

## **Sure It's Complicated**

### **Yom Kippur Morning 5774**

A colleague writes her sermons in June and then prays that nothing new or extraordinary, or tragic for that matter, happens in the world forcing her to revise her erudite words or even discard a well-written sermon entirely. It is good therefore that I write my sermons much later. So now at this last possible moment I wish to offer a few words about contemporary events and what Judaism can offer us as guidance.

I have one contention and several illustrations. I believe that as Jews we are called to improve the world, that we cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering and pain of others. While our first concern is to the pain of fellow Jews our Jewish heart must be stirred by concern for all human beings. All are created in God's image and all are deserving of life. It is therefore un-Jewish to use as an excuse for inaction, "It is complicated." The world is indeed complicated, but too often complication and ambiguity are held up as reasons why we cannot get involvement. Involvement and concern are our Jewish responses to the world at large. The world's troubles can be exhausting but the throwing up of our hands and exclaiming, "They will never change. It can never be fixed." are the most un-Jewish of responses. We do not believe that the future is already written, that everything is fated. It is this sin, the sin of "We can do nothing" that we must banish from our souls on this Yom Kippur. The world can indeed be changed. History can be written by our own hands. So that is my contention at the outset. And now the illustrations. First an example that does not involve life and death.

On Rosh Hodesh Av, the day that begins the intense mourning period for the destruction of the Temple, I accompanied my wife and 300 other women, as well as some 50 men, and joined Women of the Wall for their monthly prayer group. Women of the Wall is a 25 year old organization with one simple purpose. It advocates that women should be allowed to pray at the Western Wall. They argue that they should be allowed to read from the Torah scroll and wear tallisim. They have been met with opposition and until recently prevented from doing so by Israeli authorities. Over the years women were even arrested for praying there at the Wall. Now Israel's courts have ruled that the State cannot prevent women from praying. So the ultra-Orthodox have stepped in to prevent them from observing Rosh Hodesh. We were called Nazis. A few eggs were thrown. My friend's daughters were spit on. We continued to pray. We sang, "Ozi v'zimrat yah—my strength and songs to God will be my salvation." (Psalm 118:14)

The morning began, ironically enough, at Liberty Bell Park where the police insisted we gather before traveling to the Wall. There we boarded buses for the short drive to the Dung Gate. We were accompanied by police cars and then escorted by officers through the entrance to the Western Wall plaza. Haredi, ultra-Orthodox, leaders had bused girls to the Wall ahead of our arrival and filled the women's section with 5,000 young Haredi girls. The police determined that it would be impossible for Women of the Wall to pray

at the Kotel and so they only allowed the group into an area just inside the entrance. We stood in a group, enclosed by police and their barricades, and surrounded by thousands of screaming Haredi men on one side and women on the other. They shouted at our prayers. They blew whistles to drown out our singing of Hatikvah.

I never imagined that in the sovereign Jewish state my wife and I would require police protection to pray as we have done all our lives. I felt as if we were the young African American students struggling to integrate a high school in the American South of 1957. The tragic circumstance of the Wall is that it has become a Haredi synagogue. Too often the State has colluded with Haredi leaders to enforce their mode of Jewish prayer on others and more significantly to legislate their form of observance in all public places.

Natan Sharansky recently argued that the Kotel, the Western Wall, belongs to the entire Jewish people. All Jews should therefore be allowed to pray at this national treasure as they deem fit. His proposal of building a third area at the Wall for pluralistic prayer would be a welcome change. For years the Wall that our prayers imagine unifies the Jewish nation instead divides my family. When I first went there I could not stand with my mom. When I next touched its stones I could not stand with my wife Susie, and then some years later not with my daughter Shira. My son Ari and I stood on one side. Susie and Shira stood on the other.

On that day this summer I decided that I could take the tentative steps to change what must be changed. I dream of praying at this ancient site, standing alongside Susie, Shira and my mom. Why should this be such a fanciful vision? I could have said, "Israeli politics is too complicated. The ultra-Orthodox parties have too much control. They will never cede even partial control of the Kotel." Instead I chose to try. I chose to pray as I would want my children and grandchildren to be able to pray at the Western Wall. As the beautiful, and intelligent, Rabbi Moskowitz (for our new members I am not talking about myself but my wife) said, "Our prayerbooks were our banners, our psalms our protest songs." Sure it's complicated. Inaction, ambivalence, indifference, are not possible choices for the Jewish conscience.

So now, as promised, my thoughts on Syria and the crisis there. You may be thinking, that's complicated. So was every other historical crisis, and atrocity. In 1944, when the atrocities of the Holocaust were becoming clear, Jewish leaders requested that US forces at least bomb the railroad tracks leading into Auschwitz. Here is the Assistant Secretary of the War Department's response. It is signed by John J. McCloy.

