

BREAKING THE SILENCE
ROSH HASHANAH 5778
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

Rosh Hashanah is called Yom Teruah, the Day of Sounding the Shofar. The shofar blasts sound an alarm to wake us out of our complacency. Will we turn our ears, our hearts, to hearing the call? To face the fact that, to quote Rabbi Arthur Waskow, "business as usual" is not an option? To heed the shofar's call to justice? Are we ready to be woke?

When Elie Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, he was described as quote "a messenger to mankind" who felt compelled to quote "awaken our conscience, because our indifference to evil makes us partners in crime." Wiesel explained that one of the central tenets of his life was the biblical injunction in Leviticus: "Lo ta'amod al dam reakha -- Do not be indifferent to the bloodshed inflicted on your fellow human being." Quoting Albert Camus, he says: "Not to take a stand is in itself to take a stand."¹

So my fellow Jews, we are at a crossroads in our country today. Anti-Semitism, bigotry, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia and xenophobia have reared their ugly heads. During the High Holy Days, we ask God for forgiveness for these very sins. Will we stand idly by while others in this country act on this hatred? Or will we speak up? Will we turn a blind eye or a cold shoulder while too many of those in power fuel hatred and division? While too many refuse to call out white supremacy? Will we acquiesce to blatant discrimination? Or will we speak up?

¹ Interview with Elie Wiesel from Aron Hirt-Manheimer, "Channeling Elie Wiesel," ReformJudaism.org, 8/23/17

Now let me be clear: I do not condone violence, anti-Semitism, racism or homophobia on any side. While the alt-right -- white supremacists -- is clearly anti-Semitic, so, too often is the far Left, particularly when it comes to Israel. The violence on the part of the antifa -- or anti-fascists -- is inexcusable, as is their effort to shut down speakers on campuses.

While I deplore the killing of Black men by the police, I also deplore the killing of police officers.

And while I have been supportive of the Muslim community, I spoke up against the incredibly inflammatory statements made by the new imam during a recent sermon at the Islamic Center .

But what is going on in our country today, fueled by leaders in Washington and elsewhere, must also be decried. Not only discriminatory rhetoric, but discriminatory legislation. As a moral leader, it is my responsibility to speak truth to power and to speak up when those in power enable hatred.

The Talmud tells us:

“If you see wrongdoing by a member of your household and you do not protest – you are held accountable.

And so it is in relation to the members of your city.

And so it is in relation to the world.” One medieval commentator teaches that we must speak hard truths even to those with great power, for “the whole people are punished for the sins of the king if they do not protest the king’s actions to him.”²

Complacency is simply not an option. Again, the Talmud teaches:

When the community is immersed in suffering, a person may not say: I will go to my home and I will eat and drink, and peace be upon you, my soul. . . Rather, a person should be distressed together with the community. . .

And anyone who is distressed together with the community will merit seeing the consolation of the community.”³

² From the CCAR shared sermon by Rabbis Judy Shanks and Elka Abramson

³ Babylonian Talmud, *Ta’anit* 11a.

I am sure all of us were terrified last month when we saw images of torch-carrying Neo-Nazis and KKK members in Charlottesville chanting "Jews will not replace us!" and the Nazi rubric "Blood and Soil." We were shaken when we learned that, in the year 2017, members of the Charlottesville congregation were afraid to leave their synagogue because Neo-Nazis armed with semi-automatics threatened their lives. Imagine then, if you will, how frightened immigrant parents are feeling when they might be arrested and deported at any moment, leaving behind their citizen children. Yes, we need to protect our borders. And yes, many immigrants came here illegally, but the majority have committed no crime, work hard, pay taxes, and they have no legal path to citizenship at this point.

Our own grandparents or great-grandparents came here, sometimes illegally as well, for similar reasons: seeking refuge, hoping for a better life. Do children deserve to be left here without their parents? Do their parents deserve to be put into detention centers and mistreated -- or worse? The recently pardoned Sheriff Joe Arpaio jokingly compared his jails to concentration camps. Do we cheer someone like that who spent years abusing immigrants and depriving them of their civil rights? Do we remain silent? Or do we speak up?

Now imagine you are born into the wrong body. Your body is female but you feel that you are really male. Or vice versa. Are you not still a beautiful human being, created by God *b'tzelem Elohim* -- in God's image?

So if you are patriotic and brave enough to want to fight for your country and join the Armed Forces, should you be deprived of this right? And if you are already enlisted, should you worry that at any moment, you might be ejected from your position?

