

The Whale in the Room

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Yom Kippur Morning Worship² ~ Saturday, September 30, 2017

Congregation Shir Shalom of Westchester and Fairfield Counties

Ridgefield, Connecticut

We read this afternoon that our Prophet Jonah was sent by God to agitate the people of Nineveh. Jonah fled instead and ended up in the belly of a giant fish, eventually convincing the people of Nineveh to repent and change their evil ways.

Jonah's "whale of a tale" is part of a prophetic motif repeated throughout our Bible: the Israelites stray, God punishes, a prophet comes along to warn people, people change their ways, order is restored.

And Jonah becomes angry because he knows the people of Nineveh will soon return to their evil ways. He can only do so much to change hearts and heal a broken world.

There are days when I feel like Jonah, especially when I see so much anger in our divided nation. Like Jonah, I tried to flee from my responsibility and avoid the "whale in the room." I offered to trade jobs with Cantor Debbie, I even asked God to postpone Yom Kippur while I struggled to find words that could cut through the anger and fear that have taken hold of our nation, anger and fear that prevent civil conversations among strangers and politicians and pundits, anger and fear that even prevent civil conversations between family members.

From the pulpit, I see people start to squirm when the name of our President, Donald Trump, is said aloud. Some squirm with feelings of disgust and anger. You would like to drown out his name like Haman on Purim. The supporters of our President squirm too, anticipating that I may be critical of the President. I can imagine that our President's supporters are also tired and angry; you may even be feeling misunderstood, unjustly labeled as racist. It seems that one of the only things that supporters and detractors of our President share is a sense of fear and loathing and anger.

God listened as Jonah vented and responded: "ההיטב חרה לך—*Habeiteiv charah lach*—Is it good for you to be angry?" Rabbi Edward Feinstein translates the Hebrew: "Has hate displaced the good in you?"³

¹ I am grateful to work with a fantastic editor, Aron Hirt-Manheimer, who was supportive and immensely helpful in the revision process. I must also thank my wonderful wife, Ashley Heller, for her input and tireless support. In addition to my own experiences and suggestions from Aron, I drew a lot of inspiration from *Speaking Truth in Love: Strategies for Prophetic Preaching*. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale. In: "Reflections: A Magazine of Theological and Ethical Inquiry from Yale Divinity School." "The Future of the Prophetic Voice Edition." 2006.

² This text reflects the sermon as it was delivered at the 11:30AM Service. A slightly different (lengthier) version was delivered at the 9AM service. Between worship services the text was revised: shortened and emphasis slightly shifted. The previous draft focused more on LGBTQ issues (and, especially, transgender rights). This text emphasizes more that LGBTQ and transgender rights are one of many causes for concern.

And I cannot help but wonder: Is it good for **us** to be angry? Has anger or hatred displaced the good in **us**?

The divisions within our country, our community and our families are significant but not insurmountable. We can overcome that which divides us by engaging in civil discourse, by seeking truth together,⁴ and by focusing on our sacred mission, as Jews, to engage in acts of *Tikkun Olam*, acts that help to repair our broken world. If we cannot see beyond our anger and our emotions, our world, our communities, and our families will remain broken.

In the first quarter of 2017, there was an 86% increase in antisemitic incidents over the first quarter of 2016. In the past year, incidents involving antisemitism at primary and secondary schools have more than doubled. There were nearly as many incidents of antisemitism in the first three months of 2017 as there were in all of 2015. The Anti-Defamation League warns: “Children absorb messages from their parents and the media, and bring them into their schools and playgrounds...the next generation [may be] internalizing messages of intolerance and bigotry...”⁵

Ridgefield and Lewisboro and all our neighboring communities have not been spared the impact of antisemitic symbols, even as incidents in this area appear to be random and inspired by ignorance.

Whether such threats are against Jews, people of color, or immigrants, the Torah demands we cannot stand by idly.⁶ Yelling at officials and school administrators, even pointing fingers of blame at President Trump or his supporters is, ultimately, an idle, ineffectual endeavor.

Following the protests in Charlottesville this summer I shared⁷ Elie Wiesel’s words as he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize. A survivor of the most unimaginable horrors, the Nazi camps, Wiesel said:

“I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented...”⁸

As Jews we have experienced suffering met with silence. We cannot be silent in the presence of suffering and humiliation, for (as we will read from the Torah this afternoon) we too suffered and were strangers in the land of Egypt.⁹ We cannot let anger displace our commitment to do good.

Last week Ridgefield’s First Selectman, Rudy Marconi, wrote to the wider community:

“A number of anti-Semitic and bigoted statements have been expressed in various locations in our Town recently. Having lived in Ridgefield most of my life, I can say this is not a reflection of our community. It

³ *A Yom Kippur Carol: Yom Kippur 5770-2009*. Rabbi Edward Feinstein. Published in *Mishkan haNefesh, Yom Kippur Edition*. Central Conference of American Rabbis Press. 2015. Page 349.

⁴ The Erev Yom Kippur sermon focused on the Jewish value of Truth and encouraged congregants to become *Rodfei Emet*—Pursuers of Truth.

⁵ ADL Audit: US Anti-Semitic Incidents Surged in 2016-17. http://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/Anti-Semitic%20Audit%20Print_vf2.pdf According to the audit, there were 114 antisemitic incidents reported in 2015. 235 incidents were reported in 2016. 95 incidents were reported to the ADL in the first quarter of 2017.

⁶ Leviticus 19:16 “...You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor...”

⁷ <http://mailchi.mp/ourshirshalom/charlottesville>

⁸ Elie Wiesel. Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech. December 10, 1986.

