

YOM KIPPUR SERMON ON SOCIAL JUSTICE

Rabbi Suzanne Singer -- 5770

Some congregants have told me that they come to synagogue on Friday night, or on the High Holy Days, to get away from the chaotic world outside, to get some comfort in the midst of the unsettling news we hear and read about every day in the media. They don't want to have their serenity disturbed by the issues of the day. They tell me that these kinds of issues have no place on the pulpit. To be sure, we are living through very troubling times. All around us, people are losing their homes, their jobs, their health insurance, their retirement savings. For those of us who have been relatively unscathed thus far, we can only wonder nervously when the other shoe will drop.

So we deserve solace, we owe it to ourselves to gain respite as we enter our sanctuary here at Temple Beth El. I would like to quote fairly extensively from a brilliant sermon by Rabbi Stephanie Kolin, who is now leading the Just Congregations Initiative for the Reform movement here in California.¹ She tells us, that, indeed, "the word sanctuary means, not only sacred space, but also, protection from the outside world – we say a person is 'seeking sanctuary' from arrest, exile, or persecution. We too, seek sanctuary. And much of the time we spend during services, especially during Shabbat, is devoted to letting go of the cares we carry on our shoulders during the week."

"And, yet," Rabbi Kolin continues, "in the Talmud,² Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba says in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: 'A person should not pray *elah b'vayit she'yesh sham chalonot*, save for in a room which has windows.' Our law code, the Shulchan Aruch,³ expands upon this, explaining that these windows should open toward Jerusalem, the direction toward which Jews traditionally pray. When Rabbi Joseph Karo wrote this law, what did he think we needed to look at while we prayed?" asks Rabbi Kolin. She suggests that, "If we look up, we might feel awe gazing at God's domain. If we look out, we might feel wonder at being part of a sacred network of other human beings. Upward we can see our potential to be our best selves. Outward, and we can see the arena in which we must act as our best selves."

Mordechai Kaplan, founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, teaches that "prayer in itself is a worthy thing, but can somehow never be in the right spirit, unless it impels one to the service of humanity." So why not leave the issues of the day in the public square and the spiritual in the sanctuary? "Because," says Rabbi Kolin, "our sanctuaries have windows and we are charged to gaze out of them even as we gaze inward in prayer. If we were to gaze out our windows today, what might we see?" Would we see that man worried about caring for his aging mother, or those parents worried about their children's education? That terrified woman with no health insurance suffering from cancer? That family's breadwinner who lost her job and wonders how she'll take care of

¹ This section is from a sermon by Rabbi Stephanie D. Kolin, "Sanctuaries with Windows."

² Berakhot 34b.

³ O.H. 90:4.

her husband and children? As Rabbi Kolin asks:⁴ “Can we pray and just look? Can a Jewish community witness and not react? Is compassion a feeling, or is it an action?”

I think it is particularly difficult during the High Holy Days to simply pray or to just look. The shofar is our wake-up call, arousing us, not only to achieve our potential, but also to question how we need to act in the face of our society’s injustices. Yom Kippur is a particularly appropriate time to think about justice. After all, in today’s Haftarah reading, Isaiah criticizes those who fast and pray and attend to the rituals of religion, without taking the next step: doing something about the afflicted and the oppressed around us.

God does not desire our solemn words, our ceremonies of atonement, if they aren’t wedded to righteousness. Here is how Isaiah puts it: *This is the fast I have chosen: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to loosen the ropes of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to tear every yoke apart! Share your bread with the hungry; bring the homeless poor into your house. When you see the naked, cover them, never withdrawing yourself from you own flesh!*

