

Indifference

Clean Hands: The Sin of Indifference

Yom Kippur Morning, 5777 — Rabbi Jeffrey A. Marx

I was 8 years old and had just started religious school in a Chicago congregation. Since my classes began an hour after my younger sister, I was deposited every Sunday morning in the Temple library to spend the time, there, before my classes began. The volunteer librarian, who had a kind heart but not a real knowledge of children, thrust into my hands a paperback book, that, by its short number of pages and relatively large print, she assumed would be suitable for a third-grader. It was called, *Night*. The author, Elie Wiesel, as I quickly learned in page after shocking page, described his death camp experiences at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. The world was never the same for me, again.

Night was but the first book I read, as I became a student of Holocaust. I was fascinated by the question of how it happened. I sought not just the mechanistic answers that explored the Nazi bureaucracy of death; not just the theological answers as to how God could permit this terrible evil to flourish but also to understand how human beings could do this to other human beings. Even these answers turned out to be multi-faceted, for among the perpetrators there were the planners and architects of evil; there were the bureaucrats and foot-soldiers who carried out their orders; there were Anti-Semitic civilians who turned in their neighbors or, worse, attacked them; and, then, there were the silent bystanders. In college, my senior year, I read dozens of books about these bystanders. For me, that became my primary question. The architects of evil, well, they were evil; the bureaucrats opportunistic, Anti-Semitic toddlers; the SS guards sadistic sociopaths. What I wanted to understand was the German populace. What I wanted to understand was their silence, their indifference.

But, as the years progressed, as other genocidal massacres took place in Cambodia, and Rwanda, Sarajevo and Kosovo, as ISIS engaged in “religious cleansing,” I have come to broaden my question about indifference. It is no longer: “Why were the Germans silent?” It has now become, “Why is it we who are silent?” Why have I, why have we been so indifferent, so unresponsive to so much of human distress and misery in the world around us?

Take, for example, the most recent crisis taking place before our eyes: the plight of Syrian refugees. Almost five million people have fled terrible conditions in Syria. Germany took in 300,000; Sweden 100,000. The US has only let in 10,000. What is our response to this grave humanitarian crisis? Near silence. In this year alone, in the U.S., there were 242 mass shootings. Among all the leading countries of the world, the US is ranked twenty-third in infant mortality. We are silent about this, as well.

Forty-five million Americans – that's fourteen percent of the country – live below the poverty line, while millions and millions of others are facing a bleak economic future as jobs once held by the middle and lower-middle class are lost to globalization and what's left is eviscerated by robotization. I remember a summer, when, as a teenager, I worked for the Chicago Tribune, pulling papers off the press and then lifting those bundles onto a pallet. Today, my job is gone, it's all being done by machines. There are fewer and fewer jobs left for those who once had them. And their children? Exactly what will one do these days with a high school education?

Millions and millions of retired Americans who are going to live a decade longer than the generation before them, simply do not have enough money in their retirement savings to sustain them in their old age. Millions more have *no* retirement, have homes whose worth is upside down. Millions and millions and millions of Americans are facing a future with little or no hope. And even these millions are only a small fraction of the forty-five million Americans who are the poorest of the poor.

But, in our indifference, we turn away from problems that affect millions of American citizens. When fifteen million people supported Bernie Sanders for President, we dismissed them as naïve college students, and the thirteen million Americans who support Donald Trump we continue to denigrate as angry white men threatened by women's gains in the world, rather than acknowledge that there is a severe economic crisis in America that has left millions in despair and millions more with no hope for their future. It is far easier for us to dismiss Sanders as a starry-eyed socialist and Donald Trump as a know-nothing blowhard, than to ask ourselves why tens of millions of Americans have supported them. Instead, while they are in despair over their future, we, here, on the Westside of L.A. worry that we're getting a low rate of return on our investments; that our homes aren't appreciating as fast as we would like. We are concerned about what the quality of our free time will be in the years of retirement that are before us. We debate whether or not we should spend our money on private grade-school education for our children, or sigh heavily when they decide to attend a college on the East Coast rather than a less expensive U.C. that would *only* cost us thirty thousand dollars a year. While we've been gazing with fascinated eyes at the two percent that owns the wealth of this country, we ignore that most of us, here, this morning, comprise the top twenty-five percent of wealth in this country. But what of the other seventy-five percent? How far we have removed ourselves from the pain, worries, woe, and economic despair of millions and millions of Americans.

This morning, then, I want to suggest to you that indifference is a sin. "Our hands are clean," stated millions of Germans after the Holocaust. "I did not turn in my neighbors; I was not in the SS, I did not work in a concentration camp in Germany or a death camp in Poland." And, we, here this morning, can also hold our heads up high that we are not the

perpetrators. We're not the slum landlords; we're not the business tycoons strategically declaring bankruptcy, leaving workers and contractors with useless promises. We pay our Hispanic gardeners the minimum wage; we pay our housekeepers whom we don't want to lose, even more; and we express our thanks to the Filipino live-ins, who take care of mom or dad, with gifts to express our deep appreciation. We tip well at restaurants and at the car wash; we leave money for the chambermaids in the hotels. Our hands are clean.

