

Rabbi Beth H Klafter
Rosh HaShana Day 1 5778
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One Voice Rising Up

A tourist stops an Israeli on Ben Yehuda Street in Tel Aviv. The tourist asks, “Excuse me, can you please tell me the time?” “I’m sorry,” says the Israeli, “I don’t have a watch.” “You don’t have a watch? How do you know what time it is?” “During the day if I want to know what time it is, I just ask someone.” “But what do you do at night,” asks the tourist, “When you are home alone?” “Oh, that’s not a problem. I have a shofar.” “A shofar? How do you tell the time with a shofar?” “That’s simple,” explains the Israeli, “If I wake up in the middle of the night, I open my window and I blow the shofar as loud as I can. A neighbor will always shout back, ‘Idiot! You’re blowing a shofar! Don’t you know it’s 3am.’”

We have heard the sounding of the shofar on this sacred day, do we know what time it is?

I heard a new radio commercial many times last spring:

In 15 feet, turn left.
Recalculating.
Go straight to a steady job.
Recalculating.
Stay single until you’re 34.
Recalculating.
Become vegan and run a marathon.
Recalculating.
Recalculating.

When I heard this car commercial, I thought I had found a sermon topic – only four more to go.

I began to reflect on the concept of ‘recalculating’ our ‘inner GPS systems.’ When life hasn’t unfolded the way we planned or dreamt, how do we recalculate? I pondered. I began with Sheryl Sandberg’s book, Option B. After the sudden death of her husband, she and her children needed a new life plan, because their Plan A was no longer an option.

Recalculating.
Recalculating.

But then I started to realize -- I had better start recalculating the plan I had for this sermon.

North Korea. Russia. Barcelona. London
The Transgender community. Immigrants. DACA and Dreamers.
Recalculating.
Healthcare. Voting Rights. Planned Parenthood.
Climate Change. Hurricane Harvey. An earthquake in Mexico. Hurricane Irma.
Recalculating.

Racism. Charlottesville. Anti-semitism. Yesterday's news.
Recalculating.
Recalculating.

The car commercial ends with the words, "Find your all new [Jeep] compass." I, too, had to stop to find my compass and my sermon topics for these high holidays.

As I noted last night, this is the fifth year that I am honored and humbled by the responsibility of preaching on the High Holidays. I admitted that the number five is daunting when it means that I deliver five sermons each high holiday season. On the other hand, this affords me the opportunity to share different thoughts and diverse perspectives during these days. This morning's message, then, is one among several others this season.

As the new Jewish year begins, many of us are feeling that the world is spinning off its axis. We are searching for the compass to lead us to what T. S. Eliot called, "the Still Point of the Turning World." I visualize that "the Still Point of the Turning World" is at the mountaintop of Sinai; the place where the Torah was first revealed. For me, it is Torah that continues to reveal itself for each generation. For me, it is the Torah I read through the lens of Reform Judaism in particular.

I was raised as an 'observant Reform Jew' which sounds like an oxymoron to some. Observant and Reform. We had a family Shabbat dinner every Friday night with a white tablecloth and the 'good dishes.' We went to services regularly. My mother volunteered in the religious school office and my father even taught 6th grade there too. Judaism, Jewish life and Reform Jewish values, course through my veins, my mind and my psyche, through my heart. I learned from parents and from my community; I learned, from the stirring words of my rabbi, Jerome Davidson in Great Neck, that to be a Reform Jew is to hear the voice of the prophets in our heads; to be a Reform Jew is to be part of a legacy of 'speaking truth to power.'

