

### Indignation

Picture this: I'm running around the track near my house one morning a couple of months back. Never having been terribly athletic, I am very conscious of the fact that the field is not my natural turf, the way it seems to be for so many others who are out there at that hour. It probably won't surprise you to learn that a synagogue sanctuary or a library feels much more like home to me. But I'm trying to live a healthy, balanced, lifestyle and regular exercise is what the doctor ordered. So I try to work out when I can. That day, typically, I'm huffing and puffing, sweating bullets, and fairly miserable. The consolation is that I have headphones on as I run, and I'm listening to a podcast, a way to make the time go faster till my workout is done at last. It's working pretty well, because the podcast is quite interesting, a Hebrew lecture on the history of Mizrahi Israeli feminism, if memory serves. Yeah, that's the kind of nerdy thing the rabbi listens to in his spare time! I'm an Israeli wannabe anyway, so anytime I can learn something new about Israel, a slice of the history and culture with which I am unfamiliar, and work on my modern Hebrew at the same time, I feel good. Most importantly, I'm concentrating on something other than on how miserable I feel.

Suddenly a woman comes up and motions to me that she wants to say something. She looks vaguely familiar. I know she's not a member of my shul. I don't know her name; she's someone I've seen around. It's not uncommon -- I see lots of people I know around this neighbourhood. In the little pond of downtown Jewish Toronto, I suppose I'm a big, or at least a medium sized fish -- so a lot of people know who I am, and that's fine -- I like people and I'm a friendly person. But there are unwritten rules of etiquette that virtually everyone observes, at least in my experience. One is that if you see someone in the middle of a workout, and especially if they have headphones on, unless there's a fire or some other emergency, you generally don't interrupt. Waving or smiling permitted, gestures of commiseration from other sufferers welcome, but that's it. Well, this lady somehow didn't get the memo. She signals to me that she has something to say, and being a polite person, I stop, lift my earphones a little bit, hoping for a short interchange, like maybe she would ask me what time Narayever services start on Friday night, and I would answer 6 pm, and then we would both go back to what we were doing. But that was not to be. "Rabbi," she says, "what do you think of Bibi Netanyahu?"

Well it so happens that I have quite a few thoughts about Netanyahu and quite a bit to say about him. And I usually enjoy engaging with people about Israeli politics because I'm grateful when people care so deeply. But that moment, in that circumstance, is not a time when I want to talk about Bibi, or anyone else for that matter. I just want to finish my run and my podcast, go home, hit the shower, get dressed, and start my busy day.

In one sense, I am lucky because it quickly becomes apparent that this lady doesn't actually want to hear what *I* think about Bibi. She wants to tell me what *she* thinks about Bibi, and it turns out that she takes a pretty dim view of the man and his policies for a whole variety of reasons. In fact, her feelings aren't all that different from my own (that probably won't surprise those of you who know me). But in that moment, I am not getting any kick out of having my politics affirmed by this near-stranger. Instead, I find myself getting more and more annoyed. Surely, if I'm standing there feebly jogging in place and holding my earphones out, she will get the hint? Alas, no. So there we are --she venting all of her indignation about Netanyahu, and me feeling, but not expressing, my indignation about her. Finally she runs out of steam, but by then I run out of time and inclination for more of a run anyway and I slink home.

I open my remarks this evening with this pretty trivial incident because it prompted me to think about the whole subject of indignation this year in preparation for these Yamim Noraim. Expressions of indignation have become an increasingly central feature of discourse in our culture and society. Since we often put the word "righteous" before the word "indignation", our language gives us a clue that there is something religious about the feeling of, and articulation of, indignation. Indeed expressions of righteous indignation have a long pedigree in Jewish tradition, and in the wider culture as well. In the Yom Kippur Isaiah haftarah which we'll hear tomorrow morning, the prophet thunders, קרא בגרון אל תחשך – "Cry with full throat, without restraint, raise your voice like a ram's horn, declare to My people their transgression, to the House of Jacob their sin" (58:1). Long before Isaiah, Moses had reproved the people, calling them "children unworthy of God, that crooked perverse generation...Do you thus requite the Lord, O dull and witless people? Is not He the Father who created you, fashioned you and made you endure?" (Deut. 32:5-6). In Greek mythology, Nemesis was the goddess of indignation against, and retribution for, evil deeds and undeserved good fortune. She was a personification of the resentment aroused in men by those who committed crimes with apparent impunity, or who had inordinate good fortune.

