build a community that can work together. Our personal and local attempts might also contribute to the change that "comes to Washington." Our interfaith efforts have made great progress in bringing together those who have different faith beliefs; let's also reach out to those with different political beliefs.

Our increased awareness of racial disparity should also inspire us to live out the teachings of loving our neighbor, doing unto others as we would like to be treated, and seeing all persons as sharing a common humanity as children of God. Increased awareness of what we have collectively done to threaten the creation should give us a new commitment to care for our earth as well as for each other.

We have concluded a very challenging year, and we now face the long, difficult effort to address those issues that have been exposed. Let us come together in the faith that we can have a better world by working together to seek justice and love mercy as we walk humbly into a better future.

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