It is the truth of tomorrow's Torah portion in Genesis, describing the creation of the world: "*The Talmud teaches that God created us all from Adam so that no human being could ever say, 'my lineage is greater than yours.'*" It is the truth of the Holiness Code we will read on Yom Kippur afternoon: "*The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love them as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*" (Lev.19:34) It is the truth articulated by Rabbi David Saperstein, a powerful presence in Washington, former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. He wrote: "*The core of our insight as Reform Jews is that... the thread of social justice is so authentically woven into the many-colored fabric we call Judaism that if you seek to pull that thread out, the entire fabric unravels; the Judaism that results is distorted [and] rendered aimless.*"

I recognize and respect that there are rabbis who only preach about what they consider to be 'religious topics.' They don't speak of politics, national or global issues. There are worshippers who may prefer to hear only spiritual messages of comfort on these Days of Awe, seeking a 'sanctuary,' as it were, from the constant blare of the news. There are religious schools which

may focus primarily on chanting prayers and blessings, placing less emphasis on teaching students to engage in Tikkun Olam, repairing our community and our world.

My understanding of Judaism is that all of these have a place in a synagogue. A story is told of Rav Yehuda. When presented with blueprints for a new school, the architect wanted to construct it without windows. The architect explained how that design fit into the landscape outside beautifully. Rav rejected the plans, “It is the students, not the building, which must fit into the environment. The place of Torah study is not meant to be a place where students are isolated from the outside world.” Rav Yehuda insisted, “It may be a refuge, but one that retains constant awareness of the world.”

A refuge and an awareness of the world outside.

In response to the question, “Does politics belong on the pulpit?” the president of the URJ, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, replied: *“The Judaism that I believe in does not limit Torah lessons to the [letters on] parchment.... The Judaism that I live compels me to use those lessons to understand the most urgent challenges we face. And since the beginning of the enlightenment, rabbis have felt compelled to use the institution of the sermon to bear prophetic witness to pressing societal and communal challenges,”* concludes Rabbi Jacobs.

I, too, feel compelled to bear witness to our Torah and to the world – as it spins on its axis.

In May, Robert Jones, of the Public Religion Research Institute, wrote an article entitled, “The Collapse of American Identity” in the NY Times. He cites that the profoundness of [what he called] the American experiment was that is aspired to create, ‘a home out of vagabonds and a nation out of exiles’ united by commonly held beliefs. *“Recent survey data provides troubling evidence that... Americans of (all different) political parties sense the unraveling of a broadly shared consensus of American identity,”* Jones concludes.

The challenges that we are facing in 2017 America feel different than other moments in our history at a most fundamental level. Many are feeling that we are trekking in unchartered territories as a nation. I agree with David Brooks in the NY Times when he refers to the ‘moral vacuum’ in Washington today.

This extraordinary time has led to extraordinary responses among the leaders of the American Jewish community, at this high holiday season. Some of you may have seen the ad in this past Sunday’s Newsday. It is signed by individuals representing over fifty congregations and institutions, rabbis, cantors and Jewish leaders from across Long Island, spanning movements of Judaism, including Cantor Halpern and me. Included are the words of George Washington, written to the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island in 1790, “The government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.” The full-page ad calls upon the current administration to embrace the moral vision of our first president.

Another unprecedented response to the state of our nation came about in the days immediately following Charlottesville. Rabbis of the Reform movement, my friends and colleagues, decided to compose a shared message for the High Holidays, harnessing the power of our many, varied voices. The result is a piece we have called, “One Voice 5778,” crafted by several rabbis with insights and input from others. Among the rabbis have chosen to bring this same message to our *bemas* on Rosh HaShana or on Yom Kippur are young rabbis and veterans. We are in large, urban congregations and in small, isolated towns. These same sentiments will be heard in neighboring synagogues and as far away as California.

Today we have heard the sounding of the shofar – do we know what time it is?

For me, it is time to join in this chorus, the message of “**One Voice 5778**.”

The Talmud teaches, “If you see wrongdoing by a member of your household and you do not protest – you are held accountable. And so it is in relation to the members of your city. And so it is in relation to the world.” As Jews we are held accountable in ever-widening circles of responsibility to rebuke transgressors within our homes, in our country, in our world. One medieval commentator (the Meiri) teaches we must voice hard truths even to those with great power, for “the whole people are punished for the sins of the king, if they do not protest the king’s actions to him.”