Do we cheer the transgender ban in the military?
Do we remain silent? Or do we speak up?

And if, as a young child, you were brought here illegally
by your immigrant parents, and you are now enrolled in school,
or working, or serving in the military, should you fear deportation?
Do we cheer the cancellation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Immigration --
DACA? Do we remain silent? Or do we speak up?

Because a country or a regime that discriminates against Latinos,
and African Americans, and transgender people, and Muslims,
is also a country that discriminates against Jews.
And no one is immune, even those who are in the government.
Remember the story of Esther? She married King Ahashuerus of Persia
without telling him that she was Jewish. When the Prime Minister, Haman,
planned a pogrom to kill the Jews, she was afraid to speak up
in defense of her people. Her uncle Mordechai reminded her that
she was not protected, despite being the queen.

No matter how safe we may feel as Jews at this juncture in America,
so did our parents and grandparents in the Germany of the 1930s.
They were so well integrated into the society, they were sure the Nazis
would leave them be. That is what my own French grandfather believed,
so when he had a chance to leave, he chose to stay.
My mother was the only member of her family to survive Auschwitz.

How could such horrors occur in such an advanced civilization
as Germany was at the time?
The worldwide economic depression had hit Germany hard,
leaving millions of people out of work. Germany had also suffered
a humiliating defeat during World War I, wounding its national pride.
And Germans lacked confidence in their weak government.⁴
The echoes to today in America are astounding.

⁴ <https://www.ushmm.org/outreach/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007671>

The Nazi nightmare was made all the more potent because people did not speak up.

As Elie Wiesel points out:

"We Jews suffered not only from the cruelty of killers, but also from the indifference of bystanders..."

Wiesel continues: "I believe that a person who is indifferent to the suffering of others is complicit in the crime." End quote.

As Jews, we have a long tradition of speaking truth to power and of holding our rulers accountable. We can begin with Abraham who demanded justice for Sodom and Gomorrah -- justice from God! Or Moses who confronted Pharaoh as well as God in seeking justice and compassion for his people. Our prophets admonished kings at the risk of their lives. Nathaniel accused King David of abuse of power. Isaiah warned King Hezekiah about making compromising political alliances. Jeremiah was jailed for his dire predictions under King Zedekiah.

Deuteronomy warns us about the potential for abuse on the part of kings, imposing strict limits on the king's power. The main activity prescribed for the king is to write a Sefer Torah in order to remind him about the laws of the land -- and that he is not above the law.

The response of our lawmakers to bigotry should be unequivocal condemnation.

As our very first president, George Washington said, quote:

"...the government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance..." End quote.

Jewish values demand of us a certain kind of behavior.

We are not a contemplative religion, but a religion of action.

We are enjoined, over and over again in the Torah, to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger -- in other words, those who are most vulnerable in our society.

At this point in our history, it is Jews, people of color, women, Muslims, and transgender folks who are the most vulnerable. We must stand up for ourselves and for them.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow tells us that, "tradition teaches that at Sinai one horn [of the ram]...blew Truth into the world, and that the other horn of that same ram will signal the world's readiness to bring the messianic days of peace and justice."

Are we ready?

As we recite the confessional prayers this Rosh Hashasna, let us think very seriously about where our own bigotry and xenophobia have affected our decisions and our actions. Let us speak up and out, not only for ourselves, but for all those in our society who are targets of hatred and discrimination today.

I would like to conclude with this powerful piece by my colleague, Rabbi Michael Adam Latz – it's a version of the famous prayer by the German theologian Martin Niemoller.

You might be familiar with it:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

This is Rabbi Latz's version:

First they came for Transpeople and I spoke up--

Because God does NOT make mistakes!

They came for the African Americans and I spoke up—

Because I am my sisters' and my brothers' keeper.

And then they came for the women and I spoke up—

Because women hold up half the sky.

And then they came for the immigrants and I spoke up—

Because I remember the ideals of our democracy.

And then they came for the Muslims and I spoke up—
Because they are my cousins and we are one human family.

And then they came for the Native Americans and Mother Earth and I spoke up—
Because the blood-soaked land cries and the mountains weep.

They keep coming.
We keep rising up.
Because we Jews know the cost of silence.
We remember where we come from.

And we will link arms, because when you come for our neighbors,
you come for us—
and THAT just won't stand.