

## Speaking of Justice...

Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker, Mount Zion Temple  
September 17, 2012 / I Tishrei 5773

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This day is gift to you and me. This day, a new year is born, and we have these quiet moments in our sanctuary, alone together, to think about our lives. To think about our world, its complexity and challenges and its beauty and opportunities. Rabbi Art Green teaches that this is the perfect moment to focus on what is essential and universal – our breath.

We breathe in life, literally. Every breath is life. Every breath in, is realizing our gratitude for life. And as we breathe out, we think about our connection to the people beside us, to the world around us. We are made in the divine image; we are obliged to return the favor.

The purpose of religion, according to Rabbi Green, is to help us move from gratitude to gift.

From your gratitude of breath, what will you give to others?

This is not a simple question. There are myriad limitations to our desire to do good. Some are excuses; some are real stumbling blocks. Even when we succeed, we struggle to sustain our efforts.

Part of the answer is in knowing yourself, knowing what in your life has profoundly shaped you. What it is that you are grateful for and what will thus motivate you to do good.

*When we know our story, clearly grounded in our values, we can sustain our actions to better this world.*

There is I'm afraid urgency to the question. Who is given to us as a model on this Rosh Hashanah? It is not Adam the first human, but Abraham. In our Torah reading, we skip over the early stories of Genesis and face Abraham's test of faith.

Isaac is bound on the altar. Abraham's knife is raised. This text is so profoundly troubling, but as a metaphor it can instruct. It is a moment when all that is goodness in the world is about to be sacrificed and we realize our culpability. The knife is in the air, and we realize in some way our hands are on it.

In a democracy, argued Rabbi AJ Heschel, some are guilty, but all are responsible.

Remember that this is the same Abraham who, chapters before, stood up to God in arguably the genesis of justice, for the lives of innocent people caught in the chaos of the corrupt cities of Sodom and Gemorah. Abraham argues that even if there are ten innocent, righteous people, they will make a difference. He understands what Margaret Mead in more recent years taught: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Abraham knew that ten people could face an entire city and change it, but alas there were not even ten.

Was he discouraged? Did he despair? The Torah does not answer. We are left to imagine Abraham's emotions as he later stands on the mountain with the knife in his hand.

What does it take to shake us out of our inertia? Out of our complex, busy lives to care about the injustices in our community, not out of guilt but from our responsibility, and knowing that a small group can make a difference?

Why does the angel have to say Abraham's name two times, "Abraham, Abraham" before he notices where he is, what is happening?

What will it take for us to say, *hineini*, I am here? I am present and ready.

*When we know our story, clearly grounded in our values, we can sustain our actions to better this world.*

This will be a year of *tzedek*, a year of justice at Mount Zion. We want to help each one of us connect to our own stories, our life experiences or our family's, and the values that anchor our world view. Nothing will help our society more in the long run, than having more and more of us clearly articulate what drives us to work for a better world. This will fundamentally change the conversation in the public square, in our wider community, to a conversation of our responsibilities to one another.

*When we know our story, clearly grounded in our values, we can sustain our actions to better this world.*

Unless something touches us emotionally, we will not hold onto it for long. As Harvard Professor Marshall Ganz tells it, "That's the power of story. Stories communicate our values through the language of the heart, our emotions. And it is what we feel – our hopes, our cares, our obligations – not simply what we know that can inspire us with the courage to act."

There is a reason that our Torah begins not with a list of values or laws, but with narratives that grip, stories of intrigue.

Three such foundational stories animate our Jewish passion for justice: 1) being freed from slavery, 2) being formed in the image of God, and 3) being part of a creation that purposefully was left imperfect so that we may partner to repair it.

These are our sacred master stories. One of these more than another may speak to you. Perhaps one touches some part of your own life experience.

**The first one, *yitziat Mitzrayim***, leaving Egypt, is recited most often.

It is about freedom and dignity and respect.  
We were strangers in a strange land.  
We were freed.  
Now we will not oppress the stranger.

Rabbi Joachim Prinz put it this way in his 1963 speech at the March on Washington for civil rights: ". . . 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. During the Middle Ages my people lived for a thousand years in the ghettos of Europe. Our modern history begins with a proclamation of emancipation. It is for these reasons that it is not merely sympathy and compassion for the black people of America that motivates us. It is, above all and beyond all such sympathies and emotions, a sense of complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience."

