A High Holiday Message for 5779 from Dr. Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor of The Jewish Theological Seminary

My wife and I had the privilege of traveling this summer through Scotland and Italy, where we found ourselves face to face with issues of identity and allegiance that have been very much in the news in America lately, and that merit reflection as we approach the High Holidays.

On a lovely, distant island in the Outer Hebrides, we heard from our guide about the ongoing battle between Gaelic and English, the decline of the once-dominant Scottish Church, and the struggle to “protect” local culture against the impact of “incomers” from England and points farther south. The movement for Scottish independence of course loomed in the background—as did the resurgence of British national feeling in the wake of the vote for “Brexit” from the EU.

In Siena our taxi driver gave voice to full-throated civic patriotism, and we learned the next day, to our great surprise, that the neighborhoods (contradas) about to compete in the annual horse race around the city center actually anchor identities and evoke loyalties that run deep, year-round and life-long. In the background echoed the pronouncements of the right-wing Italian government that had just come to power primarily on a promise to curb immigration and protect the country’s Italian-ness.

What does it mean in 2018 to be Sienese or Italian (or Scottish or American or Israeli) or Jewish? How many hyphens can be part of a self’s definition (or a nation’s) without hopelessly splitting the self (or the nation) apart? What obligations does a person have to others—strangers, refugees, neighbors—and to the world? And why do people seem to care so much about these matters lately?

For centuries Judaism has instructed us to see ourselves as part of a distinct people and religious community and also as part of larger wholes: our city, our country, humanity, our world. We are directed to be a part of these larger entities even as we stand apart from them in significant ways. The tradition teaches that Jews bear special responsibilities to those nearest to us—family, community, and the “stranger within your gates”—and have obligations as well to all human beings, every one of whom is created in the image of God. Identity in this vision of the self is not a zero-sum game: me versus you or the group, our group versus all others. The human heart has many chambers. Our minds are enriched from multiple sources. So too our souls.

This view of personhood certainly cannot be taken for granted in 2018, or 5779; indeed, Judaism’s way of thinking about individuals and collectives, or about the nature of identity and allegiance, seems woefully out of sync with the temper of the times. So many people and peoples seem to veer of late
in the direction of narrower and narrower definitions of the self. Others go to the opposite extreme, denouncing all loyalties other than universal humanity as reprehensibly tribal and xenophobic.

I am more appreciative than ever this year of the High Holiday liturgy’s emphasis upon the importance of being individuals in community, and communities in concentric circles of allegiance that stretch at their widest point to include all human beings and the planet. The *Musaf* service on Rosh Hashanah features a set of prayers known as “Malkhuyot,” the plural form of the word for “kingship.” To me, that plural form highlights the fact that, in the world as we know it, “sovereignty” is ultimately God’s but does not belong to God alone, and certainly not to any one government or ruler. Human beings can rightly affirm multiple loyalties. Each allegiance can and does enrich the others. It need not compete with them. One can be parent, spouse, friend, and co-worker; New Yorker, American, Jew, human being, citizen of the planet.

At the very end of the Yom Kippur service, right before the final blowing of the shofar, the congregation dramatically proclaims the eternal glory of God’s kingdom—and thereby pledges itself to work over the course of the coming year to help establish that wholeness in ourselves and the world as best we can. Here and elsewhere in the service, we are not told exactly where the proper balance lies between part and whole, self and community, community and country, nation and world. But we are reminded that the balance is possible, and that we should work toward it. And we are reminded of something else too: to distinguish between what is higher and lower, just and unjust, compassionate and selfish, kind and cruel, holy and profane. Our world sorely needs this reminder now more than ever.

Most important of all, perhaps, the rhythms of the High Holidays—repentance and renewal; prayer and good deeds; community and family; taking account of what we have done and taking advantage of the precious chance to start over—give us hope. Hope that the task before us is not too great: that we can ensure our planet will remain habitable in the future, that we will find a way to feed and house the world’s billions, and that human dignity will be protected and enhanced. I am privileged, as chancellor of JTS, to spend my days working to inspire a new generation of Jewish leaders so that they, in turn, can inspire our communities to find meaning in Jewish tradition, and the hope and courage to work for a better future.

May the New Year bring all of us goodness and blessing.