

We Will Stand Up – Kol Nidre
September 29, 2017 – 10 Tishrei 5778
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
Rabbi Howard J. Goldsmith

On Erev Rosh Hashanah I spoke words of comfort for a turbulent time based on the stunning poetry and spiritual force of Psalm 23. On Rosh Hashanah morning I made a statement of protest, a sermon that resonated with many people in the congregation, a sermon that has received over one thousand views on Youtube.¹ Yom Kippur is not only a day for reflection and repentance. For our repentance to work, we need to take action. And so, tonight, I will speak about following protest with action, about what we can do in the face of injustice and divisive politics. This is about rolling up our sleeves and doing the work to build a stronger community and a stronger nation. Many of you stood in support of my sermon last week, a show of affirmation I'll never forget. Tonight is also about standing, about being an upstander. Will you stand up?

Strands from our tradition have wound around in my head since last week. Different Jewish ideas come to mind as congregants have asked what we can do, as congregants have voiced concerns, or have told me the ways in which they disagree. Various Jewish customs and texts, aphorisms and themes from festivals address elements of those questions, they encourage the conversations that we need to have, the actions that we can take. Within the Jewish canon, within the millennia of tradition, we can find resources to help guide our work, resources of inspiration and resilience, resources of practice and values. Since last week, many of you have said to me, “Now what?” Our traditions serve as the best place to look as we try to answer that question, when we try to figure out how we will stand up.

The first idea, the place to start, comes from a small piece of Talmud in a section called Pirkei Avot. “אל תִּפְרָשׁ מִן הַצְּבוּר”², Rabbi Hillel says, Do not separate yourself from the community.”² The place we need to start when we want to repair the world is our own community, our congregation. As I said last week, I am constantly amazed at the level of support congregants show one another in good times and bad. The men of Next Step and Single Malt Torah, the women of the Women’s Study Group and our Monday night Canasta game, the seniors who come for L’Chaim and Engaging Aging, and the teens of our youth programs all provide support to one another. Sometimes they provide deep, acute support; sometimes the simple fellowship of friendship. For a number of years, when a congregant lost a loved one a volunteer from our Caring Community would prepare a meal of condolence to bring to their home. Good will gestures of this nature bring people close, send a message of support, and reaffirm for people that they are not alone. Tonight we are relaunching the Caring Community and its important acts of caring. Under the leadership of Lorri Goldstein we will have the chance to deliver comfort once again. These times urgently call for us to sign up to comfort one another and help when the need arises. Will you stand up?

A bit deeper in the Talmud, in a section called Gittin, we find further inspiration. “Our Rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor, visit the non-Jewish sick with the

¹ <https://youtu.be/kJLqzyVcqIY>

² Pirkei Avot 2:4

Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, מפני דרכי שלום for the sake of peace.”³ To ensure a peaceful, good, hopeful community with opportunity for all, our tradition obliges us to help not only other Jews, but all our neighbors. This kind of community will not create itself. It takes each one of us to spend time volunteering, donating our money, and giving food and clothing and toys whenever we can. Emanu-El helps us do just that. Our Social Action program, overseen at this time by Hedy Cardozo, runs various drives, and volunteer opportunities throughout the year. In addition to social action, we also founded and help to run the ESL program at Don Bosco in Port Chester. Congregants and community members volunteer to help our neighbors claim their voice in an effort coordinated now by Jaime Morris. Emanu-El makes it easy for us to help others in the community. These times urgently call for each of us to do our part. Will you stand up?

My colleague Rabbi Michael Namath from the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism in Washington tells the following story: A man standing on a riverbank sees a person floating by. He grabs a stick, reaches out and pulls the man to shore. As soon as he gets the person to safety, the man sees another person floating down the river. Again, he reaches out with the stick and again, as soon as he has pulled the person to safety he sees another person coming down the river. Again and again this happens: a person floating, pulled to safety, then another person. Finally the man turns to one of the people he rescued and hands him the stick. “You take over,” he said. “But you can’t stop now!” says the rescued person. “The people in the river need you.” “No, you can help the people in the river, I’m going up stream to fix the bridge so that people stop falling in in the first place.” This, teaches Rabbi Namath, is the difference between social action and social justice, between direct assistance and working to change policy to prevent the problem in the first place.

The first step toward addressing policy is educating ourselves and speaking with the people who make that policy. To that end, our congregation will host a number of gatherings with the staffers who work for our elected officials. Meeting with officials themselves has merit, but anyone who has worked in politics knows that the staffers have primary responsibility for crafting the actual policies. At these Staffer Meetings we will learn what our elected officials are focusing on, we will give our input, and share our ideas on the issues that directly affect our lives and life in our community, our state, and our nation. We will have no political litmus test for attendance at any of these Staffer Meetings, this is not about lobbying. All congregants and friends can come and learn while having their voices heard. This will also allow us to build meaningful relationships with the offices of our elected representatives, relationships that we could call on in the future if the need arose. Gene Sekulow and MJ Wolff have stood up to lead this Staffer Meeting initiative. These times urgently call for each of us to engage. Will you stand up?

