

“Time to raise our voice” (2013 RH Evening Sermon)

This RH/HHD marks that I have been here for 10 years, celebrating with you.

10 years mean lots of good things happening, but also means **lots of sermons**: you heard me speak from the bimah many times, and I shared with you many ideas and messages, over the past decade.

So, when thinking of my words today, I was looking for some new message, and realized I needed some help! Two people came to rescue me – two of our BeSH children: during this past year, they shared with me some of their thoughts, which I found really insightful - and wanted to share with you now.

1. This was shared with me by the very young Aaron (age 6, but was 5 then). Observing family and friends, he became well aware that some are Jews, and some are not. But one day he met some people who were Jews, but – unlike Aaron and his family – don’t go to Religious school weekly, don’t attend Shabbat services, aren’t involved in a congregation, and do not do those things he and his family regularly do. So Aaron had this realization: “some people are Jews, like them; but some people, like us, are ‘Jewish Jews’.”

The minute I heard this, I could never forget it – it is brilliant! Some of us are Jews; but some of us, are Jewish Jews.

What can this mean?

I am a Jew Tells me about something that **happened** to me – I was born a Jew;
I am Jewish Is more about how **now I feel and think** about things.

I am a Jew something was **done to me** (circumcised, SENT to Rel. School, made to have a Bar Mitzvah);
I am Jewish some things **I choose to do** – join a congregation, get involved, read a Jewish book, celebrate holidays.

I am a Jew what I am – it’s **done**; I can think about it, or not, care or not;
I am Jewish is about beliefs, ideas, values that **I am embracing and holding**.

I am a Jew It is an **accident** – the home in which I was born, I had nothing to do with it;
I am Jewish Is a **choice**, which I make repeatedly and constantly:
when I marry and start a family;
when I have kids, when I move to a new place,
when I want to volunteer,
when I rush to get home to prepare for a holiday or to come to Shabbat service.

I am a Jew is like being “Italian”, “Irish”, “Polish” – it is where **I come from**;
I am Jewish it’s about **where I am going**, and where I want to be, and where I am getting my family to be.

I am a Jew is mostly about my **past** (important, but past) – “it’s how I was raised...”;
I am Jewish is mostly about **now, and tomorrow** – “it is how I choose to raise my children and grandchildren”.

Jew it’s about the accents I **heard**, the gefilte fish and other food I was **fed**, the expressions I heard;

I am Jewish it’s about the words whose meaning I **know**, and which ones I choose to **use**; it’s about the gefilte fish I make, and the food I **cook**, and why I do it.

I am a Jew it is granted: is what I am;

I am Jewish requires awareness and will: is what I do, how I do it, and why.

Just like Aaron, I know many ‘Jewish Jews’, and also know many who are ‘Jews’.

The second insight I want to share, came from Sarah, as she and I were discussing her Torah portion, preparing her Bat Mitzvah speech.

Her portion was about war, and included this Torah rule: “when you attack a city, do not destroy the fruit bearing trees in it, not even to use the wood for war” – “are the trees enemies that can come to attack you?”

Sarah made this connection: Torah is just like The Lorax - it’s the voice that speaks for the trees!

As I listened, I thought this is one of the best ways I know of explaining what Torah is:

Torah isn’t just a book – Torah is the voice that, even at war, speaks for the trees!

Since trees have no voice, **Torah gives them a voice**, and calls us to respect and care for Nature!

Trees are not the only things that **do not have a voice, but must be heard**:

Justice – does not have a voice! And so Torah is the voice that speaks for Justice, charging us to pursue what is right and just, even beyond what a given law on the books may say.

Knowledge, Wisdom – do not have a voice! So Torah charges us to learn and study and use our knowledge to make better choices, rather than just following our impulses, or follow unreasoned beliefs.

In our society, many people do not have a voice: “**the widow, the orphan, the foreign worker, the poor**” and that is why Torah constantly mentions them, and speaks to us on their behalf. The list of those without a voice is longer nowadays: in addition to the orphan, widow, and poor, it includes single mothers, the unemployed, the full-time working poor, the minorities of different kinds.

Torah’s call for justice, and “caring for our neighbor” – is giving a voice to the unheard needs of each one of them.

But, remember what happened with the Lorax?

The voice of the Lorax, just like the voice of Torah, will not accomplish much “UNLESS...

UNLESS ... someone really cares” to listen, and to speak up, to carry its message and follow it.

As I was speaking to Sarah at her Bat Mitzvah at the bimah, I realized that just as the Lorax was closed in a high tower, our Torah is closed in the Aron HaKodesh. **How can the voice of Torah, and all for whom Torah speaks, be heard, if it's locked inside the closet?!**

Unless... unless someone, like Sarah, like young Aaron, like many here, really cares to take the voice of Torah and let it be heard. Unless we/you care to make this voice be heard. Not **heard just here** at synagogue, once a week - **but bringing the voice of Torah and its demands to be heard in our homes, neighborhoods, and the public square.**

This is something curious: you know where I heard the voice of Torah loud and clear, with all its demands for justice, in NC, in the public square?

Spoken by Rev. Barber, at a NAACP Moral Monday demonstration, in front of House of Representatives in Raleigh this Summer.

I say that I heard the **voice of Torah**, because Rev. Barber wasn't quoting much from the New Testament - when talking about justice for the poor and disenfranchised, the quotes were from the Hebrew Prophets Isaiah, Micah, Amos, Moses, and from the Torah!

As you know, Rev. Barber wasn't giving a Bible class/lecture:
he was calling for a fair society;
to stop minorities from being discriminated against, again;
he was speaking for the poor who are made poorer – and their voices are not heard;
he was speaking for those who now may not just lack a voice – they may lack a vote.

Whether one agrees with policies and positions expressed there or not, one thing we shouldn't miss: when it came to raising a voice for Justice – he, and many there, found that **Torah gives voice to their quest for Justice and a better society.**

Torah **expresses the ideals we have**, and the **standards by which we measure** how good or bad we are doing.

I am not suggesting we all start talking like Rev. Barber – we probably couldn't even if we tried. I am not suggesting we take our Torahs and start knocking at neighbors doors...

I am suggesting that we do take Torah's ideals on justice and equality, and make them our goals, make them a priority for us, here and now.

I am suggesting that we take Torah's standards – “care of the widow, orphan, foreigner and poor” to assess how well or not well we are doing; and speak up, and make the changes that are called for by these standards.

Torah , with its commanding 3,000 year old voice, is **locked in this closet** behind me.

Tomorrow, Hal & I will take it out, then others will carry it in a Hakafah, to reach each one of you in the congregation. **It can't stop there** – it is then **your turn to take it, take it's voice out there with you, and let it be heard wherever you go.**

I'd like to conclude with a Biblical voice:

(Psalms 8:2) “Out of the mouth of babes and infants have you ordained strength.”

This Rosh HaShanah, we have inspiration from our children:

They remind us that things will not be right “**unless we really care... and speak, and act; and through us the voice Torah is heard.**

When we do that, when we speak and act for Torah ideals, then we are truly Jewish Jews.