

**Subversive Torah:  
Caring for Our Soul & the Soul of our Country**

**Yom Kippur 5778  
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman**

Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer wrote: “In all of the years that I went to prisons visiting the prisoners in Argentina, the Bible was considered the primary subversive text, especially if it contained the original Hebrew. I could not get a Bible or a prayer book into a prison. It was considered totally subversive literature by the Argentine military”<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer of blessed memory is known by many in North America as the rabbi who revived one of the most soulful and socially active congregations in the Upper West Side in Manhattan, B'nai Jeshurun, known as BJ. For Latin American Jews however, Rabbi Meyer is much more than that. He was a student of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel z.l. and the teacher and founder of liberal progressive Judaism in Argentina and Latin America. He was the teacher of my teachers and of my father. In Argentina, Marshall became one of the few outspoken critics of the repressive Argentinean military Junta that took over in 1976. At great personal risk he became an important national voice for human rights in Argentina and when the dictatorship ended, he was the only non-Argentine appointed to the National Commission of the Investigation of the Disappeared.

Lately, I have found inspiration in his writings from the period of the dictatorship in Argentina while he was fighting for human rights. Sadly, many of his writings feel relevant today.

I find the notion of the Bible being subversive to the Argentinean military incredibly powerful. It reflects a recognition that Torah and Prayer come to teach us higher moral values, those same values that threatened the powerful dictatorships.

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<sup>1</sup>You are my witness, The living words of Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer edited by Jane Isay, page 141

We are about to read the *Haftarah* for *Yom Kippur*, a prophecy from the Book of Isaiah. The *Haftarah* begins with a call to rebuild the road, to remove any blocks, or obstacles that are in the way so that God's people can live in freedom. The prophet raises his voice, crying out, loud and clear, that religious ritual without moral action does not achieve the goals of a fast day, and concludes by reminding us that it is through Shabbat that we can get closer to the possibility of redemption.

Every year I find this reading powerful. I am in awe of the choice to read this particular chapter on *Yom Kippur*. On the day that we focus on self- reflection, through prayer and fast, we are told in no uncertain terms that we have a moral obligation to act in the world and that our fast is meaningless if we do not listen to this message.

Isaiah teaches us: feed the hungry; clothe the naked; house the homeless; heal the wounded. On *Yom Kippur* we are supposed to hear this message of responsibility for our brothers and sisters.

In the words of Rabbi Arthur Waskow: “At the heart of *Yom Kippur* is, of all things, a critique of “*Yom Kippur*” — if it is a ritual without compassion or commitment to radical change.<sup>2</sup>

Not long ago, Rabbi David Wolpe, a renowned Rabbi in Los Angeles, whose Torah teachings often inspire me, wrote an opinion piece titled: “Why I keep politics off the pulpit”<sup>3</sup> He argued that we should not connect the weekly Torah portion to the news of the week, to the politics of this country, to the politics of Israel, or for that matter to any politics. His main point was that by bringing politics to the pulpit, we create divisiveness in our communities. He ended his op-ed with the following words: “All we hear all day long is politics. Can we not come to *shul* for something different, something deeper? I want to know what my rabbi thinks of Jacob and Rachel, not of

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<sup>2</sup> <https://theshalomcenter.org/isaiah-lives-challenge-yom-kippur>

<sup>3</sup> <http://jewishjournal.com/opinion/220094/keep-politics-off-pulpit/>

Pence and Pelosi. Don't tie your Torah to this week's headlines. We are better, bigger and deeper than that".

Several Jewish leaders responded to Rabbi Wolpe. Just the titles of some responses should give you a pretty good idea of the content of the debate: **What you call politics, we call Torah**, by Rabbi Sharon Brous; **Rabbis must navigate politics and morality**, by Rabbi Noah Zvi Farkas. **A 'politics free' pulpit is an empty pulpit**, by Rabbi Rick Jacobs and **On the moral imperative of politics** by Joshua Shanes.<sup>4</sup>

As I read Rabbi Wolpe's piece, I kept hearing the teachings of Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer and those of our prophets, who called upon the people in times of moral crisis.

The prophet Amos, for example spoke against an increased disparity between the very wealthy and the very poor. His major themes are of social justice, relentlessly reminding the people that prayers and sacrifices do not make up for bad deeds:

In chapter 5 he says:

שְׁנֵאתִי מֵאֲסוֹתֵי חַגֵּיכֶם וְלֹא אֶרְיַח בְּעֵצְרֹתֵיכֶם:  
כִּי אִם-תַּעֲלוּ-לִי עֹלוֹת וּמִנְחֹתֵיכֶם לֹא אֶרְצֶה וְשָׁלֵם מְרִיאֵיכֶם לֹא אֲבִיט:  
הִסֵּר מֵעָלַי הַמּוֹן שְׂרִיר וְזָמַרְתָּ נְבִלֶיךָ לֹא אֲשָׁמַע:  
וַיִּגַּל כַּמָּיִם מִשֶּׁפֶט וַיִּצְדָּקָה כְּנַחַל אֵיתָן:

I loathe, I spurn your festivals,  
I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies.  
If you offer Me burnt offerings—or your meal offerings—  
I will not accept them;  
I will pay no heed  
To your gifts of fatlings.