Actually, our tradition has never made a distinction between ritual and ethics. Indeed, the Torah is replete with examples of ethical laws mixed together with ritual ones. And, frankly, how do you distinguish between the two? If we take, for example, the commandment to observe Shabbat, it soon becomes clear that this *mitzvah* encompasses myriad ethical concerns. To begin with, we are told in the Torah that on Shabbat, we are to give our servants, as well as our animals, a day of rest, certainly one of the very first expressions of concern for workers’ rights in history. Then, our willingness and ability to slow down on Shabbat, to connect to our deepest values, to spend time with those dearest to us, underline what matters most in life. This emphasis on our core principles should lead us to treat our fellow human beings with respect; it should prevent us from exploiting others, particularly in pursuit of money or power. Finally, the mindfulness we develop through Shabbat observance should instill in us a sense of gratitude for the blessings we have, sharpening our awareness of what so many in the world are not so fortunate to have. We should then be able to leave the sanctuary after a service, ready to put into action the values we have prayed.

My mentor, Rabbi Richard Levy, says that, “We must ask how our prayers can spill out of Shabbat to affect the ways we relate to God at home, in nature, and in the public square.” Indeed, Rabbi Levy asks some very pointed questions: “What does the greeting ‘Shabbat Shalom,’ imply? Are we as a movement ready to join the conversation on how and when to disengage from Iraq? Are we ready to encourage young people to carry the URJ resolution on the war to sources of influence in this country? Are we ready to raise our voices to counter those...who are content with the status quo in the Middle East?” I too hope that our prayers for shalom are not idle words. For how can we pronounce them in synagogue if we are not willing to actively promote peace? And how can we promote peace if we are not prepared to hear from the pulpit, at least on some occasions, how to counter war and violence, how to fight

⁴ Rabbi Stephanie Kolin of Boston.

injustice, and to do so as Jews?

During Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about the Unetaneh Tokef – that awesome prayer detailing all the possible ways we might die in the coming year. I spoke in terms of how we might react to the distress in our lives – the loss of loved ones, the travails we are suffering, the illnesses we are undergoing, the disappointments. Today I would like to suggest a different way of understanding that difficult prayer. Taking the lead from Rabbi Levy, I would like us to consider the listing of unfortunate fates – death by water, by fire, by sword, by wild beast -- not as personal tragedies but as societal ones. I would like us to think about water as a scarce resource, with the potential to cause major wars if we do not find a way to manage its use; I would like to think of fire as the dangers of second-hand smoke, of the sword as the genocides going on in Darfur and the Congo, of the wild beast as the animals displaced by global warming....Because, addressing these issues is a sacred task, worthy of being discussed in this sacred space.

Franz Kafka wrote a parable called “The Animal in the Synagogue” which, I think, speaks to this point. He recounts: A wild beast, ferocious looking, ravenous with flashing teeth, is loose in the synagogue...but no one pays it much attention. It hangs out in the women’s gallery. Kafka writes that one generation has pointed it out to the next, it has been seen over and over again, and by this time nobody any longer wastes a glance on it, until now even the children, seeing it for the first time, do not show any amazement. It has become that animal that *belongs to* the synagogue -- why should not the synagogue have a special domestic animal not found anywhere else?” As Rabbi Larry Bach points out, “the wild beast is none other than the message of Judaism, so routinized and ritualized as to become numbing rather than inspiring. Religion, the old saw goes, is supposed to: ‘comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.’ Unfortunately, too many of us have gotten too comfortable with the liturgy, putting it on each fall for a few days without letting it in.”⁵ Because Judaism’s message is a call to action, a call to heal the broken world. Judaism calls us to respond to the distress around us. Judaism demands that we not stand idly by.

Please, let us not allow the wild beast to become tame. Let us not become accustomed and inured to the homeless begging for spare change; the full-time warehouse worker unable to support her family because her wages are too low; the child being beaten because his parents have no hope for a better future. The synagogue is the place to let the wild beast loose, every now and then, so that our faith can remind us of what is on the other side of that window, and remind us of our obligations toward the other. As Leonard Fein puts it so eloquently: “The Jewish community has no more urgent interest than the energetic pursuit of its values. Our values are not merely grace notes to our lives; they are our purpose, they are our announcement of who we are and what we are about...The central American Jewish problem of our time is not anti-Semitism, nor is it intermarriage...It is the problem of boredom, the fact that for very many American Jews, the experience of being Jewish does not seem to be about anything — not, at any rate,

⁵ From Rabbi Larry Bach’s sermon, “Called to Justice.”

about anything that matters very much. I can think of no single statement...that more accurately...captures the most fundamental Jewish insight, than that...our world, God's world, is not working the way it was meant to—and that to be a Jew is to know that, somehow, you are implicated in its repair...

