Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman
Congregation Shaarei Shamayim
Kol Nidrei Sermon 5781
September 28, 2020

When Actions Matter: Doing What is Necessary for a Just and Good Future

This past Tuesday an uncomfortable realization set in. I still had a sermon to write, and I really had no idea what to say. I wanted to talk about the impending election with so much on the line. I wanted to talk about the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the ruthless shootings of Jacob Blake and so many other Black people. I wanted to talk about the growth, power, and violence of white nationalist groups. The death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg loomed large as I thought about the future of the Supreme Court. Recent wildfires and hurricanes made climate change feel so real. The pandemic seemed like it would wreak havoc forever.

It's a heavy list. Which is appropriate for Yom Kippur - but still, what do you even say?

I asked a friend. She gave me a blank look. "Tell people to vote?" she suggested. That felt so inadequate and insufficient. "Get out the vote?" Still inadequate and insufficient. I mean, voting is so important. Get out the vote efforts are so important. The stakes in this election are huge. The future of our country hinges on the outcome of this election. We know that. And there has to be more to say.

I thought about how our prayers on Yom Kippur are all written in the plural. We recite the Al Cheyt, which begins: *Al cheyt shechatanu lefanecha* – For the wrong we have done before you, for the wrongs of neglect and apathy and disregard for others, for the wrongs of retreating into our private spheres, for the wrongs of believing that we are powerless. We are collectively responsible for all who dwell in this country. What we say and what we do matters. We are obligated to each other.

But thinking about these prayers in the context of voting just made me feel demoralized. As authoritarian rhetoric and actions course through our national politics, our best efforts of participating fully in this election may very well be inadequate and insufficient. High voter turnout is necessary, but not an end in itself.

We've certainly had unfair elections before, with voter suppression and gerrymandering and the influence of corporate donations. But this November feels different. It feels terrifying, really. Like there are too many possible scenarios with very ugly, or even explosive, outcomes.

Too many scholars and journalists keep bringing up the word fascism. Not in a name-calling, throwaway sort of way, but as a warning that our country has the right toxic mix of ingredients to usher in a period of real authoritarianism. I never thought I would hear a president floating the idea of postponing an election or telling people to vote twice or insinuating that if the election results favored his opponent he would not step down.

When did we accept that it was okay to call peaceful protesters "thugs" and "domestic terrorists"? When did we accept that it was okay for armed white nationalists to intimidate protesters with their semi-automatic rifles? When did we accept that it was okay to send in federal agents to sweep protesters off the streets in unmarked vehicles and without probable cause?

I never thought I would witness a president who regularly attacks the media, who says the shooting of a journalist is a "beautiful thing" and who regularly sows distrust in our most basic democratic institutions. I never thought I would see a president who refuses to disavow antisemitic conspiracy theories.

Fascism is a heavy, loaded term. Historians can debate at what point a situation in the present warrants a historical analogy to help us to grapple with the world we live in. My concern is that the word fascism is even part of our conversation.

In the summer of 2019, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez compared migrant detention centers on our southern border to concentration camps. She created an uproar in the media, which was to be expected. What was surprising was that the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum jumped in with an angry statement that began, "The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum unequivocally rejects efforts to create analogies between the Holocaust and other events, whether historical or contemporary."

This statement infuriated scholars who had devoted their careers to this very question, many of whom were experts on the history of fascism. Almost 600 signed a letter demanding that the museum retract its statement. "The very core of Holocaust education," they wrote, "is to alert the public to dangerous developments that facilitate human rights violations and pain and suffering; pointing to similarities across time and space is essential for this task."

Just a few weeks later I spent a week at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum participating in their "Faculty Seminar on Ethics, Religion, and the Holocaust." A few of us were clergy, and a few of us were Jews. The rest were mostly professors and PhD students, either Christian or Muslim.

The seminar was led by Dr. Victoria Barnett, a Christian scholar whose work focuses on the role of the German churches in the Holocaust and on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a

Christian theologian who was executed by the Nazis for being a political dissident. She taught with Dr. Mehnaz Afridi, a Muslim scholar who is the Director of the Holocaust, Genocide, and Interfaith Education Center at Manhattan College and teaches on both Islam and on the Holocaust.

We studied post-Holocaust theology and interreligious dialogue, the experiences of Muslims and Jews in North Africa during the Holocaust, and religious resistance against the Nazis. The last day we discussed pedagogy and the Holocaust: What lessons do we draw from the experiences of the people who lived through fascism? How do we engage our communities in learning this material? How does our education affect our actions in the public sphere?

Most of the Christian and Muslim participants in the seminar regretted how little time they had to teach their students about the Holocaust, how their students didn't even have basic information about World War II and the Nazis' persecution of the Jews. My experience in the Jewish community couldn't have been more different. Jewish educators teach the Holocaust repeatedly, often from third grade on. But too often our focus is only on Jewish safety, of protecting ourselves, on overly particularistic notions of Jewish peoplehood.

Some Jews, though, took different messages from their Hebrew school Holocaust education. In response to the atrocities at migrant detention centers, a grassroots Jewish organization called Never Again Action emerged that summer, led by young Jews who would not stand idly by. "Never Again" meant something to them. They believed that they had a communal responsibility to not only speak out but to put their bodies on the line when their government attacked a vulnerable population.

As I sat in the seminar, just a few blocks away a thousand Jews and other activists blocked the entrance to the ICE headquarters. "Never Again is Now," they shouted. They refused to be bystanders. They refused to be silent. They had learned that solidarity matters.

A few weeks after that I was on the streets of Milwaukee with several Shaarei Shamayim members shutting down the ICE building. It was hard to know if our actions mattered. We didn't stop ICE from separating migrant children from their parents. We didn't close the detention centers. We didn't prevent the deportations. But we stood together with immigrant communities. We reinforced our sense of obligation to each other and to our deepest values. We taught each other that this is what it means to be Jewish.