But indifference is a sin. It is not enough that we refrain from oppressing others, we also are not to look away from their plight. That is what the Prophet Isaiah called out in words that we read in this morning's Haftarah portion: "Is not this the fast I look for: ...to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked, to clothe them, and never hide yourself from others?" Never hide yourself from others. It is not enough that our hands are clean if our eyes are closed to what is happening all around us.

And closed they are. While we congratulate ourselves that *we* don't live in gated communities, we might as well be doing so. We are so far removed from Detroit, and Baltimore, from hundreds upon hundreds of small towns in the Midwest with boarded up businesses, the Appalachian coalmine towns, the empty company towns by shutdown oil fields. We are so far removed from South Central and East L.A. We worry that the Expo line will bring more of "them" out to "us."

The sin of indifference can be tempting. "It is so much easier to look away...It is so much easier to avoid such rude interruptions to our work... It is, after all, awkward, troublesome, to be involved in another person's pain and despair..." (Elie Wiesel, 1999 White House speech).

And it's a sin that slowly seeps into us. We become overwhelmed by the pictures of starvation in Africa, repressive jailing in Southeast Asia; Pacific islands besieged by rising sea levels; immigrant boat capsizes in the Mediterranean. We become inured to yet another shooting in Baltimore or New York or Los Angeles. And we suffer a growing sense of powerlessness. After all, what can we do in the face of complex problems that seem to defy solutions? And so, rather than expose ourselves to yet more images of violence, of despair, of poverty and oppression, of horror, we turn away, we tune out, and we become indifferent. We become like Jonah, whose story we will read this afternoon; the story of a man who does not behave badly towards others, rather he is one who doesn't want to become involved. Jonah seeks to flee to the furthestmost corner of the known world, he hides himself deep inside a ship, he sinks into the safety of sleep.

So, we must wake ourselves up, open our eyes, and open our hearts. For that is truly what it means to be a Jew: To be a human being in the extreme. To feel more for those in need, to

regard the plight of the strangers in our midst, for time and time again, our tradition reminds us: “Remember that you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Ex. 22:21).

And when we open our hearts we are led to open our hands. Our Torah reading for this afternoon tells us this: “When you harvest your fields, leave some of the harvest for the poor. When you pick your grapes, leave some on the vine for those in need. Make sure that those sleeping out in the cold have a garment in which to wrap themselves.” So yes, open your hands. Donate books to the Book Truck program and used furniture to Angel View. Put your used cans and bottles at the top of your blue tins, so it’s easier for the poor to find them and cash them in for pennies. Go out and buy a dozen pairs of socks when you’re at the shoe store and donate them to a shelter.

Right now, in Santa Monica, on any given night, there are over six hundred men and women who are homeless, sleeping out on the street. In Los Angeles County, eighty-two thousand are homeless. If you haven’t yet filled a shopping bag with cans of food to be distributed to the hungry, open your hearts and your hands and do so this afternoon, bringing it back here for the Neilah service.

There’s something else you can do, as well. Before you break the fast with others at the end of this Yom Kippur, write a check. That, too, is an ancient Jewish tradition; the tradition of tithing. Our rabbis taught that that every Jewish community had to have a soup kitchen to provide daily food to the hungry, and a fund to provide basic essentials for those in need. If you are not able to give of your time to make the world a better place then give of your funds. Open your hands to write a check to help make a difference in the world. Write a check to Sova so they can purchase more food or Turning Point Shelter so they can house someone or the Brady Campaign to End Gun Violence. Write a check to support ALS or cancer research. And if you think this gets you too easily off the hook of making the world better for others, then write a big check. Our tradition is very clear on this. Those who become not only a patron of the arts but a patron of health, a patron of ending hunger, a patron of reducing disease, a patron of providing shelter, a patron of making the world a better place for those who are in need, those who do so by their donations, are regarded by our community as paradigms of morality and goodness. So, yes, write a check to make a difference in the world.

And, yes, vote. Vote locally, and statewide and nationally. Vote for candidates who promise not only to make the world better for the economically disadvantaged but for those who also speak for the millions who have no job, no future, no voice. Vote for those who have compassion for the stranger, for the less fortunate.

It is true that we will not solve all of the problems of this world. The world will continue to be filled with those who have and those who do not; those who are the victims of war and violence; those who are crushed by illness, poverty and despair. No, we are not going to be

able to end this cycle in our lifetime, we can start small, we can start locally. We can make a difference in someone's life. It is not enough that our hands are clean, rather, our hands must be involved.

May in this New Year to come, our hands be clean as we refrain from evil, but even more than that, may our hearts be full of compassion and care, as we work to overcome the sin of indifference. May we open our eyes, may we open our hearts, may we open our hands.