

Yom Kippur 2020/5781 – Lift Your Voice

Early in the pandemic, when the virus was devastating Italy, I felt deeply moved by videos of Italians singing together on balconies. Locked down and with limited human contact, if any at all, Italians gathered on their balconies to raise their voices in song. The stirring sounds and images underscored the yearning of the moment, the harmonies blending became a proxy for being together.

I think about the last seven weeks of summer, as we have been blessed to enjoy Shabbat services outdoors in person in the parking lot. While Karen and I get to sing, distanced from participants sitting in family pods, we have missed the full throated song of Temple Beth David. And this holiday season, as Karen, Batya, Michael, the small crew from WMC and I occupy the sanctuary, we miss seeing you and hearing the voice of our community. We mourn the absence of your voices. In a summer of masks and even a summer of protests, voices have been muted.

In this morning's Haftarah, from the prophet Isaiah, God exhorts the prophet to call out to Israel with full throat. *K'rah b'garon al tachsoch, k'shofar hareim kolecha v'hageid l'ami pisham, u'lveit Ya'akov chatotam.* Cry out from the depths, says God, do not hold back, lift your voice like the shofar! Tell my people their transgression, and the House of Jacob their sin. (Is. 58:1). Could there be a better message for Yom Kippur? At this season of reflection and repentance, we are in need of voices of conscience more than ever.

We still have the memory of the shofar's call reverberating in our hearts from Rosh Hashanah. Now on Yom Kippur, the prophet becomes God's Shofar shaking the Israelites from their moral slumber. Like the shofar, the prophet's voice pierces the hypocrisy. Isaiah's *tekiah*, "Even on your fast day you think only of desire and gain while exploiting those who work for you." *Shevarim*, "You strike with callous fists." The prophet calls out the shattering violence of word and deed that tears down society. *Teruah*, "have you broken bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, or shared your bread with the hungry?" The staccato repetition of oppression over generations brings down both oppressed and oppressor.

This summer, two indispensable American voices have been lost. Two *Shofarot* who raised their voices for justice. On July 17th, the conscience of the Congress, Representative John Lewis, left his voice to history. May it continue to resonate. And on the first of *Tishrei*, September 18, the dawn of the New Year, we ended the service to learn of the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. Learning of her death, I could not hold back, like the broken sobs of *shevarim*, I wept. Where have you gone John and Ruth? A nation turns its lonely eyes to you.

If there is any message, I want to impart to you this Yom Kippur, it is that of Isaiah. Cry out from your depths and do not hold back. We must become the Shofar of which the prophet speaks. Voices are being stifled. The America of Lewis and Ginsberg is at stake. That should concern all of us as Jews, especially at this season of return to a path of righteousness. Now is the time to take up the call of John Lewis and the quiet fortitude of Justice Ginsberg. Each left a legacy of how we can use our voices in response to the moment in which we live.

In the summer of 1961, justice was on the move, pursued by John Lewis and his multiracial Freedom Riders. These activists challenged segregated busing across the south. They traveled through southern states on their integrated bus only to be repeatedly beaten and jailed. While their bus was the first, it was not the last. More buses went south that summer as White Americans and Black Americans joined together to help register the 93% of African Americans in Mississippi who had been disenfranchised. Among the first group who participated in registering voters, 1/3 of those White Americans were Jews, far exceeding our representation of 2% of the American population. This direct action rattled the barricades of poll taxes, literacy tests, and intimidation. John Lewis once said, "The vote is precious. It is almost sacred. It is the most powerful non-violent tool we have in a democracy." The vote is the voice of each individual. In our nation, access to the sanctity of the vote has grown over time, from African American men with the 14th Amendment, women's suffrage enacted 100 years ago with the 19th amendment, and the voting rights act of 1965. Voting leads to participation, representation and change.

Once again, the vote is under siege in our nation. This fact should weigh on our conscience this Yom Kippur. It should spur us to channel the voice of John Lewis and decry this injustice. Lies about rampant fraud in mail-in voting are the poll taxes and literacy tests of our time. Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels once said, "If you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes truth." Cry out from the depths, like a shofar raise your voice and declare, "Not True!" And when the administration makes it harder to vote by mail during a pandemic that overwhelmingly affects the poor and people of color, we can demand action from our lawmakers. And in the face of their inaction, we can act.

Join the Union for Reform Judaism's Religious Action Center civic engagement campaign called "Every Voice, Every Vote." Every Voice, Every Vote has 3 simple goals: mobilize fellow citizens to vote so that there is 100% participation, fight against voter suppression, and engage student voters who might be participating in this election for the first time. Google it, every voice, every vote and look for a link in the upcoming weekly Shofar email. Every Voice, Every Vote is non-partisan. It is patriotic because in America exercising our right to vote is the way we put the "We" in "We the people..." It is Jewish because a society of justice depends on the equality of participation. That is how we American Jews have thrived in this democracy. Cry out from the depths, lift your voice like the shofar.

When Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt's voice filled the Supreme Court this past Wednesday with the memorial *El Malei Rachamim* prayer for Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, I shivered. It was not just the beauty of the chant or the moment to reflect on Ginsburg's life. It was also that a rabbi stood leading the memorial for a late Jewish Justice of the court. Judaism was in one of the sacred halls of our nation, equally part of the tapestry we call America. Justice Ginsburg once said, "Think back to 1787, who were 'We the People,' they certainly weren't women. They surely were not people held in human bondage. The genius of our constitution is now over more than 200 sometimes turbulent years, that "We" has expanded and expanded." We Jews have been blessed to be part of that expanding "We." Ruth Bader Ginsburg made it her life's purpose to fight for that expanding "We". That legacy is well-known, advancing the cause of gender equality both as a lawyer and as a judge.

But RBG's voice will also continue to echo in two other ways so important for our time, in dissent and in decency. One of the great traditions of American democracy, one which has a corollary in the Talmud, is the preservation of the minority opinion. In many ways, some of Ginsburg's greatest writings were in her dissents. She took extra care in writing these opinions. She said, "Dissents speak to a future age. It's not simply to say, 'My colleagues are wrong and I would do it this way.' But the greatest dissents do become court opinions and gradually over time their views become the dominant view. So that's the dissenter's hope: that they are writing not for today, but for tomorrow." That is the prophetic vision and voice of Ginsburg.

RBG had no problems letting her colleagues know when she thought they were wrong. She argued fiercely about ideas and yet did not belittle those who held opposing views. This was Ginsburg's decency. We need not look further than her friendship with her ideological opposite, the late Justice Antonin Scalia. Her decency meant that her arguments were, *machloket l'sheim shamayim* – arguments for the sake of heaven. Jewish tradition holds the Ginsburg and Scalia of the Talmud, Rabbis Hillel and Shammai, as exemplars of an argument for the sake of heaven. Though they had diametrically opposing understandings of *halacha*, Jewish law, the Talmud teaches that they would teach the other's opinions in their study houses, break bread with one another, and marry their sons and daughters. Like Hillel and Shammai, Justice Ginsburg worked tenaciously within the system of law and the court to try to move society to a better place while demonstrating respect for those with principled ideological differences.

Without Ruth Bader Ginsburg in our world, we have to take up her shofar. Our democracy is in trouble. Eroding democracy has always been bad for the Jews. This is the time both for full throated dissent and whole-hearted decency. In their 2018 book, *How Democracies Die*, Harvard professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt note four key indicators of authoritarian behavior that undermine democracy. First, rejection or weak commitments to democratic rules of the game, such as calling into question the legitimacy of credible election results. Second, denying the legitimacy of political opponents by calling them criminals or treasonous. Third, tolerating or tacitly encouraging violence among supporters or not condemning violence when it occurs. And fourth, readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including the media. Yet, there is nothing in the Constitution that states that a president or member of Congress can't behave in an authoritarian manner. Levitsky and Ziblatt ask, if it is not the Constitution that has fully been able to protect American democracy, then what has? They write, "All successful democracies rely on informal rules that, though not found in the constitution or any laws, are widely known and respected. In the case of American democracy, this has been vital." The more these norms are violated - lying, denigrating the free press, and personally insulting opponents - the more we become desensitized and overwhelmed.

So we can take up Ruth Bader Ginsburg's shofar of dissent. Rather than being overwhelmed and desensitized, we can call out behaviors and statements that undermine the spirit of our democracy. When we see something that is not normal we can say something to whomever will listen, our children, our neighbors, the editor of our local paper, and on social media. We can also model the decency of RBG, showing forbearance for those who disagree with us in good faith. We can model decency by marching with those who have not been treated as being part of "We the People." That includes black brothers and sisters, immigrants coming to these shores in pursuit of the same dreams that brought our ancestors here, women who still

face acts of discrimination and violence even as they occupy seats on the highest court in the land. It means standing with fellow Americans waiting in long lines at the food pantry or those who can't put a roof over their children's heads because the bounty of America is not shared more evenly.

Isaiah, John Lewis, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and you. *K'rah b'garon al tachsoch, k'shofar hareim kolecha*. Cry out from the depths, says God, do not hold back, lift your voice like the shofar! Tell my people their transgression... In spite of our masks, now is the time to find our voices. When we do, these words of Isaiah will be equally true, "Then shall your light burst forth like the dawn and your wounds heal. Then, when you call, Adonai will answer *hinei*-here I am. If you remove the chains of oppression, the menacing hand, the malicious word; if you offer your compassion to the hungry and satisfy the suffering-then shall your light shine through the darkness (Isaiah 58:8-10)." Amen!