

RISING WATERS

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Yom Kippur 5771

Ten days ago, I suggested we understand the shofar of Rosh Hashanah as an alarm constantly rousing us from sleepiness and distraction and bringing us, again and again, back to the present moment. Last night I spoke of how on Yom Kippur we meet God by surrendering the external aspects of our self-definition, looking within to discover our deepest, truest sense of self.

If these messages were all there were to Judaism, I'd probably hear them as a prescription for self-absorption and narcissism, and I'd be shopping for a new religion. But there's more to the story. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, Judaism teaches that "we must begin with ourselves but not end with ourselves." Jews don't believe in turning inward to hide from the world or to escape reality; we turn inward so we can turn outward and re-enter the world ready to start cleaning up the mess.

Shabbat and holidays aren't a refuge from our troubles -- they're structured time outs for quieting down and listening for God's Voice so we'll return to the arena energized, with a renewed vision. "There's time to keep silence, and there's a time to speak," says Ecclesiastes. Judaism teaches us to start with silence, start with ourselves -- then get back into the world and speak out.

We believe that words literally are the building blocks of creation, that language can actually change reality. "Baruch she-amar, vahaya ha-olam," we recite in the morning service. "Blessed is the One who spoke, and the world came into being." We know that words are among the most powerful tools God has given us to repair the cracks in our world. And the constructive use of speech isn't optional; it's a mitzvah dating back to the first Jew, a story which Mel Scult cited on the second day of Rosh Hashanah.

Genesis tells us that when the angelic visitors left Abraham and Sarah and started walked towards the city of Sodom, Abraham stood before God and looked out towards the city. Abraham immediately stepped up and said, "Will you sweep away the righteous with the guilty? What if there should be 50 righteous people within the city -- would you still wipe it out rather than spare the place for the sake of the 50 righteous people in it? Chalila lecha mei-asot ka-davar ha-zeh, far be it from you to do something like this, to bring death upon the righteous as well as the wicked. Chalilah lecha! Far be it from you! Ha-shofet kol ha-aretz lo ya'aseh mishpat? Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?"

Abraham's words are unprompted, instinctive, and heartfelt -- he sees something wrong, and he expresses outrage without self-righteousness, without fear. God nods approvingly at his audacity and starts negotiating with Abraham over how many righteous people must be found to save the city.

The Torah's teaching here is clear and timeless: when we see even the possibility of injustice -- even if the apparent wrongdoer is God -- we're obligated to say something about it. When we witness a possible wrongdoing -- even if it affects strangers, people we don't know -- we're obligated to speak up on their behalf. When even a handful of innocent people may suffer for the misdeeds of many, it is a sacred imperative to protect the innocent. Ever since Abraham, to be a Jew has meant to express outrage at injustice, to speak truth to power, to defend the stranger, and to protect the innocent even if it means those who are guilty go unpunished.

Abraham's example became a fundamental teaching of Torah. "Hocheach tochiah et amitecha," says the Book of Leviticus [19:17]. "You shall surely criticize your fellow, and not bear sin because of him." Once we are aware of wrongdoing, we must speak up and try to stop it. Extending this teaching further, the Talmud says [Rav in Shabbat 54b]: "Whoever can prevent members of one's household from sinning but does not, is punished for the sins of the household; whoever can prevent one's fellow citizens from sinning but does not, is punished for the sins of one's fellow citizens; whoever can prevent the whole world from sinning but does not, is held accountable for the sins of the whole world." If we remain quiet in the face of injustice, says the Talmud, we're accountable for that injustice. Silence, as we know better than most peoples, can mean death. We, of all people, understand the obligation to speak.

In this our leading role models are the Biblical prophets, who expressed the moral truths people need to hear, but never want to. The prophets broke through denial and defenses and spoke directly to the unprotected moral core of the soul. Jewish tradition says that classical prophecy ended 2500 years ago. But Moses, the greatest of them all, taught that **each one of us has the capacity, even the obligation to act like a prophet.**

In Numbers, when God takes some of Moses' spirit and shares it with seventy Israelite elders, two others -- Eldad and Medad -- run around the camp acting like prophets. Joshua warns Moses to stop them. But instead, Moses responds with one of my favorite verses: "Would that all of God's people were prophets." And later, at the very end of his life, in words that are inscribed on our ark back on Amsterdam Avenue, Moses reminds the Israelites -- and us -- "Ki karov eilecha ha-davar m'od, for the thing is very close to you, b'ficha u-vilvav'cha, la'asoto, it's in your mouth and in your heart, to do it."

Each of us, says Moses, can recognize truth in our hearts, express it with our mouths, and implement it with our hands and our feet. Each of us can function as if we were a prophet. Each of us must disturb society's moral apathy and cynicism. Each of us must translate moral outrage it into words, and words into actions. Each of us must sound the alarm when religion is used to preserve the status quo, not to advance the cause of justice.

We began these holidays by listening to the sound of the shofar, being woken by its blasts; we end these yamim nora'im by realizing that we must become shofars, waking the world to the brokenness around us. In the haftarah we just heard, God charges Isaiah, "K'ra v'garon, al tachsoch, cry with a full throat, don't hold back; ka-shofar harem kolecha, lift your voice like a shofar, declare to My people their transgression, to the House of Jacob their sin."

