

A Time to Keep Silent and a Time to Speak

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One day, a rabbi received a letter without a return address. It contained a single sheet of paper, on which was written just one word, in large, bold capital letters, followed by an exclamation point. It said: JERK! At services on Shabbat, the rabbi announced, "I have received numerous letters from people who forgot to sign their name. This week, however, I received a letter from someone who signed his name but forgot to write a letter."

The story illustrates that no rabbi is universally liked, admired or agreed with. And like all imperfect people, we rabbis sometimes inadvertently give offense by things we say, write, or do, or things we fail to say, write or do. For any act or omission, word or deed, since last Yom Kippur that hurt or offended you, and for which I have not already apologized, I do so now, unreservedly, and I ask your forgiveness.

In the case of the apocryphal letter, we have no idea what provoked it, but one possibility is a sermon to which the writer took vehement exception. As I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah, a colleague suggested that on my last High Holy Days before retirement I deliver the sermons I had been afraid I'd be fired for. It was a provocative idea, but also a poignant one, since more than a few rabbis

are, in fact, afraid they'd lose their job if they were to say what they really think on a controversial topic.

Some of you may be disappointed and others relieved that I won't be taking up that suggestion, if for no other reason than: I can't. I've never feared for my position due to a potential sermon. It's not that I'm brave or foolhardy; it's just that I have always been accorded "freedom of the pulpit," the time-honored tradition that clergy may speak their mind and conscience freely without jeopardizing their tenure. Thankfully, the lay leaders with and for whom I have worked, and the vast majority of congregants I have led and served, have recognized that a rabbi's role is not just to comfort the afflicted, but to afflict the comfortable. And as a famous 19th century Lithuanian rabbi, Israel Salanter, observed, in the gendered language of his day, "A rabbi whose community does not disagree with him is not really a rabbi, and a rabbi who fears his community is not really a man."

But like all privileges, freedom of the pulpit is one that even rabbis secure in their positions must exercise responsibly and respectfully, something I have endeavored to do. And while I've never censored myself for fear of unemployment, there are things I have been hesitant to say for other reasons. In this penultimate sermon, I'm going to pull the curtain back a bit and share considerations that have guided what I've said, haven't said, or said only obliquely or infrequently during our 17 years together. In doing so, my aim is to leave you with some key principles that I hope you'll take to heart and that I

believe will stand the test of time.

This is my 50th High Holy Day sermon at The Temple. When I revisited the prior ones recently, I found I had forgotten most of them, and if *I* did, surely you did, too. A few, I recalled due to the extraordinary circumstances in which they were delivered, none more than my first Rosh Hashanah sermon here in 2001, just a week after 9/11, and my *yizkor* sermon in 2006, the year I became an orphan and a grandfather. Even then, I mainly remembered the emotions I felt, rather than the words I spoke.

Some of the sermons were parochial, arguing for the inherent value of religion in general, or encouraging you to be serious Jews and proud, committed Reform Jews. Others addressed personal or existential issues, like the challenge of mortality, the pursuit of happiness, overcoming the loneliness inherent in the human condition, the power of both memory and forgetting, and finding the strength to remain hopeful and optimistic in the midst of a crisis. I called illness, failure and bereavement “Life’s Greatest Teachers,” grappled with the question of life after death, and described my relationship with “The God I Don’t Believe In.”

I also found myself returning regularly, sometimes reluctantly, to the topic of Israel. When I was reluctant, it was because I hadn’t intended to speak about Israel that year, but something dangerous or awful was happening and I felt it necessary. I have made no secret of my devotion to the Jewish State. The Camp David Accords were signed in 1978, my first year of rabbinic school in Jerusalem.

In the optimistic afterglow, a peaceful future for Israel seemed not just a cherished hope, but a realistic prospect. I did not anticipate then what lay ahead for Israel: malignant, metastatic terrorism; recurring attacks by non-state actors funded by rogue regimes; relentless efforts to isolate, denigrate, and delegitimize Israel, to defame it as an apartheid state, deny its right to defend its citizens, and subject it to BDS - boycotts, divestment, and sanctions - that expressly or implicitly negate its right to exist; and so-called "anti-Zionism," anti-Semitism by another name that disallows to the Jewish People alone, among all humanity, the right to a national identity. In the face of all that, I saw and see it as my duty to defend and advocate for Israel, to use my pulpit, pen and voice to speak in its behalf, rebut its detractors, and emphasize its virtues - especially those that are little known or overlooked - and to insist that the Jewish State is infinitely more than the sum of its conflicts.

That is not to say that I find nothing about Israel to criticize. There are aspects of Israel I find problematic, upsetting, and at times, demoralizing: certain actions and statements by its government or prime minister, like reneging on the agreement for an egalitarian prayer space in the Western Wall plaza; excesses of its settlement policy, which I do *not* believe is illegal, but is sometimes unwise and self-defeating; the ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate with its repugnant rabbinic black list, its near-monopoly over such fundamental areas as marriage and conversion, and its recurrent attempts to make that monopoly absolute; state-sanctioned and financed discrimination against Reform and

Conservative Judaism; the relative neglect of Israel's Arab sector, and more. But as renowned author, Amos Oz, wrote, "I love Israel even when I can't stand it." There has never been a time I couldn't stand Israel, far from it, but I understand what he means. When I have a quarrel with Israel, it is a lover's quarrel.