But while indignation has been a feature of human culture for a very long time, something feels magnified about it at this particular moment. While

I'm sure there are many factors that play a role in this complex phenomenon, the internet and social media and 24 hour cable TV certainly have an important part of the story, stoking and feeding our tendency to project out our negative feelings about the actions of others, dividing the world between us and them and finding lots of fault in *them*. Perhaps the strongest expression of indignation that I've heard in the last while came from Greta Thunberg, in her speech at the UN. I'm sure many of you heard her thunder her critique of world leaders regarding climate change (I believe Lawrence referenced it earlier in his Yom Kippur tzedakah appeal because it is so powerful): "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!"

Now that's indignation-- Passionate. Angry. Scolding. There is certainly a time and a place for indignation, and maybe the UN General Assembly, falling in the midst of the climate crisis, was one of them. I certainly do hope Greta Thunberg's words get through. In regard to climate, and so many other things that are going on in the world, there's plenty to be indignant about. But my claim this Yom Kippur is that there is an unhealthy amount of indignation being expressed in the world today, and there's a cost to conducting our debates about the issues of the day, and about the things that offend us in our own personal lives, by means of expressions of indignation. My challenge to us all this Yom Kippur is that we reflect consciously on our own expressions of indignation, and consider whether Yom Kippur can provide us with an important spiritual corrective to this tendency.

Note that indignation is always about the actions of others. We may sometimes feel badly about our own actions, even shame, but we would not typically use the word indignation to refer to our feelings about our own misdeeds. Resentment, umbrage, disgruntlement, pique, affront – whatever word we want to use for this phenomenon, it is always about what other people are doing wrong, in our eyes. Ways in which they are being unjust, or unfair, or dishonest. We in Canada are now in the midst of a federal election campaign, so we are certainly hearing lots of expressions of indignation by politicians about the views and actions (past and present) of other politicians. Our brothers and sisters in Israel just went through two election campaigns, similarly filled with indignation being hurled back and forth by the different parties (and of course it's not over yet, as the process of forming a government drags on and may yet lead to a third indignation-filled election). And we can only brace ourselves for the indignation we're going to hear from south of the border as impeachment gathers steam and once the

2020 election there gets going in earnest, given the invective that has been hurled already -- both by those who oppose and those who support the president. That may be the only way to conduct politics, I don't know. I like to think not, but the system does mandate that candidates have to distinguish themselves from their rivals, and demonstrate to voters why they are the superior choice -- a goal which lends itself to expressions of indignation. But regardless of whether we think there is another way in which the work of politics can be done, I maintain that indignation is precisely the opposite of the spiritual work that we are supposed to be undertaking on Yom Kippur.

That is not necessarily an obvious conclusion; as I've noted, indignation has long roots in Judaism, so we might think it would have a place on Judaism's holiest day. But I'm going to make the case that especially now, with so much indignation in the air, in the physical world and the digital world, we need to make Yom Kippur an indignation-free zone.

