

## Rosh Hashanah 1991 -- Becoming Spiritually Correct

by Rabbi Joshua J. Hammerman

One of the most startling images of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy can be found in the Unetane Tokef prayer of the Musaf service. It is that picture of angels in heaven scurrying about, seized by fear and trembling. And what inspires them with such awe? The following mystical paradox: "U'v'shofar gadol yitaka, v'kol d'mama daka yishama." "The Great shofar is sounded -- and a still small voice is heard."

Now we could interpret that as being two distinct sounds -- first, the loud blast of the shofar; then, the sweet, caring voice of God, the same kind of voice heard by Elijah when he fled to Mount Sinai to escape the wrath of King Ahab. But I read the phrase much more literally, exactly as it is printed. One event. The great shofar is sounded, but what everyone hears is a still, small voice.

What an awe-inspiring idea. How it must shake the heavens. To have a Louis Armstrong fill himself with air and open his mouth with a blast, and out comes the soft hush of a waking kitten.

Of course, to each of us as well, the sound of the shofar sounds different, evokes different responses. But what is most important to remember is that when we hear it, what we are to listen for is that still, small voice of truth, hidden amidst all the noise. We have to cut through the noise to find the truth. We have to fine-tune our ears to hear the eternal message. It's not easy, because there is so much noise around us.

This is a sermon about noise. If you've opened a newspaper, magazine or academic journal over the past year, two letters could be found over and over again, repeated in article after article, column after column, ad nauseam; recited like a mantra, as the cause of all the world's evils, all of society's woes, and a whole lot of noise.

These two noisy letters, when hurled at an opponent, land a crushing blow to which there is little response. The two letters, when discussed in polite company, can cause a placid afternoon tea to erupt into a tempest that no teapot could possibly hold.

The two letters, the noisiest letters in the English language in 1991, inscribed in scarlet on college campuses from sea to shining sea; the two letters: P.C.

Political correctness. What is it?

The PCP, politically correct person, is best defined in our culture as the person who espouses selected beliefs often called "liberal" or leftist, and asserts them with Stalinist orthodoxy, fascist zeal and McCarthyist intolerance of opposing views. These beliefs usually involve race, ecology, animal rights, feminism and reading lists having anything at all to do with Western Civilization.

According to the standard definition, the PCP demands conformity to his own views. The PCP is never wrong. The PCP is dangerous. And you'd better be careful or the PCP will condemn you with the most stinging barb of all: he'll call you... insensitive. Insensitive to minorities, to women, to gays, to rats, to trees, to life itself.

One college newspaper gives us some clear examples as to what is considered politically correct, and what isn't:

On television, Cosby is the most PC thing around. Blacks succeeding in upper middle class life without the help of white benefactors. Contrast that with Different Strokes, a very politically incorrect show, where blacks need whites to save them from the ghetto.

An example of a PC film par excellence would be this year's Oscar winner, "Dances With Wolves," for extolling the virtues of the Native American in his bold but futile attempt to fight off those insensitive white racist settlers.

According to this college newspaper, the well-dressed PCP wears: sandals, army surplus, a button with a cause and anything torn. Non-PC fashions feature alligator boots, army uniforms, a fraternity pledge pin and a Cleveland Indians cap.

Now, let's try the PC aptitude test to see if your views would be considered politically correct:

-- Skip, Biff and Jose take a qualifying exam for two civil service job openings. Skip scores 98%, Biff scores 96% and Jose scores 95%. You: a) Hire Skip and Biff; b) Hire Skip and Jose; c) Hire only Jose and wait for another person of color to apply. The PC answer would be, of course, C.

-- You are looking after your child's young playmate for the afternoon and he has soiled his disposable diaper. You... a) Re-dress the child with the diapers his parents left for you; b) Re-dress the child in washable, cloth diapers, as your quiet effort at saving the environment; or c) Take the liberty of returning all the disposable, non-recyclable diapers, and tell his parents off for being unconcerned with the world their child will inherit.

Of course the answer is again C.

Finally: On a city bus you overhear a businessman refer to his secretary as a "girl." You: a) Think nothing of it and get off at your stop; b) Roll your eyes, think how fortunate it is that the next generation of executives will be more enlightened, and get off at your stop; or c) Interrupt his conversation and lecture him on how incorrect ideologies embedded in language are a threat to public safety. Let him off the bus once you are convinced that he both understands you and will never use the word "girl" again.

I don't need to tell you which is the PC response. In the world of political correctness not only is there no such thing as a girl who is over 18 years of age; the adult girl is not even called a woman, for that spelling implies that her main purpose on earth is to be a womb from which another generation of men may emerge. The proper, gender-neutral PC spelling is womyn. If I were properly PC, I'd have to change the spelling of my name too, to Hammermyn.

I've been in a nursery rhyme mode lately, and it's very tough to find one that is properly PC. "Three Visually-Challenged or Sight-Impaired Mice" just doesn't cut it -- nor does "Ten Little Native Americans."