I agree with Rabbi David Stern, my successor as CCAR President, that "Israel has an indisputable right to exist. And it has an indisputable obligation to exist ethically." So, as I've acknowledged from this *bima* before, there are numerous things about Israeli law and society that *must* change. Why have I not said so more often, more explicitly, or more recently? I know some congregants wish I had, because a few have told me so. And surely, devotion and criticism can co-exist. But to offer an analogy, after 48 years of marriage, I am certain of Susie's love, despite her well-justified assessments of my errors and imperfections. But it is one thing for her to share those with me privately, as I assure you she does. It would be something else entirely if she did so in public.

Israel needs many things, but one thing it does not need is more public criticism, which is ubiquitous. Some is legitimate, but lacks context. Much of it, as I said, is exaggerated, unfair, uninformed, plainly wrong or downright hateful. The biblical book of Ecclesiastes tells us, "To everything there is a season and a time for every experience under heaven...a time to be silent and a time to speak." It can be hard for a rabbi to know which time it is. I exercise discretion in what criticism of Israel I express, and where, when, how and to whom I do so. For one thing, rabbis have precious few opportunities to address the entire

congregation on matters of paramount concern. I have long felt it self-indulgent to squander them criticizing Israel, even when it may be deserved. And frankly, I feared that no matter how many positives I would express, some would only hear or unduly emphasize the negative. If that were to happen with this sermon, it would break my heart.

Above all, my criticisms, when I have them, are overwhelmed by the pride and awe I feel at what is admirable, exemplary, and even miraculous about the Jewish State. As Jews, we have a sacred, enduring, and unbreakable connection with the land, people and State of Israel, forged by Divine promise and irrevocable covenant, millennia of prayers and dreams, settlement, survival and sacrifice, history and destiny, international law and treaty, lawful decree, and the rightful exercise of self-defense. Israel is ours to nurture and support, to contribute to and draw from its strength, admire its achievements, and work for its betterment. Come what may, it is our privilege and obligation to experience, share, and help sustain the miracle that is Israel, our People's ancient and eternal homeland, now and forever.

Yet while Israel is our homeland, the United States is our home, one I love passionately, but also not uncritically. Over the years, I have critiqued the Middle East policies of both Republican and Democratic administrations. From time to time, I addressed significant social issues, including marriage and gender equality, global warming, capital punishment, and disability awareness, but I largely avoided topics with overt political implications. Last year was an

exception. On Yom Kippur, I spoke of "America's Original Sin," the persistent scourge of racism and the problem of white privilege in American life. On Rosh Hashanah, I discussed "The Character of Leadership," articulating Jewish tradition's principal qualities of authentic leaders.

Reactions were strongly, but not unanimously positive; that seemed to depend largely on whether the respondents' political views accorded with what they inferred, rightly or wrongly, to be my own. To paraphrase Rabbi Michael Signer z"l, a *great* sermon is filled with keen observation, incisive analysis, and profound insight. A *brilliant* sermon is filled with keen observation, incisive analysis, and profound insight that you agree with. Whether last year's sermons were great, brilliant or neither, I remain proud of them and I stand by them. I am even more confident of their validity and significance today than I was when I delivered them.

That said, I appreciate every thoughtful response to my sermons and messages, whether supportive or critical, and the opportunity to exchange views with those who disagree with me and for us get to know each other better. Among both those who praised my sermon on leadership and those who did not, some clearly missed my unequivocal statement that the criteria I set out apply to *everyone* who aspires to leadership in public and private life, including rabbis and, indeed, to us all. Perhaps I should have made that point more forcefully, so I repeat it now.

One congregant whom I respect tremendously expressed a viewpoint that

I'm sure some share - that he's disgusted by America's toxic politics, but he wants his synagogue to be a refuge from them, not a forum to discuss them. I get that, and I believe that worshippers of all political affiliations, viewpoints and opinions deserve spiritually renewing High Holy Days. On these sacred occasions, we should strive to *atone*, to be *at one*, not at odds, with each other, or, at least, not to leave services more divided than we were when we arrived.

For that reason, I agree that sermons amenable to partisan interpretation should be rare, which is why I gave that kind so seldom. However, even if it were desirable to avoid politically charged issues entirely, which I do not believe, it would be impossible, because for Jewish tradition, in whose name rabbis are ordained to speak, religion and politics are not separate categories; they intersect. Consider, for example, today's Haftarah portion from Isaiah, "Cry with full throat, without restraint; Raise your voice like a ram's horn! Declare to My people their transgressions....They ask Me..., 'Why, when we fasted, did You not see? When we starved our bodies, [why] 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!...No, this is the fast I desire:...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 them, and not to ignore your own kin..."

Israel's ancient prophets did not worry about job security. They weren't trying to be popular, beloved, hired or rehired. On the contrary, they were

usually persecuted by the rulers they offended and reviled by the privileged, complacent Jews they chastised in God's name. They spoke truth to power and sought to motivate just and compassionate conduct, and to persuade their co-religionists to accept a share of responsibility for repairing the broken, unredeemed world they inhabited. Our great prophets of old were not politicians, but the political implications of their prophecies were potent and, for many, profoundly disturbing. Nevertheless, they persisted.

In 1936, Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver z"l addressed the ordination class of Hebrew Union College, telling his new rabbinic colleagues, "One of the great gifts which an historic religion like ours brings to mankind is that it carries in its deep channels, steadily, safely and undeviatingly, certain timeless, quintessential truths, regardless of the roiling and foaming of the waters on the surface..." In turbulent times, Rabbi Silver declared, "the rabbi who wishes to serve [people] in their deepest needs will stand fast by the classic traditions of [our] faith...the things that are unchangeable and perdurable in it, the values which are from everlasting to everlasting." A rabbi's role, Rabbi Silver told the young ordainees, is to "preach, teach, and proclaim...these ancient truths with an earnestness and vigor, with an eagerness and exaltation as if they were new revelations just come down to [humanity], calculated to shake the very foundations of the world."

Judaism does not promulgate a political platform. It sets forth an all-encompassing worldview combining essential values and ultimate goals. And

where these are concerned, it is clear and emphatic. Jewish tradition is not neutral as between compassion and cruelty, justice and injustice, truth and falsehood, generosity and selfishness, fairness and discrimination, respect and derogation, empathy and apathy, humility and arrogance, decency and indecency, knowledge and ignorance, civility and incivility, courtesy and coarseness, kindness and meanness, inclusion and exclusion, tolerance and bigotry, love and hate.

Jewish values are not mere preferences or suggestions; they are ethical imperatives, and they are concretized in Judaism's highest goals: pursuing justice; promoting equality; alleviating hunger, poverty and homelessness; establishing workplace equity; caring for the sick, elderly, and vulnerable; accommodating persons with disabilities; enforcing standards of business integrity; safeguarding the environment; eradicating persecution, oppression, and the denial of human dignity; and acting lovingly toward neighbors and strangers alike, each of whom, like you and I, was created in the image of God.

While the enduring truths of Judaism transcend civic politics, which are time-bound, they form a powerful conceptual framework that clarifies our obligations as engaged citizens. That framework involves both latitude and limits. Thus, for example, it doesn't tell us whether to be Democrats, Republicans or Independents, conservatives, moderates or liberals. But whichever of those we may be, it forbids condoning bigotry or acquiescing in injustice or, God forbid, inciting or exploiting them.

Likewise, Jewish tradition understands that reasonable people can differ on how to realize its preeminent goals, but it expects us to listen respectfully to others' views, acknowledge that none of us has a monopoly on truth, wisdom or virtue, admit we may be wrong, and recognize that when we point a finger of blame or accusation at another, three fingers point back at us. As Rabbi Stern reminds us, "our high horses too often stumble, and our soapboxes stand on shaky ground." In this hyper-polarized period, that is wise counsel. Yet here again, our tradition provides both latitude and limits. Though we are free to disagree over implementation, the goals themselves are neither optional nor multiple choice; they are immutable.

We are commanded to keep them in mind, pursue them, and "teach them faithfully to our children, to speak of them at home and away, when we lie down and when we rise up." *Kedoshim tih'yu*, the Torah tells us, "You shall be holy, for I, Your eternal God, am holy." We are to love God, *b'chol levav'cha, uv'chol nafsh'cha* – with our whole heart and soul, but also *v'chol me'odecha* – with all our might, which is to say, with our deeds and our means, with all we are. And where another's suffering is concerned, Torah commands, "You must not remain indifferent." To these imperatives, our ancestors responded, "*Na'aseh v'nishma. We will do and we will heed.*" So must we.

But while Judaism forbids us to be apathetic, values-neutral, or goal-averse, we know in our heart of hearts that, sometimes, we are. The physical fast of Yom Kippur is a means to an end. It seeks to induce what our tradition

calls *inui nefesh*, "an afflicted soul." So, on this Sabbath of Sabbaths, this day of days, let's dig down deep and face courageously the awkward truth: that more often than we care to admit, or even realize, you and I are among the comfortable, privileged, and complacent ones whom Yom Kippur seeks to discomfit and shame, then to encourage, cleanse, renew, and change, for better and for good.

Beloved congregants, rabbis come and go, as do we all. God willing, the Jewish People, the United States, the State of Israel, and the Jewish faith will endure. In teaching us to live by its values and work toward its goals, our tradition consoles and challenges us with Rabbi Tarphon's words: "You are not required to complete the work, but you are forbidden to desist from it." It assures us that our decisions and choices truly make a difference, that what we do matters, that love is stronger than death, evil and hatred can be defeated, and goodness lasts. I pray that, in fidelity to those who bequeathed it to us, , you and I and all who come after will live, enliven, and transmit that precious heritage with fullness of heart, soul, and might, now and always.

Keyn y'hi l'ratzon. May this be God's will, and our own.