That's not easy for me, because there is much that I do feel indignant about, and you're a captive audience. Whether it's regarding certain things that are going on in Canada, or in Ontario specifically, or in my home country the US, or in the Jewish homeland the State of Israel, there are a hundred sermons I could give about things that are going on over which I feel in my heart great indignation. Nothing would be more satisfying than to share those thoughts with you. Many of you (though not all) might share my opinion on these issues of the day. If so, and if I articulated my indignation about any of these issues in an interesting and clever and passionate way, you would get that same good, tingly, feeling that you get when you read your favourite op-ed columnist, or listen to your favourite talking head on TV, affirming what you already believe in a particularly strong and articulate way. Right on, we say. As Azar Nafisi wrote in her wonderful memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (which I read during my recent sabbatical), which is about a feminist teaching western literature to girls in Iran following the Islamic revolution, "I went on and on, and as I continued, I became more righteous in my indignation. It was the sort of anger one gets high on, the kind one takes home to show off to family and friends."

We might think that if anyone has a right to be indignant, it would be a feminist woman enduring all the humiliations and the corruption of post-revolution Iran. Yet the kind of anger one gets high on, as Nafisi puts it, the kind we show off -- to the extent that that's what's going on when we express righteous indignation, that should be a warning sign to us to pay attention. Yom Kippur comes as an antidote to this kind of indignation, because on Yom Kippur, our work is not to focus on the wrongdoing of others, but on our own, and that task rarely gives us a high. אשמנו בגדנו חטאנו

– we are guilty, we have betrayed, we have sinned. The symbolic beating of our chest during the confessional was described by one of my teachers as a kind of Jewish defibrillator, getting our hearts going again if they've gone numb. Yom Kippur is reminding us that whatever we think about what is going on out there in the wider world, we need to open our hearts and courageously take responsibility for our own actions. If done seriously, that kind of honest reflection might not give us the high that hearing a sermon or reading an op-ed expressing great indignation gives us -- but it is the key spiritual work of this day, and I believe it is an important corrective for us to consider for the rest of the year as well.

What is so bad about expressing indignation, when the world is objectively so messed up?

I see three main ways in which expressions of indignation are antithetical to Yom Kippur, and should largely be reined in.

First, in our indignation mode, we often look out at all these bad people in the world doing these terrible things that we disapprove of, and we compare ourselves to them, concluding that we're not as bad as they are. We set the ethical bar wherever we want, in order to ensure that we ourselves are above it, we are good; those other people out there are below the bar, they are bad. We confuse being the lesser of evils with being virtuous, though we are far from being virtuous even if others are worse.<sup>1</sup> Our expressions of indignation imply that because we recognize that bad for what it is, and say so, our recognition means that we are not a part of it. And if we're not a part of that bad thing, that means we must be good. After all, we're not separating mothers and babies in Texas; we're not preventing African refugees in Tel Aviv from gaining legal status; we're not cutting down trees in Brazil; we're not murdering journalists in Istanbul or mosque worshippers in New Zealand or putting mercury in the water supply of the first nations people at Grassy Narrows. In fact, we are indignant about all of the above. But Yom Kippur teaches that our expressions of indignation and disapproval might make us feel good, but they don't necessarily make us good. There is much that each one of us still has to work on, and it is ethically and spiritually lazy to justify ourselves by saying that we're not as bad as so-and-so. In God's eyes, each of us has our own חשבון הנפש, our own individual accounting to do at this time of year; we don't get a free pass by virtue of being the lesser of evils.

Second problem with indignation: Expressions of indignation often lead us to categorize *people* as good or bad rather than actions or policies as being

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Bruni, NYT, May 24, 2015.

good or bad. But on Yom Kippur at least, we need to acknowledge that many people who promote ideas and policies that we might consider bad are actually very good, kind, generous people. That might include people of different political persuasions than our own, and it also might include people of different religious persuasions. Some of us may not like for example Evangelical Christianity or Ultra-Orthodox Judaism for all kinds of very legitimate reasons of principle and values, but our righteous indignation is often lessened when we actually encounter people who are part of these communities, and we find out they are real people, with faults and foibles and also great strengths (as those of us who this year got into the TV series "Shtisel" about a Haredi family in Jerusalem found out), and are not so different after all from ourselves in terms of their hopes and dreams and life challenges. And there may be things that we can learn from them. Today, on Yom Kippur, I'm asking us to think about whether all that indignation about others might be leading us to consciously or unconsciously divide the world into good people and bad people, Harry Potter and Voldemort, keeping ourselves firmly on the good side of the ledger in a way that devalues the humanity of others.

