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Parashat Kedoshim / Charge for Bat Mitzvah

Last Sunday evening, at our shul's Annual General Meeting, we heard from author and broadcaster Rachael Kohn, who, for 21 years, hosted *The Spirit of Things* on ABC's Radio National, along with other programs exploring religion and spirituality. In chatting privately just beforehand, we both bemoaned the acts and rhetoric that misrepresent religion. We have a shared concern that religion has been given a bad name not only by acts of terror, but also by social hostilities, like the exclusion of gay clergy from the United Methodist Church, or the disparaging treatment of women at the Kotel by the Ultra-Orthodox. People see all this, and they write off religion as a whole, instead of seeing religion's potential for driving social change.

The problem with religion, of course, isn't a problem with religion. It's a problem with interpretation—how people understand certain biblical verses and stories, and apply them to societal issues. But it's also a problem of rhetoric. That is, you and I may interpret something one way, but those with the power to amplify *their* interpretations often define religion for the masses. God help us all, when the people in power amplify a falsehood, especially if it's a destructive view. Despite the look of a Torah scroll, religion is hardly black and white, so amplification is a dangerous tool. Perhaps that's why today's parashah cautions us:

וְלֹא־תִשָּׁבְעוּ בִשְׁמִי לַשָּׁקֶר וְחָלַלְתָּ אֶת־שֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ

You shall not swear falsely by [God's] name, profaning the name of your God (Lev. 19:12).

Get it right, before you broadcast it.
Don't soil My name, says God.

This week, I listened to a story on a podcast called *This American Life*. It highlighted the impact of false and damaging rhetoric on the lives of families, and on the soul of a community. It illuminated two serious problems with America right now: one, the leadership's hostile view that *all* immigrants crossing its southern border are violent criminals, drug smugglers, and sex offenders; and two, the media giants that give those leaders a podium and loudspeaker, broadcasting their dangerous rhetoric to the masses, often in religious terms, on religious stations.

The story was troubling. It spoke about a workplace raid by immigration officials that took 97 people into custody, placing 86 of them in deportation proceedings. The raid took place at a meat packing plant in a Bible Belt town said to be "God fearing"ⁱ and evangelical. A town of 100 churches, called Morristown, Tennessee, which had come out in ardent, majority support for a hardline immigration policy. This was a town that had drunk the Kool-Aid of media outlets like evangelist Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). CBN had referred to a caravan of [quote] "felons" making their way toward America from Honduras. It claimed they were funded by Jewish billionaire George Soros, to destabilise the upcoming electionsⁱⁱ—an absurd, unsubstantiated, antisemitic, damaging claim.

One religious townswoman was sent by her employer, a local newspaper, to the vigil for the *parents* who'd been taken away. Her name was Christa, and she didn't want to go, as she believed in cracking down on immigration. Because of the rhetoric, she believed all immigrants were criminals, deserving exile and punishment—every last one. But when she got to the vigil, she heard

otherwise. There, she heard a different interpretation amplified: the children of detainees were speaking into the microphone. She heard co-workers and husbands and wives and parents, all at the podium, their *grief* amplified. “It... just shook my soul,” she said. And it helped her hear another voice: She says God was saying, “See, I wanted you here, because... you’re not correct in your thinking that this is so black and white.” She heard the voice of her religion calling, but this time it wasn’t the Christian Broadcasting Network. It wasn’t the loudest voice, full of rhetoric. It was a different religious voice, convincing her that that rhetoric was untrue:

וְלֹא־תִשָּׁבַעוּ בִשְׁמִי לַשָּׁקֶר

You shall not swear falsely by [God’s] name.

When she’d voted for immigration reform, Christa says: “To go after the family man working at the meat packing plant... that’s NOT what I had in mind.” Other townspeople, too, were deeply disturbed by what had happened in the raid and its aftermath. One Reverend said of his duty to those families affected, “We’re talking about our neighbours. They’re in the shadow of the steeple of the church where I serve, so I have a moral and biblical obligation.” The town raised tens of thousands of dollars to support families and connect them to lawyers. They wrote character references for detainees. They opened their churches as safe havens and dropped off truckloads of food donations. Christa said, “It was guilt! ... We all thought that they should all go home... we needed to build a wall! And then all of a sudden, we watched families being torn apart. We had never thought about those that were left behind.” One local bishop dropped off \$5,000 saying, “This is from my church. I’m sorry. This is not what we intended.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Religion is being hijacked by the loudest voices, who preach in its name, rather than in the name of “one interpretation.” The evangelicals of Morristown realised the dominant rhetoric had profaned God’s name, and the harm that this had brought to bear on their neighbours, and their souls. So they worked to amplify a different religious message. Despite what we’d like to think, most issues are not black and white, even in the Bible. They are matters of interpretation, and we need to take more care when broadcasting them, lest religion lose even the religious.

Bill Clinton once said that “there is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America.”^{iv} Could the same be true for religion? Can what’s harmful in religion be counteracted by what’s healing in religion? N, you shared an important teaching from today’s parashah, about leaving the corners of your fields for the poor and the stranger. I’m so proud that you shared that beautiful part of our religion this morning. We may not have a media platform that amplifies our message to the masses. But we do have a bimah, and a Facebook page, and a Shabbat dinner table. We have newspapers and classrooms, and we have our actions—the best platform of all for broadcasting our interpretation of religion, and its verses, stories, and values.

So my charge and prayer for you, N, on this day of your bat mitzvah ceremony, is to mine the Torah for its noble ideas worth spreading, and look for ways to share them, for the betterment of society. Many of our best ideas are in *your* parashah! Love your neighbour as yourself. Do not deal deceitfully with one another. Do not commit robbery. Respect the aged. Pay wages on time. Be fair in judgment. Don’t profit by the blood of your neighbour. *When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. He shall be to you as one of your citizens. You shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*^v

Seek out the messages of salvation, not condemnation. For in spreading them you may just salvage religion itself.

ⁱ <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/673/left-behind>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/30/18035336/white-evangelicals-immigration-nationalism-christianity-refugee-honduras-migrant>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/673/left-behind>

^{iv} http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/clinton1.asp

^v *Parashat Kedoshim*