**The second narrative, *b'tzelem Elohim***, in the image of God, is more existential.

God formed the first human being out of *adamah*, the earth, and after blowing in the breath of life, human was called, *adam*, made in the image of God.

According to Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, this implies that every human being is “endowed by their Creator with three (3) intrinsic dignities: infinite value, equality and uniqueness. He further claims, “All of society –economics, politics, culture must be organized to respect and uphold these fundamental dignities”<sup>1</sup>

But there is a caution to this powerful but potentially misunderstood concept. Novelist Anne Lamott warns: “You can safely assume that you’ve created God in your own image - not you in God’s image - when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”<sup>2</sup>

I would argue this is the root of extremism such as we are witnessing now across the Middle East. These acts impugn **not** God, **not** the concept of *b’tzelem elohim*, but rather those who abuse religion and God by their hateful actions.

**The third sacred, master story is *tikkun olam*, repair of the world.**

This is the most mystical of the three. The first two *yitziat mitzrayim* and *b’tzelem Elohim*, *Leaving Egypt* and *Being Created in the Image of God*, demand us to look at each person differently. *Tikkun Olam* requires us look at everything differently.

The story of *tikkun olam* begins when God created the world. God was everything, so God had to breathe in, to withdraw God’s self to create a space for the world, which was in darkness. God said, “Let there be light” and sent divine light into this space within material vessels. But God’s light proved too powerful for the vessels which broke apart, sending shards forth in all directions, lodging in all parts of creation. Today in our life whenever a person helps another or does a *mitzvah*, a sacred obligation, he or she redeems part of this light, returning it to God. This act of freeing the divine sparks is *tikkun olam*, repair of the world. It is how we partner with God to mend the world, and in mystical understanding, heal the Divine realm as well.

*Tikkun olam* as a value inspires us to large-scale change. It leads us to statements such as wanting to end poverty, reverse global warming, or reform public school education. These aspirations are ones Rabbi Tarfon had in mind when he said, “It is not upon you to finish the task, nor are you free to desist from it.” (Pirke Avot 2:21.)

Our three sacred master stories of partnering with God in repairing the world, of seeing each person as being made in God’s image, and of knowing the feelings of the stranger having ourselves been strangers, all inspire justice.

*When we know our story, clearly grounded in our values, we can sustain our actions to better this world.*

The purpose of religion is more than justice, but religion without justice is trivial. Just as Judaism was the first to bring to the world the idea of one God, so too did that one God demand that we serve God by dealing justly with one another. The voice of the prophets was absolutely clear.

If we are grounded in our stories like the prophets of old, how would we respond to injustices today in our society?

How would we respond to the fact that the number of youth who are homeless in Minnesota has increased 96% since the beginning of the recession, not only in the cities but in the suburbs as well. This is the only statistic I am going to give in this sermon: 96% more youth are facing

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<sup>1</sup> Greenberg, Rabbi Irving Living in the Image of God Jason Aronson New Jersey, Jerusalem 1998 p.31

<sup>2</sup>“*Traveling Mercies*” in *Bird by Bird*, by Anne Lamott. p. 22. She attributes this quote to “my priest friend Tom”.

homelessness, twice as many kids and teens sleeping in shelters or crowding with different families or friends day to day since when the recession began, here in Minnesota.<sup>3</sup>

What would be the response of our prophets? Isaiah thundered over 2500 years ago (1:15-17):

When you stretch out your hands,  
I will avert My eyes from you;  
however much you pray,  
I will not listen,  
while your hands are filled with blood!  
Wash yourselves; cleanse yourselves,  
Put your evil doings away from My sight.  
Cease to do evil,  
Learn to do good,  
Seek justice; relieve the oppressed.  
Uphold the orphan's rights;

Take up the widow's cause. (Translation by Rabbi Chaim Stern, The Haftarah Commentary, URJ Press 1996)

Isaiah cuts through complexity to get to the core issue: are you helping the most vulnerable in our society or not?