Finally, the third big problem I see with expressions of righteous indignation: they often create blind spots. We're so busy being indignant that we miss things, we avoid facts that contradict the narrative we have constructed, in order to ramp up our indignation. On the level of politics, people who are of a more progressive stripe have things they can learn from those who are more conservative, and vice versa. Now I'm not saying that everything is relative and there are no lines to be drawn. There are lines beyond which we have to stop and say, this stance is so racist, so misogynist, so anti-Semitic, so violent, whatever, that there is nothing I can learn here. My Yom Kippur challenge is to ask whether we can pause and reflect on where we draw that line, because that's a decision we make, and perhaps push it a bit further out toward the extremes, thus keeping fewer opinions in the boycott category and more opinions within the category of "I disagree with this, but this person is taking a stand of integrity and there are things that I can learn from this person, even if I don't come around to their point of view." A rhetoric of indignation really gets in the way of that kind of reflection because we're so caught up in our superiority over the other. We should stop assuming that the very act of trying to understand the appeal of other ideas necessarily justifies and elevates them<sup>2</sup> and that therefore any attempt to understand these ideas must be resisted. Most issues that face us are really complex, and no one group actually does have all the answers to, for example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or climate change, or poverty amelioration, or immigration, or the right-to-die, or the right-to-live, or any

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<sup>2</sup> Ross Douthat, NYT, Sept.4, 2019.

of 1000 other issues we are grappling with. Yes, some groups or opinions need to be put under *herem*, ostracized, but do we have to make that move as readily as we do? Can we pull back a bit in the name of a Yom Kippur-inspired humility? Can we stretch ourselves, challenge ourselves, to learn something from those we disagree with?

I'm not saying it's easy. Taking a break from our indignation might be harder than taking a break from food on this fast day. Obviously it would be nice and would make the process easier if others went through a similar process as well, letting go of some of their indignation against us. But whether or not there are people on the other side thinking this way, that's not the Yom Kippur question. The Yom Kippur question is -- where are my blind spots, whether in my political views, or in my personal relationships with family members, with friends, with the Jewish community? What facts, what perspectives, am I missing because the stance of indignation requires me to ignore or suppress anything that doesn't fit the narrative? There can be no more apt Yom Kippur questions than these. And these questions stand, regardless of what others are doing. On this day, in this place, we are superior to no one. On this day of Vidui, in this place of diverse and holy community, we confess that expressions of righteous indignation are not a worthy substitute for actually being righteous, actually doing good in the world, and we also confess that we don't have all the answers.

My remarks so far have focused on political questions, but this same stance of indignation often accompanies us in our relationships with partners or spouses, family members, friends, colleagues, community, aspects of Jewish tradition, even God. We often carry resentments about things others have done to us, decisions they've made, things that seem to us to be unfair, unjustified, just plain wrong, ways in which they have really hurt us. Where can we this Yom Kippur stretch ourselves to let go of the indignation that characterize these relationships at times, and instead bring more humility to our reflections and our interactions? As on the political front, here too, on the personal level, we likely won't be able to let go of all our anger. But the Yom Kippur move would be to stop, reflect, become aware of our indignation, and just ask ourselves the question, is this stance still necessary? Is it still worth the cost (because there is, always, a cost)? Are our expectations of these other people in our lives reasonable? Are we using our indignation against others as an excuse to avoid examining our own actions and considering our own blind spots? If so, let's summon the courage to do the work of teshuvah that we need to do, regardless of whether others seem to be doing it or not.