Israel’s ancient prophets taught us that we have an obligation to bring our values and ethics into the public sphere, into the political life of the nation. From Nathan’s daring rebuke of King David himself,⁴ to Isaiah’s admonitions about society’s responsibility to care for the orphan, the widow, and the stranger,⁵ the prophets sought not only to change individual behavior, but to change the society, its power structures, and the government that oversaw them. Since its

³ Gittin 61b

⁴ 2 Samuel 12

⁵ Isaiah 1:17

founding in the late 19th century, Reform Judaism has heeded the prophet's call to bring our values to the public square. Indeed, Judaism teaches that religious perspective ought to inform our society just as it informs moral conduct in our private lives. In keeping with this commitment, for 23 years our religious educator, Marcie Aiuvalasit, has brought our teenage students to the Religious Action Center in Washington, DC to advocate on policies according to the values-based resolutions of the broader Union for Reform Judaism. For many of our students, this trip has transformed their understanding, not only of the American political system, but also of the value and relevance of Judaism in their lives. Our teens stand up.

Knowing the success and value of the teens' experience in DC, all of us who wish will have the chance to work with Reform Jewish Voice of New York State in the coming year to bring the values of the Reform movement to the policy decisions in Albany and around the state. Marcie serves on the Union for Reform Judaism's Commission on Social Action, helping to form the policy positions advocated by the Religious Action Center and the Reform Jewish Voice of New York. Together with Leslie Mook and Patty Chernick, they will seek our assistance in this important work. These times urgently call for us to educate, advocate, and make our voices heard. Will you stand up?

A little over two thousand years ago in the land of Israel, a feud developed between the disciples of Rabbi Hillel, a religious moderate, and the disciples of Rabbi Shammai, who held a more stringent view of religious law. A particularly harsh episode lasted three years and almost tore the Jewish community apart. Hillel's disciples asserted, "The law is in agreement with our views," and Shammai's disciples contended, "The law is in agreement with our views." Finally, a voice from heaven announced, "אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים," These and those are the words of the Living God."⁶ In the midst of their tense feud, God reminded them – reminded all of us – that we can find truth in disagreement, that multiple interpretations hold validity, and that acknowledging multiple truths allows us to venture toward a deeper truth. Critically, this allowed our ancestors to hold the community together. It offers us the same opportunity.

While many people agreed with my sermon last week, some others did not. Some have let me know via email, others in person. And, while I stand by my words and my choice to address these issues in this forum, I sincerely appreciate those who have expressed their disagreement. But acknowledgement cannot be the end of the conversation. While we may disagree on various issues or how to address them, I know that the members of our congregation all want a more just, more peaceful, more compassionate world. Disagreement on how to get there means that we can learn from each other. As the heavenly voice announced, "אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים," these and those are the words of the living God."⁷ In other words, every view that strives for holiness may reveals a portion of truth. Seeking that truth, we will hold several topical, Torah- and ethics-centered conversations about the issues facing our community and our nation today. If you need to win every conversation, this will not be the group for you. But if you want to expand your understanding of issues, increase your perspective, and learn from people who hold different views, then we need you at these conversations. These times urgently call for honest, face-to-face dialogue. Will you stand up?

⁶ Eruvin 13b

⁷ Ibid.

All of these efforts will take energy. They will take spiritual and psychic resources that we need to nurture if we will find success. Our tradition gives us a way to do just that. Judaism has always recognized the importance of work and of rest. The rest of Shabbat asks us to take time to appreciate the world as it is, the many blessings that fill our lives. Like God on the 7th day of creation, we cease our work, we cease trying to change the world, and look at this miraculous planet, our beautiful families, our good friends, and we say, simply, “thank you.” This simple pause recharges our spirit, lifts our psyches, and leaves us ready to go back into the world and progress towards the change we hope to see. Whether we observe Shabbat for a full 24 hours or just 10 minutes of candle lighting at home, it can provide a much needed sanctuary from the needs of our world. Those who join together on Shabbat each week in this room, our sanctuary, stand and acknowledge all the goodness in our lives. These times urgently call for us to create sanctuaries for thanksgiving and blessing in which we can refresh and recharge. Will you stand up?

Perhaps the most important idea about how to act in these times comes from another piece of Pirke Avot in Talmud. “אָעלָהּ הַמְלָאכָה לְגַמְדָּהּ, אֲאַתָּה בְּחֹזֶק יָד לְבִטְלָמָּהּ” It is not your responsibility to finish the work, neither are you free to desist from it.”⁸ For thousands of years our people have lived under every kind of government imaginable and we have always heeded this call from the Talmud as we worked for justice, for peace, for the betterment of society. And, we’ve done that work with no expectation that we would see the final results of our labor. Instead, we did that work like a farmer who plants trees so that his children and grandchildren may enjoy their fruit.⁹ This little verse of Talmud reminds us that every action that we take to improve the world fulfills our obligation to keep trying to make this world a little better, a little more whole, a little more holy.

Tomorrow morning we will read God’s words from the Torah, “Surely, this Torah which I give you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach... No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.” God continues, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. וּבָחַרְתָּ תְּבַחֵי יָם. Choose life – that you may live!”¹⁰ The change that we wish to see in the world, a change that Torah can inspire if we let it, is within our grasp. Whether our Judaism motivates us to engage in policy advocacy, care for our community, take care of one another, or simply seek the spiritual, Emanu-El has a place for each of us in these divisive times. And, whatever our goal for improving the world, together we can make it happen for that is what it means to וּבָחַרְתָּ תְּבַחֵי יָם choose life.¹¹ Together we will not allow our community, our society, or our world to careen away from us. Together we will unite even when we disagree. Together we will cast aside feelings of despair and alienation. And, together, as one community choosing life - We Will Stand Up.

⁸ Pirkei Avot 2:16

⁹ Taanit 23a

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 30

¹¹ Ibid.