When we take action, we have no way of knowing at the time how our actions will matter in the future. But we can commit to doing what we know is right, to taking action

with intention. We can create communal practices and expectations that will bring us together with others so we can act together, repeatedly and sustainably.

This past Tuesday, when I felt so confused as to what I could possibly say today, I reached out to the two scholars who taught my seminar at the US Holocaust Museum. I wanted to learn from them, given their life's work, what did they think about our current political landscape? What have they learned that could help us think about our communal responsibility?

Mehnaz Afridi shared a personal story with me. She told me that her daughter was ten years old when the government enacted the Muslim ban. One day, on the way to school, her daughter became very quiet, which was unlike her. Mehnaz prodded her gently, and she broke down in tears. She was having nightmares that her mother would be deported. Mehnaz tried to explain that she was a naturalized citizen, and she was safe. It didn't matter. Her daughter had learned that her mother did not belong. She was not welcome here. She was an outsider, excluded because she was a brown, Muslim immigrant.

When Mehnaz signed her email, she added that she hoped our personal anguish in these times could connect us to the pain that others are experiencing. She seemed to be saying that it's not enough for us to feel desperate about our situation. Our grief and fear have to go somewhere. We have to channel it into action. We have to find ways to connect to the pain that others are experiencing. What we do matters.

This summer the Black Lives Matter movement guided us in taking our grief and fear, along with our anger and indignation, to the streets. And if not to the streets, then into other actions that help us to better understand and fight white supremacy. We hold so much anguish – anguish that our family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, or people we do not even know will be targeted because they are Black, or that we will be targeted because we are Black. The movement is teaching us that when people come together in sustained protest, led by those who are most impacted, it's hard to ignore.

In what may be the largest social justice movement in American history, millions of people participated in a protest this past summer. Protesters expressed a tremendous outpouring of anguish and rage, grounded in the belief that it was time to show up and speak out.

White supremacy is as old as the country itself, planted firmly in American soil. We see it manifest in mass incarceration and police brutality, in migrant detention centers, in the Muslim ban, in white nationalist groups chanting "Jews will not replace us." This is what our country is and what our country has always been. If our anguish means anything, then we need to connect to the pain that others are experiencing, as Mehnaz wrote. It

doesn't mean that their pain is our pain, but it does mean that we must create human connections and understand that our futures are deeply connected.

Solidarity takes many forms. When Victoria Barnett responded to my email, she brought me back to Germany in the 1930s. She had conducted interviews in the 1980s with Germans who had been part of the Confessing Church, which stood in opposition to the Nazis.

Helene Jacobs was one of the very few Germans who had refused to go along with the Nazis from the very beginning of Hitler's rise to power. Her first act of resistance was in 1933 when she refused to fill out a required "Aryan" questionnaire at her university. Her refusal meant that she could not complete her studies. It was on that day that she gave up her dream of being a lawyer. Eventually Jacobs became part of the Kaufmann circle and repeatedly risked her life to hide Jews who were slated for deportation. She was arrested in 1943 and sent to prison for two and a half years. Yad Vashem recognized her as a Righteous Gentile in 1968.

In Vicki's interview with Jacobs she asked her about her motivation for resisting as soon as the Nazis came to power. Jacobs replied:

> Today, they talk about the "exclusion" of the Jews...as if the Jews were only a minority....But it was our world that was destroyed then...I stood *for* something, for a part of myself, not against something. It was my cause. In that moment where we [i.e., the German people] became part of this discrimination, we destroyed ourselves…My whole theme was always collective responsibility…" [Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler*, 1998, pp. 296-97]

As we focus on our own collective responsibility this Yom Kippur, and we chant *Al cheyt shechatanu lefanecha* – For the wrong we have done before you, for the wrongs of neglect and apathy and disregard for others, for the wrongs of retreating into our private spheres, for the wrongs of believing that we are powerless, we remind ourselves and each other that we are collectively responsible for all who dwell in this country. We remind ourselves and each other that what we say and what we do matters. We are obligated to each other.

I'm pretty sure that regardless of who wins the election, white supremacy will still be with us on November 4. We don't know what will transpire in our country in the next six months. But if white supremacy continues to flourish, and authoritarianism becomes more entrenched throughout the government, we will witness white violence on a much larger scale. We will see civil liberties curtailed. We will see stiffer consequences for protesting.

We will need to make difficult decisions about whether we will speak out and how we will speak out. We will need to decide whether we will stand with those who are targeted, excluded, and attacked. We will need to decide whether we truly believe in the concept of collective responsibility.

I'd like to conclude by sharing Vicki's personal reflection at the end of her email to me. These are the words of a historian who spent her career studying the people and the institutions who did resist, who did speak out, at great risk to themselves.

> I don't know yet what I'm willing to risk (just as I don't think that in 1933 [Helene Jacobs] foresaw everything that was to come), but I do feel a sense of clarity about the values that matter to me, the future of my children and grandchildren, and the things that I really love about this country and the hopes I still have for our future as a society. It's important to develop a clear sense of what is at stake, and what we want the future to look like – to stand "*for*" something, as Jacobs put it: "It was my cause." Perhaps then it's not so much a matter of weighing risk as nurturing the deep commitment to do whatever is necessary for the sake of a just and good future.

Al cheyt shechatanu lefanecha – For the wrong we have done before you, for the wrongs of neglect and apathy and disregard for others, for the wrongs of retreating into our private spheres, for the wrongs of believing that we are powerless.

Together we take responsibility.

Together we affirm that what we say and what we do matters.

Together we do what is necessary for a just and good future.

Gmar chatimah tovah – may we all be sealed for good.