Jonah, in the Yom Kippur afternoon haftarah, is indignant that God would go back on His decree to destroy the people of Nineveh if they repent. Jonah

feels that God's forgiveness of the Ninevites would make him look bad, look like a false prophet. He worries more about his own image than about actually helping the people of Nineveh make teshuvah and avert their punishment. He is not able to recognize that Nineveh is not only the capital of the enemy Assyrian empire which has inflicted terrible suffering on the people of Israel, but is also composed of human beings, who merit generosity and compassion. He is indignant at the Ninevites, he is indignant at God, and he reflects little on his own actions and attitudes. Perhaps the rabbis chose this story as a Yom Kippur reading to encourage us do some of that reflection ourselves.

Just prior to Kol Nidre, we recite a passage which is easy to miss because we're usually so caught up with the music and with the drama of Kol Nidre. Here's what it says: ... בשיבה של מעלה בשיבה של מטה...

– “By the authority of the court on high and by the authority of the court below, with divine consent and with the consent of the congregation, we grant permission to pray with those who have transgressed.” Now it's not certain what the historical context of this declaration is, but it is now a fixed part of our Yom Kippur liturgy. We may perceive all kinds of people to be עבריינים, transgressors. People we read about in the news, and people with whom we share a bed. People in our congregation, people in our neighbourhood, people from our Jewish past who lived in a very different time and place than our own, and whose very different attitudes get reflected in some of the traditions we have inherited that might offend us. People in the Jewish present either here or in Israel whose actions don't reflect the kind of Judaism we believe in. Depending on the kind of year we've had, we may even feel indignation against God -- for what we or our loved ones have endured over the past year. The Yom Kippur move is עבריינים הם מותרים להתפלל עם העבריינים they're all welcome here. It doesn't mean we're saying they're not transgressors. In our eyes, they are. But the very fact that at the beginning of the holiest day of the year our tradition has us declare that their very presence does not compromise the integrity of the community, and in fact we don't just tolerate their presence, we “pray with” them -- that declaration certainly provides some measure of corrective against the stance of indignation. And of course we know that we are all, every one of us, in someone's eyes, עבריינים.

My prayer is that in 5780 we can reduce our feelings of indignation and realize that our righteous indignation isn't always so righteous. I am not advocating that we strive to eliminate the feeling of indignation altogether, I'm not proposing a Zen-like acceptance of suffering, and I'm not proposing passivity or silence in the face of evil. What I'm advocating as my Yom Kippur message this year is a very Jewish balancing act that does honour both to the demand to stand up for what we believe and speak our truth, a

la Greta Thunberg, and the demand to be as generous as we possibly can be in our judgement of others, especially those whose actions and viewpoints we profoundly disagree with, and to feel genuine humility about ourselves and our own virtue. Let's not be so confident that we can always discern the motivations and the true agenda of others. And let's remember that in addition to all the matters of principle I've been discussing, very often on a practical level, expressions of indignation -- while great for riling up those already on side -- are often less than effective in making change happen. Nobody likes to be made to feel like a "deplorable"; it's really off-putting. Can we find a way to be honest with those we disagree with or who have hurt us, without being sucked into a counter-productive stance of indignation?

In the annual cycle of weekly Torah readings, we are now at the very end of the book of Deuteronomy. It's the end of Moses' life and he knows he's not going to be crossing over the Jordan into the Promised Land. We might think that Moses has a right to be indignant. After so many decades of faithful service, not to be given a chance just to step into the Land of Israel, to walk even for one day upon its dreamed-of hills and mountains, touch its soil, breathe its air. Yet it was not to be. On the last day of his life, the prophet who expressed so much indignation against the people during his long career seems to have reached a point of acceptance, at least of his own fate. He has publicly passed the mantle of leadership to Joshua and shares his final words of warning to the people before ascending Mt. Nebo, where he will die and be buried by the very God who denied him his most fervent wish.

*Hazak ve-emetz*, Moses said to Joshua, who will have the privilege and responsibility of leading the people into the land – be strong and resolute. May we find similar strength and wisdom and grace and humility in responding to our challenges as individuals and as a society in the coming year.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah.