

Can We Talk?

I began my rabbinical studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1982, in the years before JTS agreed to ordain women. During my early years there, the mood was exciting, but also turbulent. The College had just moved into its new home in the Philly suburbs -- that was exciting. But there were divisions within the student body that were sometimes tense. These broke down into two factions: The students who viewed Judaism and their rabbinic formation through the lens of social justice, and the students who were drawn to the vision of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan for maximalist Jewish living and the ongoing interpretation of Judaism. The latter were seeking deep engagement with Jewish texts, ideas, beliefs, rituals and practices.

The former were driven by a calling to social justice, inspired by activists and encouraged by the new RRC president, Ira Silverman, of blessed memory. In Silverman's vision, Jewish tradition found its greatest resonance in our passionate engagement with the world, facing down the great moral and ethical issues of our day. Rabbis, he envisioned, would lead the way.

The students who viewed Judaism through the lens of social justice had one view of what a rabbi should be. Their priorities were clearly focused on what they could *do* in the world, while the Kaplan-inspired traditionalists viewed their rabbinic formation as a broadening and deepening of Jewish knowledge.

Neither vision was a negation of the other; I am sure the RRC leadership saw them as complementary, two aspects of one whole. But the cultural biases and assumptions of these two groups of students became increasingly pronounced. My oversimplification of what must certainly have been more nuanced notwithstanding, my memory of that time goes right to the tensions over these two competing visions.

This got to the heart of what it means to be a Jew, and what it means to be a Jewish leader. The College leadership didn't anticipate the storm that was brewing.

Immature as it was, some took to sarcastic labeling of each other. The derisive attitude emerged out of social pressure to "show up" for the high-profile causes of the day. There were protests at a GE facility for its involvement in the production of nuclear weapons and the machinery of war. Some were proud to have been arrested after chaining themselves to the fence of the facility. Another prominent cause was a campaign to boycott the Nestle food company¹ for flooding poor third-world countries with powdered baby formula, fostering an ethical and public health crisis.

The student lounge contained a vending machine filled with Pepperidge Farm cookies; these were popular among sleep-deprived students who craved them to remain alert. The problem was that the parent company for Pepperidge Farm was implicated in the baby formula controversy. There was intense social pressure to "do the right thing," to boycott the vending machine.

It became especially tense one day when someone bought all the cookies from the machine and placed them around the tables in the lunchroom with signs that read, "courtesy of the silent majority." The seam in the fabric of unity had been ripped open. The dean of students called an emergency student meeting to address the crisis. It was time to repair and redirect the relationships between students.

I have thought about that schism many times since then, reflecting on what it means to be a Jew and what it means to be a Jewish leader. Does it have to be either/or -- tradition or activism? I marvel at my own development as a rabbi and teacher and

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/01/27/us/nestle-boycott-being-suspended.html>

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activist. I have come to understand that this is really about us -- who we are as a Jewish community.

In a recent NY Times column, “*How America’s Jews Learned to Be Liberal*,²” Steven Weisman traced the history of the American Jewish community’s focus on “repairing the world.” The term “*tikkun olam/repair the world*” emerged from the Jewish mystical tradition and has come to describe a central value in Judaism today. Arnold Eisen, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary... “has noted ... that Jews have embraced the message of later prophets that Jews are “the servant of mankind” and “a light unto the nations.”

“For many American Jews, the prophetic and messianic role of the Jewish people has become central to their faith. A Pew Research Center survey of American Jews found in 2013 that among the five million American Jews, most regarded “working for justice and equality” as a pillar of their Jewish identity.”

American Jews, accepted, equal and prosperous, are at home as never before. From this vantage point we began to look outward, to reclaim the prophetic call for justice. In today’s Haftarah the prophet Isaiah³ proclaims in soaring language,

*Cry with full throat, without restraint; Raise your voice like a ram's horn!
Declare to My people their transgression...They ask Me for the right way...
[asking] "Why, when we fasted, did You not see? When we starved our bodies,
did You pay no heed?"
Because on your fast day, you see to your business and oppress all your
laborers!
Because you fast in strife and contention, and you strike with a wicked fist!
Your fasting today is not such as to make your voice heard on high.*

² “How America’s Jews Learned to Be Liberal,” Steven Weisman. NY Times, August 18, 2018

³ Isaiah 58

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Is such the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies?

Do you call that a fast, a day when the Lord is favorable?

No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke.

It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin.

When you cry, He will say: Here I am.