A true story: The Fresno Bee is a racially-sensitive newspaper, and their computer is programmed to eliminate non-PC language. In an edition last summer, the paper spoke about ways that Massachusetts could overcome its budget crisis and put itself "back in the African-American." Of course the item should have said, "back in the black."

What a mess. So much noise.

Why has this happened? Why has the level of public discourse on our campuses, in our government and in the press been reduced to childish name-calling and profound trepidation over minute vocabulary errors? (And of course I must emphasize here that I'm not speaking about overt racist statements, still made often in public company, which must never be condoned. Such language kills.)

Why has the noise level increased so?

It's been said that the whole PC thing was invented by conservatives to discredit the left. After all, the right has its ideological zealots too. And those zealots rule the airwaves on radio and television talk shows; Rush Limbaugh, Patrick Buchanan, and the like. More noise.

But you can believe that theory only if your fur coat has never been splattered with red paint in front of Bergdorf's or if you've never been chastised for hating the person who just mugged you. Political correctness exists in a news media that grants legitimacy to the vicious anti-semitism of an Al Sharpton and makes excuses for the hypocrisy of the PLO, all in the name of "sticking up for the victim." Political Correctness does exist; it wasn't just made up.

Political Correctness exists. However -- it exists for a reason:

It all comes down to frustration. Frustration at a full decade of insensitivity at the pinnacles of power. Frustration at a government that has become more and more deaf to the cries of the have-nots of this country, that doesn't really seem to care about the environment, and that has run roughshod over the rights of real victims everywhere.

Frustration at a Supreme Court that appears bent on steering this nation as close as it possibly can to the status of theocracy, by applying principles of fundamentalist Christian morality to everything from abortion to church/state to capital punishment.

Frustration at corporations which mock our intelligence by running ads falsely implying that animal rights activists favor animal lives over human lives.

There is frustration and there is fear -- unprecedented fear. People shout because they are used to being shouted at. People lecture because they are constantly being lectured at. There is no dialogue, there are only sound-bites. There is only noise. And there appears to be no still, small voice to be found in all this.

-- Those who support the legal right to have an abortion but have profound questions about the morality of casual abortion, as a form of birth control, have great difficulty articulating this view, a view that can only be stated in a still small voice. One of the great oxymorons of our language is the phrase "abortion debate." There is no abortion debate. There is only abortion shouting, and at times, abortion terrorism.

-- Those who respect other cultures but believe that Moby Dick should be required reading for all Americans, even though it has no women and ignores issues of race, class and sexual orientation; there is another case for a still, small voice.

-- Those who absolutely love animals but will concede that it's OK to use rats for experimentation because they're ugly, but not puppies because they are lovable -- have trouble defending their ambivalent beliefs. Most of us are in that gray area; we are the true silent majority, and increasingly, we are afraid to speak. The noise around us is too deafening.

Joel Conarroe, president of the John Simon Guggeneheim Foundation, wrote in a New York Times op-ed piece, "The phrase "Politically Correct" has become a lethal weapon for silencing anyone whose ideas you don't like. Many thoughtful citizens confront a dilemma. To protest demeaning language and ideas is to run the risk of being labeled P.C.. But to not protest is to tolerate the intolerable."

The man is right. To call someone P.C. is to humiliate him, and to be shouted at by a P.C.P is also humiliation. Intolerance rules the day, most of us are caught up in the crossfire. And if there is one thing I cannot tolerate, it's intolerance.

In our society, to be the loudest is to be the most truthful. There is no attempt to listen for that still, small voice. Contrast that to that beautiful poem in the Machzor. Rosh Hashanah redirects us toward the truth.

And the Jewish world could use some redirection, because for us too, the noise of Political Correctness is rampant, on all sides of

the ideological spectrum.

Example number one: A year ago, the Reform movement's rabbis voted overwhelmingly to support the ordination of openly gay and lesbian rabbis. But in a survey taken after that convention, fully one third of the rabbis disagreed with the decision, far more than did at the convention itself. These are the silent third, those searching for the still, small voice, the ones deathly afraid of being labeled "anti-gay," afraid to admit that there is a gray area. They're not "anti-gay" at all; they're simply "pro-gray."

There is a gray area here, one based on a value system that espouses both the traditional family structure and the principle of "Ahavat Yisrael," loving your fellow Jew. These values come into conflict over this question. Someone could be very much in favor of gay rights in every situation, and yet be uncomfortable with the idea of gay rabbis. And another could make the difficult choice of sacrificing the value of promoting traditional family values for the sake of this particular persecuted group of living Jews, Jews who need their own special rabbinical guidance. And they are persecuted; and they are in desperate need of solace, of a spiritual home; entire neighborhoods of Greenwich Village have been wiped out by AIDS, and yet, and yet, for the most part, the Jewish establishment has rejected them.

