

A few months ago I met a sweet little Jewish grandmother at the bus stop. As we got on a crowded bus she realized that she did not have a Metrocard or correct change for the fare. The driver tried to be firm with her, but she put her hand over her chest and sweetly said, "If you knew what I had, you'd be nicer to me." Remarkably, the driver caved in and let her ride for free.

As she and I tried to get down the crowded aisle, people would not move over. The woman again placed her hand over her chest and said: "Excuse me, but if you knew what I had, you'd be nicer to me." Amazingly the crowd parted like the Red Sea and let us down the aisle.

When we got to the back of the bus there were no seats. She looked directly at a few people, but no one took the hint to offer her their seat. Once again the lovely grandmother placed her hand on her chest and quietly said, "If you knew what I had, you'd be nicer to me." A couple of people rolled their eyes or looked away, but several jumped up and insisted that she sit down to ride in comfort.

Finally, my curiosity getting the better of me, I leaned over and whispered to her, "I hope you don't mind ... and I know this is none of my business, but what is it that you've got, anyway?"

That sweet little Jewish grandmother smiled innocently at me and said, as she delicately placed her hand on her chest, "*Chutzpah*."

A person with *chutzpah* can make even from a sweet Jewish grandmother more than a little obnoxious. A *chutzpadik* attitude is "in your face", seeking something beyond what is due, and is often just an excuse for pushy boors to get what they want. But a *chutzpah* has its roots in an important Jewish value – namely, seeking things better than they are.

Where does this radical refusal to accept what is, but want something greater, come from? It is woven into our very name as a people. The origin of that name – Israel – comes from a man named Jacob. Jacob is, by nature, a striver. He is assertive or, perhaps less charitably, a bit pushy. At birth he grabs the heel of his older twin from the womb, as if seeking to supplant him. Thus,

he is named יעקב from the Hebrew עקב "heel." In his early years his drive leads him to act in ways that hurts those closest to him. He manipulates his brother and deceives his father. Fearing his brother's wrath over a blessing he stole, Jacob runs away from home. Even then, when God comes to him in a dream, his faith is offered as a bargain – given only, he says to God, if you are with me, provide for me and allow me to return home. 20 years later Jacob realizes that he has to face his demons – all the lies, trickery, bargaining and scheming to get ahead. So he journeys back to confront his brother. Jacob, the one who ran away rather than confront his issues; Jacob, the master manipulator: Jacob, the heel, is now about to take responsibility.

The night before that fateful meeting Jacob is left alone. In popular thought Jacob wrestles with an angel. Torah, however, is more ambiguous, saying only that he struggles with an אִישׁ, a "man." It is a time of transformation, for Jacob is given a new name. No longer is he merely "the heel", but he now becomes Israel. Then, his opponent adds one thing more – that he is called Israel "because you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."¹

We are the heirs of Jacob's struggle – challenge is our name; disagreement, our calling. I lived in Canada long enough to come to like what the minority government was called – "the loyal opposition." The Jewish ideal is not obedience and conformity, but dispute. The Jewish proclivity is not opposition for its own sake, but to speak out for human dignity, to be a voice for those without power, to challenge the political structure in every land when it does not seek equity and justice. That's what it means to be Jewish, my friends – not content with the world as it is, but seeking a world as it *ought* to be.

Yom Kippur is a time to consider our personal relationships, but we are unworthy if we see today merely as a moment for self-repair. Last night I spoke about the need to be the individuals we ought to be. This day says to

¹ Genesis 32:29

you and me that we can be better – and the good life begins with integrity, responsibility and humility. We have to start here, in ourselves. But we can never be fully the “children of Israel” if we only engage in navel-gazing.

God's promise to Abraham was that his descendents would be “as the stars of heaven”. Maybe it was a reminder that if we want to see who we truly are, we should look up, freed from the discouragement that keeps too many men and women only looking down. Our gaze must be higher – to be a voice of moral conscience in the world often drunk with power, the voice of reason against those who terrorize others with narrow vision of God, the voice of responsibility and caring to the self-satisfied and secure.

If we are the voice of ethical audacity, it is hard – no, it is impossible! – to avoid the moral issues of the day. A Jewish conscience compels us, therefore, to be political. In a reflection in the *Wall Street Journal*, a former White House Jewish liaison under President George W. Bush recently warned, “Political sermonizing is a mistake.”² I have heard it from many of you, too. “Don't talk politics.”