*If you banish the yoke from your midst, the menacing hand and evil speech,
And you offer your compassion to the hungry and satisfy the famished creature
— Then shall your light shine in darkness, and your gloom shall be like noonday.*

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel eloquently gave voice to the prophetic call, “Over and above personal problems, there is an objective challenge to overcome inequity, injustice, helplessness, suffering, carelessness, oppression. There is a question that follows me wherever I turn. What is expected of me? What is demanded of me?”⁴

The call to action flows from the rabbinic tradition as well, amply expressed in the Talmud. In Pirke Avot, for example, Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa taught: “Anyone whose actions are more plentiful than his wisdom, his wisdom endures. And anyone whose wisdom is more plentiful than his actions, his wisdom does not endure.”⁵

This was the lesson the 1980’s rabbinical student traditionalists needed to learn. Yes, pursue knowledge and wisdom. Of course, value learning! But it is not the end, it is the *means to an end*.

Heschel taught: “There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done to other people...The prophets’ great contribution to humanity was the discovery

⁴ from 5779 AJWS Rosh Hashanah card, unsourced

⁵ Pirke Avot 3:9

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of the evil of indifference...just as God hears the shouts of the widows and orphans, so should you. And again, just as God is free of all indifference, so should you be.”⁶

Still, many rabbis today remain committed to being teachers of Torah, not activists. This may be their comfort zone and what they can offer as their contribution to the Jewish people. That has been fine for them for a long time, until now. Today the swirling controversies in America and the world are tugging at communities. Many communities are asking for more. We talked about this during the Rabbinic Torah Seminar at the Hartman Institute this summer. Some rabbis complain of being pressured to speak out on issues, when that is not their style or their strength. It brought back my memories of 1983.

Many rabbis avoid speaking about controversial social issues out of fear. With the responsibility to nurture unity within community, some worry for their jobs; others worry for the strength and financial health of their congregations. It hurts in many ways if members become alienated and leave. Some rabbis just want others to be the activists. But we all own this; it is the Jewish way to examine issues from different viewpoints -- the Talmud’s beauty is that it is a document in disagreement.

Still some activist rabbis who choose to speak out on moral issues are feeling even greater pressure to be careful to not offend or divide. They fear the hand of censorship from leaders of their communities who worry about the impact of their words and actions that might alienate due-paying members.

A recent column in the Jewish press by Jan Zauzmer reacted to the proclivity to seek unity and healing between divided Jewish community members. It was titled,⁷ “*Dear rabbis: Take a stand in your High Holiday sermons.*” The author, a lay leader, wrote,

⁶ From Shai Held. *Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Call of Transcendence*. Indiana University Press. Indiana. 2013. Page 173

⁷ “Dear rabbis: Take a stand in your High Holiday Sermons.” Jan Zauzmer. JTA. August 23, 2018

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“I understand the typical view that it is better for rabbis to speak to higher values than to take sides in the rough-and-tumble over political issues...but as we all know, this is no ordinary time... Even if we could shield ourselves by burying our heads in the synagogue sand, we as Jews and as decent people are called upon to face the horrors around us and try to fix them... In these extraordinary circumstances, preaching only about ‘building bridges instead of walls’ is the safe sermon...But please don’t stop there!...We don’t have time to see whether civil discourse alone will solve the slew of problems wrought by racism, greed and xenophobia...While in normal times finding common ground is a noble Jewish value, these are not normal times. Don’t aim not to offend anyone — offend us all. Boldly tell us to do better.”

Personally, I have been wrestling over issues that tug at my heart and offend my values as a Jew. But I don’t want to be *just* an activist or *just* a traditional teacher of Jewish wisdom. I want to be *both*. Yet, sometimes that is not possible. There are times when we must muster courage. Remember the Holocaust era saying from the Rev. Martin Niemoller:

First they came for the Jews
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me
and there was no one left
to speak out for me.

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We can't take on every issue. And when we do take a stand, we should be careful to respond *knowingly* about the situation, prioritizing information that we have carefully made efforts to learn, responding from the place of wisdom and not impulse or self-regard.

As we learned of families being separated at our southern border this June, Pastor John Pavlovitz⁸ wrote a provocatively titled post, "*If Your Church is Silent this Week, You Should Leave It.*" He argued, "If there was ever a moment moral leaders were made for, it is this one. If there ever a day where spiritual leaders should stand bravely in front of their faithful and speak the hardest of truths...—it should be this one..." What is our religion, he argues, "if not to rescue the most vulnerable from the most powerful, if not to advocate for the least of these, if not to care for their neighbor as themselves...If your faith leaders can't find their prophetic voices to defend children caged like animals and isolated from their parents, are they really worth looking to for guidance on how to live one's faith...?"

