

“Opening Our Eyes: Pursuing Justice”

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It is comforting to be together this day.....The familiar feel of community.....The melodies – many of which echo timelessly - inspiring memories of Holy Days past.....The sweet gatherings....reunions of family and friends. In so many ways, we are blessed. I spoke with someone recently who shared that she found herself looking forward to this Rosh Hashanah more so than any other she could recall. She spoke of living in a world that seems to be spinning out of control: the devastation of nature’s wrath.....the division and divisiveness in politics and amongst people.....the rising tide of intolerance and hatred. As well, she spoke despairingly of an increasing sense of powerlessness in the face of it all. Indeed, today, our Temple serves as a sanctuary, in the truest sense of the word: a place of comfort.....a place of safety within which to find a measure of respite..... and to try to regain understanding and strength.

Importantly, for us, the central figure of Rosh Hashanah is Abraham. We read of his struggle to understand what God asks of him. And we are reminded that, according to Torah, the relationship that he would establish with God....the covenant that would bind him....the mission that he would embrace...would be one that would be handed down throughout the generations.

As a reminder, towards the beginning of Abraham’s story, God is described as having called upon him to “Go forth....”*Lech L’cha*”.....to leave the only land that he and his family had ever known....and to embark on a long and arduous journey.” At least two important questions are inspired by this story: First, what exactly was the purpose of Abraham’s mission? The text – enigmatically – speaks only that “*Veh’yei Brachah*” – that he and those who would come after him would become blessings. But it is not at all clear what this means. Secondly, as readers, we are left wondering why it was that God called upon Abraham in the first place. What precisely was it that qualified him to be so selected?

Not surprisingly, the rabbinic imagination – expressed through literature known as Midrash - speaks to the heart of the matter: In a text known as Genesis Rabbah we read: “*Amar Rabbi Yitzchak*” ...“Once....Rabbi Yitzchak taught the following: The call to wander may be compared to a man who travelled from place to place. As he made his way, he saw a castle with flames coming from many of the windows. The man said to himself: “How is it possible that this castle is ablaze - that no one has come to extinguish the fire? Does this castle not have an owner who looks after it?” Upon hearing these words, the owner of the building then looked out and said to the man, “I am the owner of the castle....I will surely tend to the flames.”

Rabbi Yitzchak continued – This was precisely like the circumstance of Abraham. Abraham opened his eyes and saw his world – metaphorically – on fire. Filled with troubles and difficulties. Recognizing how dire the circumstances, Abraham is said to have cried out to God: “Is it possible that this castle – this world has no guide? --- Is there no one to look after it?” To which the Holy One Blessed Be God responded to Abraham: “It is I who am the Master of the World....Indeed, I will tend to the flames.....*Lech L'cha!*.....I send you!”

According to the midrash, both the merit of Abraham and the purpose of his mission were clear: Why Abraham? He opened his eyes. He saw. And then...he raised his voice. His mission? To serve as God’s messenger to address the world’s needs.

In Jewish tradition, the foundational quality possessed by Abraham was that he was a *Tzadik*....a truly righteous soul. And woven repeatedly throughout the fabric of what it means to be Jewish is a call to follow closely in Abraham’s footsteps – to look upon the world as it is...and to remain unrelentingly committed to the pursuit of *tzedek* – “righteousness” or “justice.” The commands and teachings are found throughout Torah and rabbinic literature: In Deuteronomy 16:18 we read that the children of Israel are told: “*Tzedek, Tzedek, Tifdof*....Justice, justice shall you pursue in order that you may live....” The prophet Isaiah – living in the 8th Century BCE - proclaimed: “Learn to do good....to seek justice....to relieve oppression....to ensure righteousness for the orphan and the widow.” For emphasis, our Sages even went so far as to put this teaching at the center of our Yom Kippur liturgy. Once again we hear Isaiah’s voice. Upon witnessing the Jewish people paying far more attention to Temple practice than to the people’s needs in the streets, Isaiah forcefully proclaimed God’s message: “This is the fast that I desire!” – he says – “To undo the chains of evil....to let the oppressed go free....to allow righteousness to go forth from before you.” It is a bold reminder on our holiest day that we should never confuse our ritual observance with our ethical responsibility.

In Judaism, the pursuit of justice is not merely a societal good, it is a spiritual imperative. And it is impossible to come together as a Jewish community at this season – focusing as we do on the essence of life’s meaning – and not speak of the rise in hatred...bigotry....and intolerance in our country....and in our communities.