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<sup>4</sup> All responses can be found following Rabbi Wolpe's op-ed  
<http://jewishjournal.com/opinion/220094/keep-politics-off-pulpit/>

Spare Me the sound of your hymns,  
And let Me not hear the music of your lutes.  
But let justice roll down like water,  
And righteousness like a mighty stream.

The *Unetane Tokef* is one of the most beloved, prominent and controversial pieces in our High Holiday Liturgy. A prayer that brings together moral challenges, fatalistic theology, the proclamation of God's holiness, a call to human responsibility and a prescription for redemption.

Every year we read this poem, and struggle with its theological implications. As I read it this year, I could not help but notice how relevant its list is to what is happening around us:

Who will live, and who will die?  
Who by the length of their days, and who before their time?  
Who by wildfire, and who by hurricane?  
Who by warfare and who by wildlife  
Who by hunger and who by thirst  
Who by earthquake and who by plague  
Who by strangling and who by stoning  
Who will rest and who will wander

And Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg adds:

“Who by repeal of their health care, and who by unjust pricing of their lifesaving medicines?”<sup>5</sup>

Paraphrasing Rabbi Ruttenberg: The questions that we ask on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are not theoretical. They have never been. But perhaps this year, we see this more than ever. We are in the middle of an overwhelming season of natural disasters; climate change is devastating our communities by fire and water, just as the

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<sup>5</sup> <http://forward.com/life/faith/383080/what-this-rosh-hashanah-liturgical-poem-means-in-trumps-america/>

administration reaffirmed its withdrawal from the Paris Accords. The Republican Party made another attempt to take away healthcare from probably around 20 million people.

Who will live? Who will die?

The final line of the *Unetaneh Tokef*, reads "*tshuva*- repentance; *tfilah*- prayer and *tzedakah* - justice can avert the severity of the decree."

*Tefilah* and *Teshuva*, - prayer and our capacity to look inward -- are the tools that help us to look into our own selves and take our minds out of the narrowness of self-interest, moving us to a life of *tzedakah*.

*Tzedakah*- which comes from the root **צדק**, means justice, manifest in a commitment to create a society in which people care for each other and take that responsibility seriously. It means to be committed to seeing the world as a mirror of the holy. To live with the hope that the world can be a better place and not to allow ourselves to fall into despair.

Our rabbis teach us that one should pray only in a house with windows<sup>6</sup>. This teaching recognizes that when we come together as a community, we must beware of disassociating our inner experience from what is going on outside the synagogue walls.

The word for synagogue in Hebrew is *Beit Haknesset*, the house of assembly. Interestingly, it is not called *Beit Tfilah* - the house of prayer or worship. Throughout history synagogues have primarily been places for people to assemble, to get together, to share their lifecycle events, to share their pains and their celebrations, a place to become a community. This is what we are trying to create here at TBZ. Not just an institution or a building called a Temple but a *Kehila kedosha*- a sacred community. A place where we can look out the windows to engage with the world. A place where through working for change in our communities and lives we ourselves are

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<sup>6</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 34B

transformed and changed in a deep way, for that is how we encounter God's presence.

I grew up under the dictatorship of Pinochet in Chile. My strongest memories as a child was that we were not allowed to speak up. Speaking up was a daring act, a dangerous one. Yet I knew that my father was doing precisely that.

Faced with the imperative to protect the lives of thousands of Chileans in the dire situation of repression following the coup of 1973, the Chilean churches quickly organized an ecumenical service to protect people in distress. This effort was attended by some Christian Churches, such as the Baptist, Methodist, and Orthodox churches and also by the Jewish community, which my father represented. Thus was born the Cooperation Committee for Peace in Chile. This Committee was the first step in the defense of human rights during the military regime. It was created through Archbishop's Decree signed by Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez on October 4, 1973, less than a month after the coup. The memory of my father's voice, raised in resistance alongside Christian clergy is one of the most fundamental building blocks of my rabbinate.