Like Isaiah, this prophetic voice may offend some folks. Yet, its intention is not to insult or demean, but to shake us out of our complacency and inspire a community to action; to uplift spiritual values as our purpose -- a pathway to meaningful living.

Heschel taught, "The greatness of the prophets was in their ability to voice dissent and disagreements not only with the beliefs of their pagan neighbors, but also with the cherished values and habits of their own people."⁹

So, like Rev. Pavlovitz and the 40 major national Jewish organizations who spoke out about family separations at the border and criminalization of immigrants seeking asylum, we took a stand here at Ohavi Zedek. I'm proud of what we did and continue to

⁸ <https://johnpavlovitz.com/2018/06/19/if-your-church-is-silent-this-week-you-should-leave-it/>

⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Essential Writings*. NY. Orbis Books. 2011. page 107

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do through our support for refugees and the work of our sanctuary committee. But I also know that some members weren't proud; a few were angry. I feel badly for their feelings of alienation. We take this stand not as a partisan political issue, but a moral crisis that comes out of the annals of Jewish experience and prophetic values.

It is a delicate balancing act to honor diverse views, as our sages modeled, while hearing the call of the prophets and millennia of teachings about justice. We must be respectful of each other, acknowledging that we have different views among us. And -- we must thoughtfully address the moral and ethical issues that most threaten the world as we have been taught it should be. We should endeavor to be *informed* not by what we read on social media, since that is curated by our apps that feed us only what we want to see, and informed not by what we see on TV, filtered from biased sources. We have a responsibility to understand before we speak, or to remain as listeners until we have knowledge. Knee-jerk reactions feed our impulses on both sides of the political divide --- neither are healthy for today's complicated and controversial issues.

In today's swirling chaos of huge moral challenges, it can be easy to feel helpless. Liel Lebovitz of Tablet Magazine, reflected on this in a column, "*The Things We Can Change*." He observed that it is easier to complain about the state of the nation and the world than to "look at what can and must be fixed all around us." He recounted how he sadly came face-to-face with the *numbness* that has become *indifference*. He was walking on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and all around him he "could see or hear someone expressing their outrage" about our nation. Then, "Passing one street corner, I saw a young woman sitting on the sidewalk, looking distressed." He walked over to her, and learned that "she'd been out walking in the sun, and was likely exhausted and heat-stricken. At that, someone ran into a restaurant nearby and got a tall glass of cold water; the other called an ambulance. Before too long, the woman was cared for, rested, and ready to go on with her day." He wrote, "Before we parted ways, she thanked us and

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told us that she'd asked a few people for help before collapsing, but none bothered to stop, listen, and lend a hand."

Liebovitz was awakened out of the numbness around him; he was changed. He wrote, "I will be thinking of that woman next time I shout at the TV or slam my fist on the breakfast table when confronted by an article that upsets me in the morning paper. And I'll remind myself that my outrage is impotent: There's very little I can do to address the world's greatest tragedies. But there's much I can do to grow into the sort of person who is mindful of everything that yet needs repair, and much all around me that I can yet help fix."¹⁰

Alan Lew writes in his high holiday book, *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*¹¹ on the effect of the shofar's blast: "Suddenly you are awakened by a strange noise, a noise that fills the full field of your consciousness and... You awake to confusion. Where are you? Who are you?" Maybe it is Isaiah, or maybe it is the sound of the shofar, or maybe it is the distressed person on the sidewalk -- this is the moment to open our eyes to notice the suffering in the world and to respond.

"The sound of the shofar rouses us from indifference, moves us to action, and renews our conviction to keep going despite seemingly insurmountable challenges...The shofar inspires us to rise above despair and embrace the promise of a better world." That better world is one where activists arise to change what must be changed to make the world whole, and it is where communities respond to the voices of its members with mutual respect and acceptance, even when it is hard.

¹⁰ "The Things We Can Change." Liel Liebovitz. *Tablet Magazine*. August 1, 2018

¹¹ Alan Lew. *"This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation"*. New York. Little, Brown and Company. 2003

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Ben Zoma says,¹² *“Who is wise? One who learns from all people...Who is mighty? Those who are able to discipline their passions... Who is the rich? Those who rejoice in the portion given to them...Who is worthy of honor? Those who respect all human beings.”* Respect is shown in how we treat each other and in how we respond to the call to action. As Isaiah calls to us today, let us *“unlock the fetters of wickedness”* while we avert *“strife and contention.”*

Every day we recite the Aleynu prayer, which proclaims, *“It is incumbent upon us to praise God Who has formed all creation. To repair the world. To bring us nearer to the day that the world will be one.”* May it be so in this New Year. *Gemar chatimah Tovah!*

¹² Pirke Avot 4:1