The events of Charlottesville were beyond-shocking – leaving us in a cloud of anger and disbelief. For a Temple community – in 2017 – to have been brazenly intimidated by a mob of armed Neo-Nazis – would have been unheard of just several months ago. The images of hundreds of torch bearing white supremacists – calling out “*Seig Heil*” and other Anti-Semitic epithets - carrying flags emblazoned with swastikas and other symbols of hate - filled news coverage. An on-line letter written by Congregation Beth Israel’s president, Alan Zimmerman, went viral almost immediately. In it, he vividly described what he experienced that Saturday morning as forty members of his congregation were gathered inside for Shabbat services. He

wrote:

“I stood outside our synagogue with the armed security guard we hired.Here is what I witnessed during that time.For half an hour, three men dressed in fatigues and armed with semi-automatic rifles stood across the street from the temple. Had they tried to enter, I don't know what I could have done to stop them, but I couldn't take my eyes off them, either. Perhaps the armed presence of our armed guard deterred them.Several times, parades of Nazis passed our building shouting, 'There's the synagogue!'"After services, I advised congregants that it would be safer to leave the temple through the back entrance rather than the front and to leave in groups." Zimmerman shared that he learned through a notice on-line that the Neo-Nazis were urging that the synagogue be burned down. This, he said, prompted him and the rabbis to order the removal of the Torah scrolls from the building and to have them secured in a member's home.

As we know, during those fateful days in Charlottesville, three people were killed: Heather Heyer – a young counter-demonstrator - as well as two Virginia State police officers, J. Jay Cullen and Berke Bates – both of whom were doing their jobs - protecting the public. They are all of blessed memory and, as we recite Kaddish this day, we think of them.and pray for their families.

What happened in Charlottesville was not an isolated incident. Incendiary attitudes and acts of an ascendant right are on the increase across the country. The Anti-Defamation League....the Southern Poverty Law Center...and other human rights watchdog organizations report a significant rise in hate crimes nationally. The Boston Globe recently reported that, over the past several months, there has been a noticeable up-tick in the reports of racist graffiti found scrawled on MBTA busses, trains, and subway stops. One day this past summer, on a Red Line train - three teenage girls were witnessed harassing a foreign-born woman – mocking her accent and telling her to “go back to her own country.” When the woman tried to get up and walk away, the girls blocked her path and then physically assaulted her. On another train – a man pulled a pocket knife on two Latino men and yelled at them – telling them to speak English. And in Claremont, New Hampshire – police are investigating an incident where a group of teenagers allegedly placed a rope around the neck of an 8 year old bi-racial boy. Taunting him, they are said to have then pushed him off a picnic table. Thankfully, the boy survived, but we are all left aghast – bearing witnesses to a world whose moral and ethical foundation is undeniably under assault.

Commenting on the rise of communities who derive inspiration and their sense of purpose from their identity, New York Times columnist David Brooks notes that: “Many identity-based communities are not defined by internal compassion, but by external rage.”

This Rosh Hashanah.....gathered as a community of sacred purpose....focusing hearts and

minds in order to stand firm against a world threatened by the fires of hatred.....the sound of the shofar echoes with the cries of the vulnerable amongst us.

In Torah, if it is Abraham who begins the mission to “go forth” in pursuit of *tzedek*....justice.....it is Moses who, later in the narrative, takes this task to the next level. Whereas Abraham is said to have embarked upon his quest at the behest of God – driven forward, fundamentally by a command from on-high.....it is Moses who internalizes this task – genuinely making it his own.

One of the most powerful scenes in the Torah takes place immediately following the sin of the Golden Calf. The Children of Israel, having completely abandoned God by creating and bowing down to an idol, become the focus of God’s anger. High atop Mount Sinai, God reveals to Moses what God is going to do. “*HaNicha Li....V’Yichar Api Va’HemV’achaleim*”..... “Moses....Leave me be....so that my anger may blaze forth against the people and consume them.”

Rabbi David Stern of Temple Emanu-El in Dallas - while exploring the meaning of this text - discovered a moving passage found in the pages of the Talmud. In it, the rabbis offer an insight into what they believe may have been going on in Moses’s mind as God was speaking to him.

I am paraphrasing that text of Talmud: Listening carefully to God’s words, Moses paused and wondered to himself, “Why would God be telling me to leave? Surely, the Creator of All can do whatever God wants.” In that moment – according to this interpretation – Moses realizes the reason: “If God is telling me to leave before God acts, surely it is because: “*Hadavar zeh talui bi!*” – “This matter is dependent upon me!” ---- “What I do or don’t do will make the difference!” Motivated by this understanding....the Talmud says that Moses “*Amad v’nit’chazeik*” --- “Moses stood up and was strengthened” in his resolve – forcefully pleading his case for compassion and justice for the people. An argument that Moses eventually wins.

This mission driven spirit of Moses – this personal embrace of the pursuit of justice - rests at the heart of Judaism.....and it has inspired Jewish activism for generations.

One story among many.....In 1964, on the eve of the passage of the Civil Rights Act, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. reached out to his friend, Rabbi Israel Dresner – a Reform Rabbi serving in New Jersey. King asked him to gather a group of rabbis and come and meet with him in St. Augustine, Florida. There, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was working with students and activists to fight Jim Crow segregation in the city. Dresner – along with sixteen rabbinic colleagues from across the country – made their way to Florida. Before the peaceful demonstration was to take place, a large crowd had gathered inside a local church to hear inspirational speeches, sing, and prepare. Rabbi Richard Levi – one of the rabbis in the group –

recently recalled what happened that day when they arrived at the church. Dr. King, noticing the rabbis as they were ushered into the sanctuary, paused in his remarks and pointed to the rabbis – proclaiming: “Here come Moses’s children!”

