

Yom Kippur – Pursuing Justice

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In the interfaith circles in which I hang out, there has been a lot of discussion about our roles as clergy given the turmoil in our society today. One of challenges put forth has been this question: “Are you intending to be a chaplain to the Empire, or a prophet of resistance?” (Rev. Michael-Ray Mathews). To give that more of a Jewish flavor, we might ask, Are religious leaders to be priests, kohanim, officiants, who serve the people and preserve the status quo, following in the footsteps of Moses’s much beloved brother Aaron? Or are our role models the prophets who spoke in fiery tones, disrupted the hierarchies of their times, and were viewed as troublemakers? Though considered heroic today from the distance of 2,500 years, during their lifetimes they were not so popular.

The priests took on the pastoral role of comforting the afflicted, while the prophets saw as their task to afflict the comfortable. That language actually comes from the world of journalism, from a time when newspapers were viewed as guardians of democracy and used these words to defend their investigative reporting.

As a rabbi, some part of one’s work is to comfort the afflicted, whether by illness or loss or other pain and sorrow. This work has been important to me; I know that the pain is real. That is part of how I left my first intended major of urban planning. I was housesitting for a woman physician who lived in the neighborhood, one of a handful of mothers I knew with significant careers. I

remember walking up to her beautiful home, on a shady, pleasant street, near parks and public transportation, all the things that urban planners might supply, but looking at her house and those of her neighbors, realizing that even so, there was unhappiness and pain in these homes.

But if our role as rabbis was merely to soothe and make comfortable, we would never have to say no, never be in conflict. We could duck all of the issues of the day, arguing that this is not the role of religion. Of course, that wouldn't be true to Judaism either. I have always loved the great story about the young rabbi who was instructed that he should preach from the weekly Torah portion and that would keep him out of trouble. He goes out to his student monthly pulpit in a small town in the South, and the Torah portion is about Sodom and Gemorrah, so he speaks on the sin of a city that won't accept immigrants. He returns a month later for parashat Miketz and preaches about economic inequality and the abuse of the poor. The congregation complains to the college and the student is called in to meet the dean. "But I did what you told me," he protested. "I talked about the Torah portion."

Sometimes, depending on what's going on in the world, even the topics that seem like motherhood and apple pie—honestly, loyalty, respect—can take on a prophetic hue.

But rabbis aren't prophets. The mantle of prophecy was not passed on at the end of the Biblical period, God does not address us as God did the prophets with a message for their time. Rabbis are something else entirely.

Nor is pastoral work the essence of the rabbinate. Pastoral care, visiting the sick, and comforting the bereaved are something we do as we model for our congregation what it is that one human owes another. We may do it more than some, because we have training that makes us less afraid, and because being financially supported by the congregation, we are freed from other duties that might prevent a member of the congregation from having the time to visit, call or reach out. But our job as rabbis is something quite different.

I became a rabbi because I believed that Judaism had something important and useful to teach us about how to live our lives, both as individuals and as a community. Was I a good rabbi? Surveys can give you a lot of information but perhaps not the answer to that question. It isn't proven by popularity, or by its opposite either. The proof is in how each of you lives your lives. Have I convinced you over the years that the Torah, which in its broadest definition includes all of Jewish teaching and culture, has something to tell us, that there *is* a "so what"? Maybe it's a measure of how much of a nudnik I have been, without crossing the line to being unwelcome.

Many rabbis, as the end of their careers approach, are proud of the rabbis, educators, and cantors that came out of their congregation during their tenure, and I am as well. But I am equally proud of those I have taught—the oldest of whom are now pushing 50—who have chosen careers that serve the common good, and of the adults in the congregation who in a myriad of ways have chosen to be among those who (in the words of our old prayerbook) "have contributed their grain to the great store of the Eternal and done their part in the struggle for goodness." I hope that I am among them as well.

This morning we read Isaiah's stirring words: "Is not this the fast that I have chosen?" The question is not whether we can quote them by heart, but whether others can recognize them in our lives.