To be sure, Judaism cannot offer clear answers about what should be the proper tax rate for those making over \$250,000 a year. There is no good guidance in Jewish sources as to how to pay down the Federal debt – or to defining the parameters of Social Security or Medicare. Jewish tradition has values in common with the political right with its emphasis on personal responsibility, and the political left, which says that care for the downtrodden and poor is a communal and societal obligation.

If politics is simply defined, then, as the legislation of the moment or partisan support of one party over another, I agree that a definitive Jewish perspective is impossible. There is no place for that narrow kind of “political sermonizing” on the pulpit nor is there any great insight any rabbi can bring to the debates of the moment. But politics in the broader sense – as the instrument by which we govern ourselves communally – has ever been the

² Tevi Troy, “The White House's Advice for Your Rabbi” *Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 2011

concern of the Jewish mind, heart and soul. Judaism demands moral rectitude in every human endeavor – including politics. Is it politics – or faith in God - that demands that we speak out for greater equity? Is it politics – or engagement with Torah - to challenge a system that places undue hardship on those without power? Is it politics – or a commitment to Jewish values – to say that the ideals of liberty, justice and peace that we seek for ourselves should be the inheritance of every people and all nations?

I will not - I cannot – be silent. Nor should you. We are the “children of Israel.” As the prophets of old remind us – we cannot shrink. We must not shirk. The world is broken, and it is ours to help make it better.

The prophet Jeremiah was born into money and privilege. He could have had a life of comfort. He saw the political misconduct and lack of religious commitment of his fellow Israelites, however, and he was incensed. He railed against the pandering to other nations and decried the chasing after wealth. Jeremiah's *chutzpah* was far from appreciated. He was attacked by his own family, beaten up by the religious authorities, imprisoned by the king and even threatened with death. Still, he spoke.

Another prophet, Isaiah, who we read this morning as our *haftarah* – also denounced the false piety, empty rituals and a Jewish life unconnected with making the world more just and fair. You want to know what it means to be Jew? It is, Isaiah said, to “cry with full throat, without restraint; (to) raise your voice like a ram's horn!”³ On Rosh Hashanah we listened to the *shofar*. This day we do not sound it, for we are empowered to become that sound – to call out the lies, oppression and injustice in our world. You think not having food or drink is self-affliction? No, cries Isaiah. Yom Kippur is to help those who are poor, to fight for the oppressed and reach out to other Jews.

Tony Judt, the controversial professor of history at NYU, often took positions on Israel with which I disagreed. As a secular Jew, there was little he said about Jewish identity I found appealing. A few months before he died last

³ Isaiah 58:1

year, however, he wrote a fascinating reflection on why he was a Jew. It is not compelling enough, he claimed, just to remember our past or those who tried to destroy us. I agree. Our enemies tried to kill us. OK? Is that reason enough to be a Jew? Judt argued that there is a more relevant rationale to be Jewish – one with ancient roots. “Judaism for me,” he wrote, “is a sensibility of collective self-questioning and uncomfortable truth-telling: the *dafka*-like quality of awkwardness and dissent.”⁴ Why, then, be Jewish? We are the world's “loyal opposition”, the *shofar* of conscience – questioning the moment we are given, the political structures, the religious hypocrisy, the knee-jerk compassion for the underdog with little regard for history.

Chutzpah for own sake is brash, arrogant, selfish and unbecoming of our inheritance as Jews. But a *chutzpah* that seeks greater righteousness, a *chutzpah* that demands a society that is caring ... that is a worthy calling of being a Jew.

Imagine a whole country filled with people whose natural inclination is towards being *chutzpadik*. The first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben Gurion alluded to this when he once met President Eisenhower. The American president confided: “It’s very hard to be the president of 170 million people.” Ben-Gurion responded: “Trust me. It’s harder to be the prime minister of 2 million prime ministers.”

The Palestinian-Israeli *מצב* (or “situation” as it is euphemistically called in Hebrew) is, of course, the central, existential issue in Israel. But Israelis have plenty of other concerns – and some even more pressing. Like you and me they want to work, to feel they are fairly paid and that their basic needs (food, housing and health care) are within their grasp. But a growing number of Israelis don't feel that. It's not that Israel, as a whole, is in bad shape. Even through the past three difficult years, Israel has shown remarkable economic strength. Yet of all the developed countries in the world, Israel has the greatest level of poverty. It ranks fifth among developed countries with the

⁴ <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2010/apr/19/toni>

greatest income gap (incidentally, the nation with an even worse record is the United States).⁵ All this was the background for Israelis suddenly rising up these past few months in a movement for social change, demanding a better deal – in short, a world that ought to be.