The demonstration, as it turned out, resulted in all of the rabbis being arrested by the St. Augustine police. Booked and brought to a small, shared, jail cell – the rabbis did what rabbis often do: They wrote. Their letter --- an epistle penned to the public ---was entitled: “Why we went.” It was written on the only pieces of paper that they could put their hands on --- ironically: the back of a mimeographed police report that described local assaults by the Ku Klux Klan.

In their note, the rabbis wrote the following:

“We went to St. Augustine in response to the appeal of Martin Luther King....in which he asked us to join with him in a creative witness to our joint convictions of equality and racial justice. We came because we realized that injustice in St. Augustine, as anywhere else, diminishes the humanity of each of us.....We came.....mainly because we could not stay away.....We could not pass by the opportunity to achieve a moral goal by moral means --- a rare modern privilege – which has been the glory of the non-violent struggle for civil rights. We came because we could not stand silently by our brother’s blood. We had done that too many times before. We have been vocal in our exhortation of others but idleness of our hands too often revealed an inner silence; silence at a time when silence has become the unpardonable sin of our time. We came in the hope that the God of us all would accept our small involvement as partial atonement for the many things we wish we had done before and often....We came because we know that, second only to silence, the greatest danger to man is loss of faith in man’s capacity to act.”

On Rosh Hashanah, it is this unflagging personal commitment to justice that we are asked to rekindle. Like Moses of the midrash, we are asked to say to ourselves: “*Hadavar zeh talui bi!*” – “This matter depends upon me!” During this season when we raise our voices in prayer and song – safe in our sanctuary, we are called upon also to raise our voices...and extend our hands... as role models of righteousness.

Calls to and visits with our legislators – Letters to leaders....and to newspapers – Peaceful presence at protests – Not only standing UP for those most vulnerable, but also standing with them in friendship and solidarity – Supporting organizations whose values align with your own.....Providing humanitarian aid to the needy.....Taking the time to research and learn about complex issues – Asking questions....and listening to answers....Engaging in meaningful dialogue with those whose opinions are different from your own.....Reflecting on our own biases and assumptions.....These are essential stepping stones paving the path to justice for all.

As a Temple community, we have created a congregation-wide initiative: “TBS Tzedek” to

organize our own collective efforts.....to leverage our capacity as hundreds of households to help bring about transformative positive change. We are working together in partnership with other congregations – Jewish and Interfaith – as well as with our own Reform Movement and with organizations dedicated as we are to social justice.

TBS Tzedek is rooted in our tradition's commitment to righteousness. And for each specific issue that our community works to address, there are three key goals: Education.....Concrete Action.....and Congregational Conversation. Together we are dedicated to working for both the betterment of our societyand better understanding and relationships amongst each other.

Information about TBS Tzedek and its activity is publicized in all of our Temple communications – the Scroll, weekly E-news, and Facebook. I invite you to participate in this important community effort in any way that is meaningful for you – through activism and learning, as well as by offering the ideas and opinions that will enable us to shape our efforts together.

Reverend Elaine Ellis Thomas – an Episcopalian minister at St. Paul's Church in Charlottesville has been sharing the following words loudly and often since the days of violent demonstration in her community: "The power behind us is far greater than the evil that confronts us. If we unite across our differences with a common goal before us, we can uproot and disarm ideologies of hate."

Stepping as we do now into a new year.....renewed in our resolve to ensure righteousness for all....a prayer penned by Rabbi Karen Kedar. She wrote:

These are the Days of Awe, the Days of Judgment.
O, Eternal Source of Peace, hear our plea:

Judge us, inspire us, compel us
so that we will not turn away,
never to be silent, never to be numb,
never to be distracted, never to let our bewilderment
and exhaustion keep us from
doing what is right, what is good,
and what is demanded of us, O God:
to love mercy, pursue justice and to walk humbly.

These are the Days of Discernment, the days of Self-Examination.
God of compassion and love, hear our prayer.

Give meaning to our confusion, purpose to our pain,
and bring healing to our fragmented hearts.
May our tears ease the suffering of another.

When we love our neighbor, we transcend;
when we love the stranger, we transcend;
when we do not stand idly by, we transcend;
when we pursue peace, we transcend;
when we hold the world as a vessel of grace, we transcend.

These are the Days of Renewal, the Days of Life.
Divine Source of good, hear our heart's desire.

Lift us, guide us, command our eyes
to gaze into the shadows, and upon the streets,
and into every place that evil strays and preys...
(and) upon all that is good and beautiful in our world.
Send us forth, that we may be Your servant(s)
choosing blessing over curse, bearing witness.

May we proclaim from the heights and from the depths
the power of goodness, beauty, righteousness, and hope.

These are the Days of Holiness and You are the Holy One of blessing.

We will not tire, we will not despair, we will not turn away.

You Dear God, are the Source of peace in the high heavens.
We are the source of peace, here upon the earth.

Amen.....v' Amen.