It's a very difficult question, one over which I still struggle, and it is a gray area. The Reform movement has been thrown into turmoil because it was handled so clumsily, so quickly, with such dispatch. The P.C.P.s ruled the day.

Example 2: Political Correctness of a different kind: A few months ago, the Rabbinical Council of America, the largest Orthodox rabbinical group, summarily expelled eight of its most distinguished rabbis, for having views which they regarded as perilously liberal. Included was the renowned Avi Weiss of Riverdale, who had the audacity to allow women's minyans at his synagogue, and another under attack is Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, who has had the audacity to encourage dialogue with Reform and Conservative rabbis. Still, small voices, shades of gray, dissent of any kind, not allowed.

Judaism has always had its own version of Political Correctness; its called Herem -- excommunication. It's simple. It's neat. And in this world it's about as effective as a Communist Coup. Ex-communication: the abandonment of all hopes of communication. There's a lot of herem going around these days. You know the old joke. A Jew is stranded on a desert island, and he decides to build two synagogues. Why? So he'll have one to call his own and another so he could have one he wouldn't dream of setting foot in. "We'll talk to you, we'll let you in," they say, "if you promise in advance to agree with me."

This kind of Herem is practiced by Jews of all denominations, not just Orthodox. At a recent convention of Jewish leftists sponsored by Tikkun magazine in Jerusalem, invitations were offered only to

people who agreed, in advance, with the journal's platform promoting the establishment of a Palestinian state. This they call a dialogue? Who could have imagined that the only place on earth where we could find real open political debate would be in the pages of Pravda! Such is the world in 5752.

I attended a conclave not long ago where mostly Reform rabbis were present. As a Conservative rabbi, at times, I must say, I felt like a Mossad agent in Damascus, such is the state of intergroup relations among American Jews in 5752. One of the most respected and politically correct rabbis in the Reform movement, got up following lunch to tell some jokes. About a half hour into his routine, he recalled a time he and another rabbi were guests on a TV program somewhere out in mid-America, where people don't know much of Jews and Judaism. The host asked the rabbis to define the laws of Kashrut for the audience.

"Kashrut," said the nervous colleague, "is the humane slaughter of Orthodox Jews."

For me that was a low point of an otherwise excellent conference. For the rest, its grammatical incorrectness made it all the more correct politically, and there was uproarious laughter for ten minutes, easily. Of course the laughter was understandable -- it was safe; those rabbis were among friends; and in most of their communities, their Orthodox colleagues won't even acknowledge their existence. They've already been put into herem. So, this kind of joke was in effect an act of "my herem's better than your herem," the Reform rendering the Orthodox unworthy of real communication.

By the way, our own Conservative movement is not immune to its own orthodoxies (small "O"). I saw it first-hand during my years at the Seminary. I know of several instances where rabbinical students who disagreed with the party line were not only subject to severe chastisement by their peers and teachers, but were actually instructed to seek psychiatric help.

But there is a difference, because Conservative Judaism by definition searches for the still, small voice. Being middle of the road has its disadvantages. It's not easy to wave a banner proudly that has the slogan "Tradition...and change." But part of that ideology is the idea that the search for truth is an evolving one. Although God's word was revealed at Sinai, it was revealed to human beings, so our understanding of that revelation is subject to our own human imperfections.

600,000 Jews were at Sinai, and according to tradition, each heard God speak to him or her a little differently, as if a personal message was delivered to each of them. The Pesikta d'Rav Kahane, a collection of midrash, explains: It is as if God were a mirror. A thousand people look into it and each finds reflected the image of divinity.

A beautiful thought. Pluralism is what Judaism teaches. Every

ideology, every concept of God, is necessarily incomplete, even if it came from Sinai. I need your vision of truth in order to make mine more complete. My own is insufficient. I can't do it alone.

The two great sages of the early rabbinic period were Hillel and Shammai. They were always at odds, never agreeing. Like Serrani and the Advocate. And the Talmud's decisions almost always went Hillel's way. Why? Because Hillel always presented Shammai's views before his own. And let it be known that the Talmud too always presented both views. At least.

"U'v'shofar gadol yitakah, v'kol d'ma'mah daka yishamah." The great shofar is sounded, and a still small voice is heard. Our interpretations and opinions differ, and they come out as a re-sounding cacophony; and we must listen ever so carefully to hear that still small voice of truth that emanates from each of us.

Let's resolve this year to be more sensitive -- to minks, whales, and Orthodox Jews; to native Americans and native corn. Let's try to be more sensitive to everything that lives -- for that is what our tradition requires of us. Not because it is trendy, not because it is politically correct, but because it is right and good.

Let's try to be more sensitive; and let's never be afraid to disagree with the majority, even when it means admitting ambivalence. Let's be proud of our ambivalence. Knowing that we are human, let's not tear one another apart over every misstatement or misstep. This new year, let's just try to be menschen -- ... Did I say menschen? I meant **mynschen**. In 5752, let's do our best to be **spiritually** correct.