A Jewish community of faith such as ours must *become shofarot*; we have an imperative to speak and act on behalf of others in this world. This year our Yad Mordecai Social Action Committee will be engaging individual members of our entire community in conversation to learn directly, from each of us, what it is in society that outrages us, what it is that moves us to get off the sofa, to click off the TV, to take to the streets – or at the very least, to sign a petition. Out of these one-on-one or small group conversations, we will develop a consensus around the issues which are most pressing, most important to us collectively. We need to hear from single member of West End Synagogue, to hear your own personal concerns. We need to hear your internal Isaiah, your own prophecy, so that we might blow together through a shofar that will amplify our calls for a more just society, a more peaceful world.

Prophetic outrage focused on society's failure to attend to its most vulnerable members – minorities, the poor, the hungry, the homeless. There is no shortage of causes for outrage today. I and many of you grew up understanding that to be a Jew meant to identify with those on the bottom of the ladder, even if you were near or at the top. We grew up understanding that

Jews measure society's morality by how well it attends to its most vulnerable. That sense of outrage is dying -- and if we don't live that moral code, what is the meaning of our Judaism? Were Isaiah living among us today, he'd be letting us have it.

Where's the outrage that the richest society in the world still has the most unequal distribution of wealth of any major industrial nation? Where's the outrage that, as the Times reported yesterday, there are more Americans living in poverty today than 15 years ago. If we here today truly represented the population of this country, one out every seven of us would be trying to exist on an income of \$11,000, or for family of four, \$22,000. The United Nations estimates that to provide basic education, health care, adequate food, clean water and safe sewers for everyone in the world would cost about \$40 billion -- an amount less than four percent of the combined wealth of the 225 wealthiest people in the world. Over these collective moral failures, there's little or no expression of outrage -- instead there is only paralysis, helplessness, and a great silence.

The thrust of Isaiah's message is economic justice, but it is not limited to that. He reminds us also that everyone is impacted and we all are responsible whenever any group in society is maligned and scapegoated, whenever fear is used to foment hatred and bigotry. Were we Muslims today, we would fear for our safety and that of our families, our children here in the streets of New York, even in perhaps the most multicultural, the most tolerant city in the world. We would wonder, as Jews have, whether we will ever truly be accepted as full and equal members of this country. It is no stretch at all for us as Jews to imagine what it feels like to be the designated lightning rod of a society's anxieties and fears, since we continue to play that role in much of the world.

We, of all people, know what it is to be the *ger*, to be the strangers, to serve as the lightning rod for a nation's anxieties and fears. We, of all people, can recognize the phenomenon of internalized oppression when others need to apologize for building a house of worship expressly dedicated to mutual understanding. We need to be among those who most loudly defend the freedom of all Americans to practice their religion, to protect those who may be intimidated from standing up for themselves and for sacred rights which belong to all of us, or to none of us.

No past trauma, no fear, no anxiety should ever dictate the extent of our freedoms -- because the dams protecting those rights, once eroded by fear and anxiety, are not likely to hold. And no one, Jews least of all, will be immune to the rising tide of irrational blame, the floods of recrimination and hate which, even in this country, can so easily rise to hurricane proportions.

It's time for us to add our voices to those who still speak for the dispossessed and the unjustly threatened. It's time for us -- comfortable on this island of affluence and social achievement, absorbed in our own personal and congregational needs -- to reinforce the dams protecting freedom from those who claim to speak for God while wielding the tools of ignorance, hatred, and violence.

It falls to us as progressive people of faith to represent the sacred values which took root with Abraham, values like protecting the innocent even at the expense of letting the guilty go free. Against those who claim to speak for our people and our faith, it falls to us to speak for Isaiah and the other prophets, who would surely be standing with those who are marginalized and threatened by waves of ignorance and suspicion, just as they would be standing with the growing millions who, through no fault of their own, are sinking into despair and poverty, slipping through an increasingly tattered and neglected alleged safety net.

The simple function of virtually all Jewish ritual is to remind us of the interconnectedness of all lives. We're not fasting today to punish ourselves, or because there's virtue in suffering. We're not fasting as an achievement, like running a marathon. We're fasting to experience our fundamental connection to those who are threatened and in pain. In language that still moves us and shakes us, Isaiah proclaims the point of the fast is "to loosen the chains of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke. Share your bread with the hungry; bring the poor, who are cast out, into your home. When you see the naked, clothe him; do not hide yourself from people in need."

The alarm will go off tonight at 7:42 p.m. with the final tekiah g'dolah to end our fast. We'll rush off to fill our empty bellies and our hunger will be a memory. But that shofar blast isn't a dinner bell – it's sounded in remembrance of the yovel, the jubilee year in which slaves were freed and a poor person could return to his or her ancestral homestead, freedom and equal opportunity restored. That shofar isn't the closing buzzer; it represents the cries of the hungry and persecuted among us. That shofar reminds us of our whispered pledges to sacrifice some of our comforts, to live larger lives than the circle of our own contentment.

Out of our reflections over the past ten days, may we hear a Voice calling us to speak and act for those among us who are forgotten and distressed. May Isaiah's words be reflected in our speech and our actions. May we "remove from our midst the yoke of oppression, the pointing of the finger and the tongue of malice; may we put ourselves out for the hungry and relieve the wretched, that our light might shine in the darkness, that our gloom might be as the noonday."

As we walk into this New Year, may we find our voice and amplify the Isaiah within; may we raise up the words of justice which God has implanted within each of us. May we move from reflection and silence to speech that awakens our society to our collective moral failures. May we be blessed, in the year ahead, to rebuild the dams protecting our freedoms, to restore dwelling places, to lift up the fallen, heal the sick, and weave together again the tattered fabric of our people and our country.