From early age, I knew that *Torah*, *Tfilah* and *Tzedakah*, were connected to daily life. Our Jewish values were what inspired us to continue the fight, and we needed to fight. It wasn't theoretical -- just a line from the liturgy or the prophets -- and it wasn't something that happened in the shul. There was no separation between my spiritual life and my moral and religious life, between the prayers we said and the actions we took.

This is why I have a hard time understanding Rabbi Wolpe's case for leaving politics outside of the Sanctuary. We might not all agree, and that is fine, and even welcome. Torah does not speak in one voice. But if we do not talk about our values, about our moral and religious obligations to care for those in need, for the poor, the widow, the stranger, the children, the immigrant, the person with special needs, the women, the

minorities, of every human being created in the image of God, then Torah is not speaking at all.

Let's talk about race, and wealth, and health care.

Let's talk about anti-semitism, on the right and on the left, about Israel, about the occupation, about BDS, about Islamophobia.

Let's talk about our fears.

Let's talk about immigration and about climate change and gun violence.

I know that in some ways I am preaching to the choir at TBZ, we already are actively engaged in Tikkun Olam. We have a resistance group, a climate change group, we are sponsoring and helping two families of refugees from Africa and South America. We are a sanctuary level 2 congregation. We have an active Muslim-Jewish women's group and have built relationship with the local muslim community. We have groups working for a 15 Dollar Minimum Wage and for Paid Family and Medical Leave Ballot Campaigns. Our community has been amazing at mobilizing during these times. But I want us to understand that this is what our tradition requires of us, to understand that for us this is a religious act. We are caring simultaneously for our soul, and for the soul of our country.

Growing up in a dictatorship, raising our voices against injustices was dangerous and forbidden. Today, in America the privilege to speak freely, creates an obligation to do so. I must raise my voice and take action against injustice, including injustices that are being committed by the current administration of this country.

Rabbi Suzie Schwartz Jacobson of Temple Israel, responded to the summer's events in Charlottesville in her sermon last week. She said:

“We are not surprised by the existence of white supremacist organizations who broadcast racist, homophobic, xenophobic and anti-semitic messages. But this summer we saw white supremacy emboldened - Neo-nazis marching in our streets, their message on the front page of every newspaper. We watched these hate groups

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grow stronger and more confident because they felt supported by a President that fails to unequivocally condemn their hate speech”<sup>7</sup>

Charlottesville represents what happens when hatred is met with anything short of explicit and unequivocal condemnation<sup>8</sup>.

Today, is the March for Racial Justice in Washington DC. A a multi-community movement led by a coalition united in demands for racial equity and justice. They march today because as long as U.S. laws, policies, and practices remain steeped in white supremacy, we will never see basic human rights and civil rights fully realized for people of color. It is unfortunate that this march is on Yom Kippur. The organizers wrote a letter asking for forgiveness from the Jewish community for not realizing that it would not be a good day for the Jewish community to join, and in response marches in other cities are organized for tomorrow Sunday. We can’t march today, but we can raise our voices against systemic racism in this country.

Reverend William Barber, who started the Moral Movement an interfaith mobilization of people working in pushing forth a broad social justice agenda said: “This moment requires us to push into the national consciousness a deep moral analysis that is rooted in an agenda to combat systemic poverty and racism, war mongering, economic injustice, voter suppression, and other attacks on the most vulnerable. We need a long term, sustained movement led by the people who are directly impacted by extremism”<sup>9</sup>

How is it possible not to hear his word as a response to Isaiah’s admonition: “Is this the fast that I desire? For you to starve your bodies?... NO! This is the fast that I desire: To separate yourself from wrongdoing... To share your bread with the hungry, and to take the poor and desperate into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore his suffering...”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.tisrael.org/remembrance-as-a-survival-tactic/>

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Sharon Brous Facebook post after Charlottesville.

<sup>9</sup> <https://thinkprogress.org/rev-barber-why-america-needs-a-new-poor-peoples-campaign-dd406d515193/>

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 58:5-7

I will end with words of Rabbi Marshall Meyer:

“Many times, during the Argentine military dictatorship, people asked me ‘What are you doing as a rabbi in politics?’ I replied: ‘What do you mean, politics?’ They said: ‘Well, you’re involved in human rights.’ ‘Human Rights’ in Argentina for eight years was the subversive phrase. It is true that politics and religion can be mixed in a very unhealthy fashion. When fundamentalists declare that government should legislate religion, this is unhealthy. On the other hand, that which comes from the depth of one’s being and militates in favor of the sanctity of life - that is neither religion nor politics. It is the essence of being human”.<sup>11</sup>

Or if I may paraphrase him slightly:

It is both religion and politics - it is the essence of being human.

Hatimah Tovah.

Rav Claudia

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<sup>11</sup> You are my witness, The living words of Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer edited by Jane Isay, page 55