After study it became apparent that such an operation could be executed only by the diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations elsewhere and would in any case be of such doubtful efficacy that it would not warrant the use of our resources. There has been considerable opinion to the effect that such an effort, even if practicable, might provoke even more vindictive action by the Germans. (More vindictive

than gas chambers and crematoria!?) The War Department fully appreciates the humanitarian motives which promoted the suggested operation, but for the reasons stated above it has not been felt that it can or should be undertaken...

I don't know how we look back on our own history and not cry in pain over the massacres in Syria. I cannot say as Alon Pinkas, an Israeli diplomat said, "Let them bleed and hemorrhage to death." (NYT, September 5, 2013) And Abraham chastised God when God revealed the intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham said, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city..." (Genesis 18) True it is a civil war and not a methodical genocide. Nonetheless over 100,000 have been killed. Over 2 million are now refugees. Sure there are bad guys on both sides. Make no mistake some of the rebels are worse than Assad. They only lack the means and resources to realize their murderous ideology. Still we cannot turn a blind eye. I refuse to remain a mere witness. The use of chemical weapons calls us to action. The danger that these weapons can fall into the hands of Hezbollah or that their use can embolden Iran are real, but the moral justification remains our obligation to relieve suffering. We cannot speak of atrocities only when it is our people who are the victims. We have a moral obligation to fight the use of weapons of mass destruction because their singular purpose is to massacre. I am not of course a military strategist. I cannot know if cruise missiles or a clandestine SEAL operation would be more effective. I can only say what is our moral right and even more importantly our moral duty. At this point our main goal should be to prevent further atrocities and massacres. Punishment and justice comes last. First is the relief of suffering. Sometimes, when evil exists, our only recourse is military means.

I am not naïve to the challenges. Will we empower Islamist forces? Will we strengthen Hezbollah? Will we endanger Israel? Will Jewish leaders be blamed when such a military venture leads to unintended consequences now that AIPAC is lobbying Congress for action? Let me be forthright. Military action always leads to some unforeseen, and unfortunate, results. I have often wondered about the term surgical strike. If surgery were so precise why must one sign a lengthy release form before going under anesthesia? (That is said with all due respect to my many friends who are surgeons.) There is no such thing. There is nothing so neat and tidy when war is involved. Still this cannot be held up as an excuse for inaction. We must never allow the knowledge of the difficulties and challenges to color the moral calculus of good and evil.

President Obama is ambivalent about American military power. Some of his ambivalence is well founded. We have failed in our dream of bringing democratic governments to the Arab Middle East. The Arab Spring is no spring. It offers few buds of rebirth. It appears more like a long, cold winter is approaching. There are limits to our diplomacy. Recent history reminds us that there are limits to our intelligence about WMD. There are limits to what we can achieve by military means. Our army must first and foremost protect our country and its citizens. Secondly we have a moral responsibility to help those suffering and being slaughtered. Regarding the most recent

developments about the Russian proposal to turn over Syria's chemical and biological weapons to international inspectors we must support this. I don't trust Putin or Assad but we must give this proposal a window of time to test whether or not it can succeed. The Torah reminds us that before waging war we must first offer the city terms of peace. "When you approach a town to attack it, you shall offer it shalom." (Deuteronomy 21) That's Torah! We must not remain ambivalent. We cannot just throw our hands up in the air and exclaim, "It's complicated."

Again, I turn to Leon Wieseltier, who offers a lucid and incisive commentary on this crisis and who has been writing of our obligation to get involved well before we saw evidence of the use of chemical weapons. He writes: "The idealization of ambivalence is a version of the search for perfection, for a wholly clean conscience, when no such human immaculateness exists and not even just causes are perfect causes. Evil is certainly unambivalent. So it is good to be warned of all the impurities of power; but we are forgetting that power, our power, may be used for good and high purposes." (*TNR*, August 27, 2013) Rabbi Tarfon said millennia ago: "Lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor. V'lo ata ben chorin l'hibatel mimena. It is not your duty to complete the work. But neither are you free to desist from it."

Let us learn from history. A few short weeks ago we marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March on Washington. On that day in the struggle for civil rights Martin Luther King offered the famous words, "I have a dream." No less significant, although certainly not as well remembered is the man who spoke immediately before Dr. King. That was Rabbi Joachim Prinz. His words are worth recalling at this juncture in history. He said:

I speak to you as an American Jew.... As Jews we bring to this great demonstration... a two-fold experience – one of the spirit and one of our history. In the realm of the spirit, our fathers taught us thousands of years ago that when God created man, he created him as everybody's neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity. From our Jewish historic experience of three and a half thousand years we say: Our ancient history began with slavery and the yearning for freedom..... When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence. A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder. America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent....

He was of course speaking about a different problem and crisis, but his words haunt me. How many times do I sit at my kitchen table, eating my breakfast and reading the

newspapers about the massacres in Syria, or the starving children in West Africa, or the growing poverty among immigrants to our own country? And then I get up from my table as if the day is no different than any other. The letter from the War Department rings in my ears. "The operation would in any case be of such doubtful efficacy that it would not warrant the use of our resources." We are again in danger of becoming onlookers, mere witnesses to history, when our calling and sacred duty is so much more. There were voices then, as there are voices now, who call every problem complicated, every crisis unsolvable. That is not our legacy. We are a people of action.

During that same struggle 16 rabbis were arrested on June 14, 1964 in St. Augustine, FL. They had gathered there at the request of Dr. King to come and pray with the black ministers and parishioners. I am proud to say that one of the many rabbis who officiated at Susie's and my wedding (there was nearly a minyan of rabbis) was Rabbi Murray Saltzman z"l. They were arrested for eating with Blacks. Blacks and whites were forbidden from even sitting together. That night they sat in jail and wrote together these words:

We came to St. Augustine mainly because we could not stay away.... We came because we could not stand quietly by our brother's blood. We had done that too many times before. We have been vocal in our exhortation of others but the 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.

The greatest danger is the loss of faith in our capacity to act. You bet it was complicated. They obviously risked being jailed. Who knows what their synagogues' presidents said? We can never say there is nothing that can be done. When there is injustice we speak out. Where there is suffering we take action. That is our legacy! That is our Jewish obligation.

That is as well the lesson of Zionism and the State of Israel. Despite its imperfections, it is the realization of the dream that changing history is possible, that the fate of the world is in our hands. Sure it was complicated building a democratic nation in the inhospitable Arab Middle East. Sure many voices counseled against taking matters into our own hands and settling the land. And yes, it is going to be terribly complicated to forge a peace with the Palestinians but again that cannot be an excuse. To say "We have no partner. We can do nothing." is a betrayal of our heritage.

I conclude with a story that begins a short drive from the Western Wall. It is the story of Tel Aviv, a city that was only a 100 years ago a beach and is now a cosmopolitan,

crowded city of 400,000. In the greater Tel Aviv metropolitan area there are some 3 million people.

Susie and I were there for our last Shabbat in Israel to celebrate our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. (Aww!) We attended Shabbat Services at the port, where a new liberal synagogue meets: Beit Tefila Yisraeli. It is the JCB of Israel. Ok, perhaps I am exaggerating, but there is wonderful music and singing there. As the sun is setting over the Mediterranean the congregation sings Eli Eli, Hannah Senesh's beautiful poem and song, "My God, my God, I pray that these things never end: the sand and the sea, the rush of the waters, the crash of the heavens, the prayer of man." Imagine this scene. There were hundreds of Israelis, and a lot of American rabbis, sitting in plastic chairs facing not towards Jerusalem but to the West, to the sea. There were nearly ten musicians sitting in front of us to accompany our praying and three more to lead the singing. The entire service was as well signed for the hearing impaired. I was captivated by the signing. He moved his hands to the beat of the drums. He signed the rhythm of the music. His hands appeared to caress the waves behind him.

I do not know if he volunteered or was paid. I imagine some might have even said it would be too complicated to sign rhythm and beat. "There's too much music." they perhaps said. Some might have argued that it was not worth the effort to convey music to those who can only feel its presence but not hear its songs. That was not their response. It is complicated has never been our answer.

I refuse to give this statement voice and countenance no matter what problem I am tackling, no matter what struggle I am facing. If that had been our view, we would not have rebuilt a nation, and carved out a new and different future in the State of Israel. If that had been our view we would not have advanced the rights of African Americans in this nation. If that had been our view so many of our relatives would have not begged and borrowed their way to this country and built a comfortable life for their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. If that remains our view we will not create the possibilities for peace between Israel and its Palestinian neighbors. If that remains our view the slaughter will continue, the world will become more dangerous, and we will remain but onlookers. If that remains our view our most holiest of places will remain the province of a few and not the rightful heritage of an entire people.

The world is indeed in our hands. And we are forbidden from making excuses. We have heard these excuses throughout our long history of suffering and oppression. It is complicated must never again be uttered from our lips. Lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor. V'lo ata ben chorin l'hibatel mimena. It is not your duty to complete the work. But neither are you free to desist from it."

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