

Temple B'rith Kodesh-Third Presbyterian Church Exchange
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The Prophetic Ideal in the World Today

Good morning, dear friends. It is always a joy, and a great honor, to be together with you. Thank you, Rev. Wilkinson, for your friendship and your gracious welcome. As always, you are an important friend and thought partner in how we can engage in the most impactful ways in the broader community.

We are at an interesting juncture in the Jewish year. Some of you may know that the Jewish calendar is a lunar calendar...as such, the year is several days shorter than the secular solar year.

To keep the holidays more or less in season, there are leap years every few years...an additional month is added to the calendar.

This is a leap year, and we are in that "extra" month. Without getting too technical, the holiday that *would be* this month will be celebrated a little less than a month from now. As such, this past week we had the foreshadowing of this holiday, with just a few minor observances.

The holiday is Purim, which centers on the reading of the biblical book of Esther. The climax of the book is that Queen Esther defeats a villain named Haman.

The book is melodramatic, with greatly exaggerated imagery. The holiday that is rooted in the reading of the Book of Esther is raucous, silly, and filled with carnivals and games and jokes.

And yet, this book of the Hebrew Bible contains a serious message: we must stand up and speak up and take action when there is danger. If there is a leader who is posing a danger, we must speak truth to power and not rest until there is safety. The book of Esther also teaches us that every single one of us has the ability to take action and to make a difference.

All of this was anticipated this past week during the leap month, and will be celebrated fully in mid March.

In the meantime, right at this very moment, the Jewish community suffered a great loss. An extraordinary social justice leader named Al Vorspan died last Sunday. He was 95 and so his loss was not unexpected. Nonetheless, his accomplishments, his passion, and his unique charisma were so special that the Jewish world has been reflecting on his legacy all through this week. Among other notable tributes, the New York Times published a beautiful extended obituary.

Al was a World War II veteran who was an early and leading protestor against the Vietnam War.

Al was a passionate Zionist who regularly raised concerns about human rights and equality in the modern State of Israel.

Al was a social justice leader who held several very significant and serious national leadership positions, but was someone who was outrageously funny and profoundly accessible.

Listen to Al's own words, from one of his first books, *Justice and Judaism*, published in 1956. Please forgive his use of the gendered language of that time. "Man is different from all of God's creatures, and the differences between man and the animal, plant, and other organic kingdoms are fundamental. These differences center in the free will granted by God to man along among His creatures. Only man can, by his own whim or will, disobey God's laws. Man can, if he wishes, trample upon the Divine commands to live justly, to love his fellow, to practice love and not hate, and instead can express in his life evil and not the goodness which is his natural potential. Man has the right to choose."

We have the right to choose...to live justly and to practice love and not hate.

Many of the tributes and reflections that have been offered about AI this week focus on the legacy of the biblical prophets. AI was one who understood the message of Isaiah and Amos and Micah as an urgent call to action in our own time. AI was one who could not rest when there was injustice in our midst. He was an agitator. Colorfully, he referred to himself as a “nudnik for peace.”

For all of us, I think this is an important idea to consider. Just as Esther and Vashti, the heroes of the Purim story, teach us that we have the capacity to stand up and make change, so too we have inherited the prophetic message that we must stand up and work to heal the brokenness in our world.

Remember that the biblical prophets lived in a time of extraordinary upheaval. Here’s the history lesson for today: the biblical prophets lived between the ninth and fifth century BCE. At the beginning of this span of time, the people lived in peace, independent in the land of Israel. They served God with the biblically prescribed rituals, in the Temple in Jerusalem.

And then, during this span of time, the people began to struggle and stray from faithful observance. There was violence, hatred, and a pervasive lack of faith. The prophets spoke out, urging us to change our ways.

And nothing happened. The violence only increased, the lack of tolerance only grew.

And then, the Babylonians came into the land and the Temple was destroyed. The people were expelled from the land, thrown out and ending up far to the north of Israel, in exile in Babylonia.

The prophets spoke again, now reassuring the people that the exile would not last forever.

Within 100 years, the people were able to return and rebuild.

This is the foundation on which we stand, the biblical prophetic messages that we have inherited. We must never lose hope that there is the possibility of renewal and a better world ahead. But we also must never forget that we only create this brighter future when we speak up and act up and change. The prophetic message is urgently important today: we must not rest when there is inequality, hatred, discrimination, and lack of equal opportunity in our midst.

Temple B'rith Kodesh has an active social action committee. We participate with several national and state coalitions, and engage in various community projects...many of which are common concerns with you, our Third Church partners. I am grateful for the work we do together with RAIHN, as one example of what we do together. I believe there is more and more we can do out of a shared vision of a just and peaceful world.

It is the sad truth that since our exchange weekend one year ago, there has been even more of an increase in anti-Semitism and violence, most notably the tragic murders at our sister synagogue in Pittsburgh.

One of the very first phone calls I received on that terrible day was from Rev. Wilkinson. John and so many of you joined a cross section of the community in gathering together to pray for Pittsburgh and to reject hatred and violence in our community and our country. It was a powerful night and a strong demonstration that our community is filled with good will.

And yet. In the aftermath of that event, there was anti-Semitic graffiti and vandalism here in Rochester, as well as in other cities.

And yet. It was just a few weeks after that event that one of the magnificent Frederick Douglass statues that had been erected downtown was vandalized.

And the question that was asked, over and over on social media and in community conversation: was this a racist act or a drunken mistake??? Was this hatred or mischief???

There is only one answer to that question, and that is to declare that there is zero tolerance for hatred and violence and no acceptable minimum amount of intolerance.

None of these destructive acts happened in isolation. None of them, sadly, were an aberration of the new normal.

The prophets are calling out to us. We must remember what they said, so many centuries ago, in a society that was descending into hatred and violence: *no more!*

It's not about rallies and solidarity services. It's about modeling, each day and with each person we meet, that we can create a world that is filled with peace. It's about modeling that when any one faces injustice, we all face injustice – and we won't accept it. It's about building deep and honest relationships across the community, with people of different identities and different perspectives.

I mentioned the confluence of different events in the Jewish world coming at this time...Purim Katan and the death of Al Vorspan. There's one more.

At this season, in our prescribed cycle of readings from the Five Books of Moses, we are turning to the last portions of the book of Exodus. A significant episode in that section tells of the people building the Golden Calf. How does Moses respond? Outraged and overwhelmed, he shatters the Tablets of the Ten Commandments, just inscribed by God.

The outcome of that episode is that Moses returns to the mountaintop and experiences revelation once again. There is a very important teaching that then emerges.

The new tablets are placed in the Holy Ark, of course, but what happened to the shattered pieces? They are placed in the Ark as well, alongside the new tablets. They are there to remind us that everyone and everything is holy and included. They are there to teach us that those who have brokenness in their lives, those who are struggling and suffering, must be embraced and given a place of honor.

And so, this is the obligation we have...to create a community that has the courageous resolve to answer brokenness with love. Together, we can fill the world with dignity, opportunity, and equality. Together, we can create a community that is the fulfillment of the prophetic ideal.

I pray that together we will achieve this lofty and profound obligation, and we will each understand and act on the healing potential that God created within us.

Ken yehi ratson, may this be God's will.