“The rich religious culture that we have been bequeathed and that we are privileged to bequeath to our children...is not a contemplative culture. There is study, to be sure, and there is ritual, and there is prayer; there is solace, and there is wonder. All these matter; they matter profoundly. **But in the end, it is not the services we attend that will sustain us; it is the services we perform.** For us, Shabbat was never meant as a stopping place; it was meant as a resting place, a place to regather our energies to take up again, and forever, God's work in this world. And what is that work? Do we not now? Have we not been told? It is the work of clothing the naked and feeding the hungry, of embracing the stranger and freeing the captive and smashing the idols; it is, in short, the work of justice. That is the Torah that we are instructed to do. That is the Torah that drives us.

“So though the work be endless and the day be short, we persist. We persist because mending the world is the authentic Jewish calling...We persist because we know that, though it is not incumbent upon us to complete the work, it is not right, it is not wise, and in the end we simply are not free to desist from it.” You may well ask, faced with the enormity of the world's problems, what can I as an individual accomplish? I would like to propose that we not do this work as individuals, but as a community. And that we work selectively on one or two issues that are the most compelling for us. In order to begin, we need to share our stories with one another. We need to let each other know what keeps us awake at night. Because it is in the sharing of these stories that we discover what matters most to ourselves and to each other. It is by telling our stories that we build relationships and community. When we don't share our stories, we perpetuate many myths. If we don't tell our stories, we make it harder and harder for people to talk about things like divorce, like infertility, like loneliness. We might not realize how many others share our quiet desperation. The power of story is captured in this poem by Rabbi Zoë Klein:

“Tell me a story
About a congregation
Which understood
That the first step to empowerment
Is knowing each other.

Tell me a story
About a congregation
Which knew how to listen.

Tell me a story
About a congregation
that got organized.

Tell me a story about a congregation
that shared its stories,
discovered its commonalities,
reached out, grabbed hands
and made an impact.

Tell me a story
about a congregation
that understood
the lives of its members as sacred text...

and I'll tell you a story
that I want to hear again
and again and again.

'I had a little overcoat, much too old to sew...'
Does anyone know where that line comes from?
It's the opening line of a song,
Actually it's originally in Yiddish,
About a man who has an overcoat,
And when it gets tattered and worn he turns
It into a jacket,
And when that gets tattered and worn,
He turns it into a vest,
And when that gets tattered and worn
He turns it into a tie,
And when that gets tattered and worn
He turns it into a handkerchief
And when that gets tattered and worn
He turns it into a button.
And one day he loses the button.

He doesn't even have a button...

So what does he do?
He makes it into a song.
He makes it into a song."

When Rabbi Anne Brener was here last spring, she conducted a workshop for the members of the Caring Community. It was incredibly powerful to hear people sharing some very profound experiences. Amazing things can happen when people share their stories. I would like to propose that, in the months ahead, we set up some time to share our stories with one another. Rabbi Brener offered to return, and I have invited her back in March so she can help us in this vital task. I hope you will be willing to participate.

Changing the world can happen only one step at a time, one story at a time. Let us listen to the music in each other's stories so that we might be empowered to right society's wrongs. Let us not just look out of the window of our sanctuary -- but let our prayers for peace and justice take us out into the public square so that we might engage in the sacred work of tikkun olam. Then, as Isaiah says:

*...shall your light blaze forth like the dawn,
And your wounds shall quickly heal;
your Righteous One will walk before you,
the Presence of the Lord will be your rear guard.
Then, when you call, the Lord will answer;
When you cry, God will say: Hineyni – Here I am.*