This election year has shown how tormented our society is by economic challenges. We see injustices and inequalities. Still, we are sometimes not sure what is true. Will government programs help the widow, the orphan, and the stranger? Will they go bankrupt before doing enough good? Who is helping our society more, unions or governments?

Does assistance act as a disincentive for people pulling themselves up by the bootstraps?

These are not simple questions. The fact that they are debates shows why, on policy issues, our Mount Zion justice efforts will never be partisan. No party owns all the truth, the best ideas. Our tzedek efforts will not be partisan, but they will be political.

Politics is not inherently dirty or unholy. A passionate voice for justice, Reverend Dr. William Sloane Coffin once said: "There is a real temptation to think that an issue is less spiritual for being more political, to believe that religion is above politics, that the sanctuary is too sacred a place for the grit and grime of political battle. But if you believe religion is above politics, you are, in actuality, for the status quo – a very political position. And were God the god of the status quo, then the [synagogue] would have no prophetic role, serving the state mainly as a kind of ambulance service."<sup>4</sup>

Let there be no mistake: ours will not be a partisan endeavor. But if we believe that Judaism urges us to create a more equitable society – as do the vast majority of Jews in every poll—then we must speak out for the most vulnerable in our society. Otherwise, what kind of religious community are we? We will take a stand as we did on the Marriage Amendment, and say that we are all created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of God. Let no law discriminate against one person over another, one couple over another.

When we last had an entire year focused on *tzedek* at Mount Zion, it was the year 2000.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Star Tribune* blog on September 12, 2012 "Suburbs, state top Mpls for growth in homeless students" by Steve Brandt. [Star Tribune blog](#). The quoted statistic reflects changes from 2006-07 until today. See p. 27 of this report: [Minneapolis Report](#).

<sup>4</sup> William Sloane Coffin, "The Politics of Compassion," as quoted in *Just Preaching* (2006) by André Resner.

Our congregation was in a different place, let alone our country. Then our goals were to create many opportunities to volunteer. At the High Holy Days that year, everyone was given a card to fill out with over a dozen places to choose from.

This year volunteering is not our emphasis, but please know that there are so many places your efforts are needed, from Neighborhood House to Jeremiah Program to Jewish Community Action, to our blood drive and emergency homeless shelter. Ways to get involved are always in our bulletin and website.

Our emphasis this year is on changing the tone and character of the conversations in our society. We want to help you tell your story, to connect life experiences to Jewish values, to be compelling not only to others, but to yourself.

On Yom Kippur afternoon, we will hear three congregants tell their stories; I will teach the afternoon study session on actually writing down your story, ways to relate life experiences to the Jewish values I have spoken about today, *yitziat mitzrayim*, leaving Egypt, *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, and *tikkun olam*, repair of the world; and as we pass the Torah scrolls through the congregation in the late afternoon of Yom Kippur, we will give you a chance to speak with the people standing around you.

Beyond Yom Kippur, we invite you to find at least one person in the congregation you would like to know better and go out for coffee or tea or a beer. Ask each other: What drives you to work for a better world? Which Jewish values speak to you?

What life experiences or family stories have shaped your view?

*When we know a person's story, clearly grounded in values, that person becomes a friend and together we can sustain our actions to better this world.*

On November 11<sup>th</sup>, a Sunday morning, we will invite everyone who wants to be part of the growing conversation to hear what others are talking about and to think where our conversation and actions may go.

The pursuit of justice has been part of Judaism since Abraham's arguing with God over innocent lives in Sodom and Gemorah. St. Paul born Al Vorspan, past Vice President of our Reform Movement puts it this way: "The desire to build a better world has sunk deep into the chromosomes, the bones, the blood, the memory and soul of the Jews. The prophetic tradition exalts this world and invests humankind with a spark of God....As long as that tradition still resonates in Jewish hearts, the Jewish people will still strive to be not only a barometer of civilization but also a symbol of divine discontent and the messenger of a brighter tomorrow."

May we be grateful for every breath within us.

May we resist inertia and discover our own story and speak it.

May we learn the Jewish values that can speak to us and to others.

Then, and only then, will we bring a conversation of *tzedek* with prophetic clarity to our state that so desperately needs rational, religious voices.

May these be voices be ours.

*Ken yihi ratzon*, may this be God's will.