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-acceptance_en.html

⁹ Leviticus 19:34

disappoints me to have to address issues like this, and I ask that all of our community come together to with our Jewish families and neighbors a happy and healthy new year...”

Where there was silence, Mr. Marconi has spoken. His non-neutral words bring comfort and support; we are not suffering alone in silence. He has found good in the midst of his frustration.

Trying to find good in the midst of my anger, a few weeks ago I travelled to Washington, DC for the Thousand Ministers March for Justice. It was the 54th anniversary of the March on Washington when Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. shared his historic *Dream*. Nearly three thousand clergy -- Christians, Buddhists, and Sikhs; Hindus, Muslims, and Jews -- gathered at the MLK memorial, in the shadows of the Lincoln Memorial. Fifty-four years ago, before the first March on Washington, protesters of color were forced to ride overnight on buses, unable to stop and use whites-only bathrooms or purchase cups of coffee. I was inspired to witness that while we may have a long way to go, we have come a long way too.

We gathered, united by a common transcendent principle (found in our afternoon Torah reading): **ואהבת לרעך כמוך** *V'ahavta l'reiacha kamocha*—Love your neighbor as yourself.¹⁰ We marched past the White House, stopping at the closed doors of the Department of Justice, chanting the words of Psalm 118 – “פתחו לי שערי צדק” *Pitchu li sha'arei tzedek*—Open up for me the gates of justice.”¹¹ And we stood together, arm in arm, singing “We Shall Overcome.”

There are many challenges in our world that existed long before Donald Trump was elected President, challenges next to which we have stood idly and not done enough: immigrant rights and refugee resettlement, criminal justice reform, gender pay equity, global poverty, education reform, to name a few. While each is worthy of a sermon, I want to take a moment to highlight inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, and Transgender students, that we should love as we love ourselves.

We are upset by symbols of antisemitism in our schools. And, according to a 2011 report, 95% of transgender students feel unsafe in their school. 75% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual cisgender youth feel unsafe, and “90% of trans[gender] students report verbal harassment and approximately half report physical harassment.”¹² Again, that report was from 2011, long before Donald Trump was elected President.

Had President Trump banned Jews from serving in the military or rescinded Federal protections for Jewish students, we would have been outraged. When asked, “When will there be justice?” the Greek philosopher Thucydides responded: “There will be justice when those who are not injured are as outraged as those who are.”¹³ That is the meaning of *V'ahavta l'reiacha kamocha* -- love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Following an outbreak of antisemitism in the early 1980s, Leonard Fein, ז"ל, a writer and social justice activist, urged that we should not allow antisemitism to distract us from our sacred mission as Jews:

¹⁰ Leviticus 19:18

¹¹ My colleague, Rabbi Hannah Goldstein, spoke beautifully from the dais about the imagery of standing before the gates/doors of the Department of Justice, during the March. While I cannot remember her words well enough to quote, she certainly deserves credit for emphasizing the imagery.

¹² “I Want Them To Know Who They Are Is OK”: Supporting Trans and Gender Non-Conforming Students; A Guide for Primary and Secondary School Educators. Raimi Marx. 2011. Page 15.

¹³ I read a version of this Thucydides quotation in a few columns by Leonard Fein, ז"ל, including *A Drum Major for Righteous Indignation*. Leonard Fein. Forward Magazine. July 17, 2008.

engaging in *Tikkun Olam*, the repair of our world. If we allow anger and hate to replace the good in us, we give our tormentors and oppressors an even greater victory.¹⁴

Fein also made clear that being Jewish extends beyond the prayers we read and sing and the texts we study. Being here today is important, and we need to care as much about wearing a *kippah* as we do about clothing the naked. Feeding our children matzah on Passover is as Jewish as feeding children who are dying of starvation. Welcoming refugees fleeing persecution with love is as Jewish as welcoming Shabbat with joy. We cannot truly pray with fervor without also expressing indignation in the face of injustice.¹⁵ We cannot be silent and we cannot let anger displace the good in us.

On dark days—and there will be many ahead—let us be mindful of what God wants of us – to be active, not idle, in loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Let us take to heart the words of Torah we just read this morning. Remember, it was all of Israel and the strangers in their midst who stood before God, from the water drawers to the woodchoppers, Trump supporters and detractors. God said, “This day I call heaven and earth to witness regarding you...Choose life—so that you and your children may live...”

Help us, O God, to choose life, to set aside our differences, seek truth together, and find ways we can repair our world.

Let us not flee from our obligation to repair the world, let us not be paralyzed in a “narrow space,”¹⁶ like the belly of a whale, but let us remember God’s words to Jonah and not permit our anger or hatred displace goodness and love.

Let us take heart in the belief that “The arc of history bends towards justice” -- and that we SHALL overcome, one day.

Amen and Amen.

¹⁴ *The Curse of Anti-Semitism*. Leonard Fein. Moment Magazine. Page 60

¹⁵ Paraphrasing Rabbi David Saperstein who paraphrased Leonard Fein in Introduction to *Where Justice Dwells: A Hands-On Guide to Doing Social Justice in Your Jewish Community*. Rabbi Jill Jacobs. Jewish Lights Publishing. 2011. Page xi.

¹⁶ This is a reference to my friend, colleague, and former rabbinical co-leader, Rabbi Marcus Burstein, z”l, who died following the conclusion of Yom Kippur 5777/2016 (one year ago). In what ended up being his final sermon to the congregation during Rosh Hashanah of 5776/2015, Rabbi Burstein spoke about “Narrow Places.”