*Today as I speak words of protest, I am joining my Reform rabbinic colleagues across the nation in fulfillment of our sacred obligation. We will not be silent. We, like the prophets before us, draw from the deepest wisdom of our tradition to deliver a stern warning against complacency and an impassioned call for action. We call on you to rise up and say in thousands of ways, every day, as proud Jews and proud Americans: We cannot dehumanize, degrade and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation. Every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, woman, man and child is beloved of God and precious in the Holy One’s sight. We, the people, all the people, are created *b’tzelem elohim*, in the image of the Divine. All people are worthy of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Rosh Hashanah is Yom Teru’ah, the Day of Sounding the Shofar, whose piercing tones sound an alarm; they express our fears and compel us to respond with a resounding call for justice.*

T’kiah. The Sound of Certainty:

As rabbis we are, from sea to shining sea, speaking to our congregations in every accent of America to declare in unison: acts of hatred, anti-

Semitism, intimidation and divisiveness will not be tolerated in these United States. We stand upon the shoulders of the sages, poets and rabbis in every generation who fought for freedom. We speak in memory of every Jew and in memory of all people who tragically and senselessly lost their lives at the hands of evil oppressors. We call on our political leaders; progressives and conservatives alike, to rigorously uphold the values brilliantly articulated in the founding documents of our country, that all [men] people are created equal. We call on every elected leader to responsibly represent our country's history and advance its noble visions of tolerance. On this first day of the New Year we are "Proclaiming liberty throughout all the land." [Lev 25:10].

T'ruah. The Sound of Brokenness:

Something crumbled inside us when we watched the beautiful streets of Charlottesville filled with hate-spewing marchers. Locally the wound reopens when swastikas are found on a Long Island high school, when synagogue windows are shattered in Queens. How much more vandalism, how many clashes, how much more hatred will we witness? We must not accept or become inured to some warped version of "normal," of racist and anti-Semitic acts or rallies popping in and out of breaking news cycles. Let us never grow numb to the brokenness. Let our pain fuel our vows to respond – with peaceful protests, and with public calls for healing, by building alliances and by speaking in unison with other minorities and faith communities. Neither silence nor complacency nor waiting anxiously and fearfully for the next wounding event is an option. Not for us. Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, possessed a rare understanding of immeasurable brokenness. His unforgettable words sound a warning to us today, "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." May we never be neutral, never silent in the face of threats or of discrimination toward any one. As the Psalmist said, "Let us be healers of the broken [hearted] and binders of their wounds." (Psalm 147:3)

Shvarim. The Sound of Urgency:

The events of these simmering recent weeks and months are a wake-up call to our Jewish community. Anti-Semitism and any form of racism are not acceptable. Not in our towns, not in our country. The shout of the white supremacists and Nazi sympathizers is clear: "We will not let the Jews replace us," they chanted. Their fiery torches illuminated another truth, one we learn and forget only to learn again this day: if one minority group's rights are threatened, we are all threatened. As Martin Luther King, Jr. taught us, "We are all tied together in a single garment of

destiny,” whether we are the least powerful person or the most powerful person in our world.

Tkiah Gdolah: The Endless Pursuit of Justice:

Tzedek tzedek tirdof the Torah admonishes: “Justice, justice you shall pursue, so that you may live and inherit the land which I, God, give to you.” Our sacred text reminds us that for a community to inherit its place in the world, thoughtful leaders at every level must be dedicated to equality and to unity. Every community relies on passionate and engaged citizens; it relies on you to be insistent advocates for tolerance and enduring kindness among the diverse peoples of our nation. To pursue justice is to create a society that protects and inspires every citizen. Let us be relentless, tireless builders of that society in our cities and in our country -- in this New Year.

There is no more time for recalculating: The Shofar has been sounded: The time is now.