The protests in Israel this summer were sparked by (of all things) the price of cottage cheese. That's right! Cottage cheese. In June, a 25-year-old resident of B'nai Brak, Yitzhak Alrov, had enough of rising food costs. Upset by reports that showed the high cost of living in Israel, Alrov opened a Facebook page and called for a consumer boycott of (you guessed it) cottage cheese. The response was electrifying. Over 100,000 consumers joined the boycott. Stores reported a steep decline in sales of the popular item. The protests expanded in July to discontent over the cost of housing. And the protests continued to grow all summer long. On September 3 the biggest rally in Israel's history took place. Some 450,000 people - nearly 6% of the country's population – gathered in protest against the government (an equivalent number here would be 18 *million* people). As diverse and diffuse as what the protesters were seeking, they were in agreement about one thing – Israel as a State must be better, not just a refuge or place for Jews to be sovereign, but an Israel dreamed of by our Torah and prophets, rabbis and visionaries.

We are living through tough time – and there will be, as a result, much that will test our moral mettle. There is (God knows) plenty to give one pause. The world seems mired in economic quicksand – a “synchronized slowdown” said one financial guru recently, which seems to me as just business-speak for “keep your money in the mattress”! The political climate in this country is so appallingly toxic and dysfunctional that compromise is all but impossible. As popular revolts swept from Tunisia to Egypt, and beyond, some waxed optimistic. Few Jews, however, felt hopeful, and the anti-Israeli melee in Cairo brought to the fore our worst fears. The Jewish State's relations with Turkey are fragile (and I'm being generous), Hizbollah is re-armed with rockets that now

⁵ <http://www.forward.com/articles/137232>; <http://www.acri.org.il/en/?p=2389>;
http://www.oecdobserver.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/3544/A_profile_of_the_Israeli_economy.html;

can strike anywhere in Israel and the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians seems to be getting worse.

Some will laugh at the notion of a better world as just some naïve ideal. The particularists amongst us will say that this is a time to focus less on the world and more on ourselves as Jews. Some will claim, "They will always hate us, so let's stop pretending. We need to be strong, assertive, unyielding." In an age of challenge, few of us will not be tempted by a self-serving inner voice to stop looking at the stars, and to circle the wagons. "Let's take care of our own ... to hell with the rest."

As natural as is that desire, we can do better, we should look higher, we can seek more of ourselves – and the world. The great Modern Orthodox rabbi of the last century, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, the "Rov", taught that there is not one, but two covenants, that we have as Jews. One he called a *ברית גורל*, *brit goral* a "covenant of fate" born of the experience of slavery in Egypt. This is the covenant that unites us, by historical experience – our exile and suffering, our common heritage – to all other Jews. But there is another covenant, one that we accepted at Sinai. This *ברית יעד*, *brit ye'ud* this "covenant of destiny", defines the people Israel not as the object of persecution but the subject of a unique vocation, to become 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' Under this covenant, the Jewish people are defined not by what others do to it, but by the task it has undertaken, the role it has chosen to play in history."⁶ At Sinai we put aside the limitations of being defined by others. We were no longer "Hebrews". We became fully Israel.

At the end of Yom Kippur we will sound the *shofar* one final time. Why is it that the *shofar* is blown from the small opening and not the wide one? Of course, it would not work if we blew it that way. But maybe there is something more. It teaches that we have to begin where we are – and in so doing affect something far beyond ourselves. We are Jews, linked to other Jews by a "covenant of fate." But we are not *just* Jews. We are Jewish human beings,

⁶ <http://www.jewishpress.com/pageroute.do/43888/>

and our "covenant of destiny" teaches that we are called to be the *shofar* to the world.

As the *shofar* reminds us of the sound of Creation, we affirm the moral intent of that Creation – that all people are equal. The *shofar* was a thunderous blast heard at Sinai, the culmination of our freedom from Egypt. We, too, must be witness to the demand that all people should be free. The *shofar* will, our rabbis teach, be the sound of the messianic moment, a sound our people heard as they entered a new and Promised Land. Its redemptive call ought to be echoed in our vision, our hope ... nay, our demand ... for a better world that will only come when every person is treated with justice, dignity and love.

Now – more than ever – it is a time to look to the stars and remember. Rise up, O Israel. Rise up. Be a nation of prime ministers. Be a kingdom of priests. The world is broken. It is ours to dream of something better ... something it *ought* to be. God knows, the world needs you! It needs all of us.