

## The World Needs More Prophets

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Like a lot of you, I've been watching the news and asking myself, "What can I do? What *should* I do?" Hearing George Floyd's words – "I can't breathe. ... I want my mother..." – I am outraged by the seeming lack of empathy by a person with power, and the sense that some lives are somehow more important than others. I am saddened by the realization that in some way, just by being me and living my life, I may contribute to the institutional racism and inequality in our society. I'm just one person, but with a voice.

I look at my diploma, which authorizes me "to exercise the functions of Rabbi, Preacher, and Teacher in Israel," and I ask: what does this moment demand from me and the community I lead? It's pretty simple. We have to bring Judaism's universal values, the commandments to pursue justice and love our neighbors, to the forefront of our message. We have to use the wisdom of our tradition to bring moral clarity to a moment of crisis. We have to be "Rabbis," or as the Rev. Donald Kelly of Olive Branch Community Church in Olney put it to me, we have to be "Prophets."

Those are technical terms. The Torah doesn't know from rabbis. "*The*" Rabbis, who came to prominence in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, saw themselves as the legitimate inheritors of a chain of tradition that passed directly from Moses. *The* Rabbis called him Moshe Rabeinu, Moses our Rabbi, but the Torah never calls Moses a rabbi; the Torah calls him a prophet. The Talmud teaches that after Malachi, the holy spirit ceased for Israel; but in making themselves heirs of Moses, the Rabbis knew exactly what they were doing.

The Bible describes three types of leaders: kings, priests, and prophets. The Rabbis didn't identify with kings, as they shared the biblical view that political leadership was mostly corrupt (something we know nothing about). That leaves priests, represented by Aaron; and prophets, personified by Moses.

Today's Torah portion describes how Priests are religious functionaries. They carry the Tabernacle and the Ark; they follow instructions to administer sacrifices; they sing and play music. Parashat Naso describes the commandment to bless the people with a caveat: "The priests shall link My name with the people of Israel," says God, "ואני אברכם, but I (God) will bless them." Priests don't speak.

I did a quick search to see how many times Aaron speaks in the Torah. It's ironic because in Egypt, he is described as Moses's spokesperson. But there are only three instances when we actually hear original words attributed to Aaron. (1) Aaron instructs the people to bring him gold and proclaims a Festival to the Lord. (2) When an angry Moses comes down from the mountain and asks what is going on, Aaron passes the blame: "Let not my lord be enraged," Aaron says to Moses, "for you know that this people is bent on evil. ... I asked for their gold, they gave it to me, I hurled it into the fire; and look what came out!" And (3) after he and Miriam gossip about Moses and Miriam is stricken with leprosy, Aaron

speaks up to protect himself and his sister: “O my lord, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly.” We’ll read about that one next week.

There is one other instance when we expect Aaron to speak. But after his sons are killed, we read only, “וידם אהרן, Aaron was silent.” Priests are religious functionaries who do what they are told, follow the rules, and keep quiet. There is something praiseworthy in that, but it is telling that the ancient Rabbis did not call themselves priests.

Now, look at Moses. The Torah says he is exceedingly humble and has a speech impediment, but he overcomes. All he does is speak. There are instances when Moses goes too far, like when he expresses doubt whether God can provide enough meat to satisfy the people or when he angrily calls the Israelites “rebels” before hitting the rock. But on the whole. ... he speaks truth to power before Pharaoh. He convinces God to exercise patience and forbearance when God wants to obliterate the Jewish people after the crime of the golden calf. He rebukes his people – sometimes gently, sometimes not – when they fail to live up to their potential.

This year, I’ve been following the Daf Yomi cycle, studying one page of Talmud every day, and it happens that this week, in tractate Shabbat, there are two passages that preach this message of speaking out. The first praises Moses for not just hearing God’s word and transmitting, but for actually interpreting and contributing on his own. There are three instances, say the Rabbis, when Moses acted on his own and God applauded his initiative: He added an extra day to the prescribed preparation for receiving the Torah; he separated from his wife after the Torah was given; and he smashed the tablets. I don’t want to focus on the details, just the point that the archetypal rabbi speaks out to go beyond the confines of the law, and his personal voice is sanctioned by God.

In the second passage, the Rabbis condemn our patriarchs for failing to speak up to protect us. They quote verses in Genesis to show how God told Abraham that his descendants would be slaves in Egypt; they demonstrate how Isaac knew and Jacob knew, and they didn’t try rush to our defense. The message for us is clear: when we know that people are suffering, we must speak up.

Which brings me back to my original question: What does this moment demand from me? It demands that I avoid the tendency to be a priest or religious functionary – and be a rabbi. It demands that we all speak out in support of justice and in condemnation of the brutality that gives police officers who dedicate their lives to protect us a bad name. It demands that we look at ourselves. We aren’t bad. This isn’t our fault. But we contribute – in subtle ways and sometimes not so subtle, intentionally and often unintentionally, through commission and also omission. We can be seen as part of the problem. And we must become part of the solution.

This is not “their issue.” We Jews have particularistic concerns like antisemitism, assimilation, Israel, the effort to bring meaning to an ancient tradition in the modern world – these are important concerns. But the universal message of justice and equity is our issue too. The moment demands that we prioritize the needs of our friends and neighbors in the African American community. And that we recognize that not all Jews are white – our community is diverse and would be more diverse if we did more to recognize and invite individuals of all backgrounds into our midst.

I reached out to Black Christian colleagues this week to express solidarity and ask how I can help, and I heard two messages:

1. We can listen. One of our problems, says the Rev. Jim Stowe, is that we think we already know what racism is. We think we already know what oppression is. We think we already know what suffering is. But we have to listen and hear and act in new ways to demonstrate understanding and a desire to help.
2. And we have to be prophets. As the Rev. Donald Kelly put it, the world needs prophets right now. What he calls prophets, we call rabbis; but we mean the same thing. To quote Dr. Martin Luther King, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

Yesterday, I sent a statement to the congregation, written in partnership with Jewish and African American colleagues to condemn police brutality, preach justice, and call for increased dialogue between our communities. Rabbi Berkowitz and I are working with Reform and Orthodox colleagues to produce a course on the Prophets. And through our Faith Community Outreach and Adult Education committees, you will be invited to get involved in our efforts to do the right thing.

The Ancient Rabbis taught that one supports the poor of the gentiles as we do the poor of Israel; one visits the gentile sick as we do the sick of Israel; one mourns and buries gentile dead as we do the dead of Israel. One comforts the mourners among gentiles as we comfort those in Israel, מפני דרכי שלום, for such is the path of peace.

In memory of George Floyd and in solidarity with all who demonstrate peacefully in pursuit of justice, I pray that the prophetic voice will come to animate for all people the priestly blessing of today's Torah portion:

May Adonai bless you and protect you.

May Adonai's light shine upon you, and may God be gracious to you.

May Adonai's presence be elevated upon you, that you may experience peace.

Shabbat shalom.