

In 2018, when Ruth Bader Ginsberg walked down our center aisle at Temple Beth-El, she gleefully carried a tote bag. That tote bag bore the words: I dissent. That was not only her motto but also one that speaks to the Jewish people. As Jews we are dissenters. It is our heritage. From Abraham arguing with God about Sodom and Gomorrah. To Talmudic arguments. Even our own Reform Movement is a dissent which emerged as a challenge and continues to challenge the status quo. The very name “Israel” means to wrestle with God. Even the Holy One is not exempt from examination. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches, “I remain in awe at the challenge God has set us. It is to be God’s question mark against the wisdom of the age, to build, to change, to mend the world/ until it becomes a place worthy of the divine presence.”¹

How can we be God’s question mark?

By raising our voices for greater good and justice against prejudice and hatred. That is dissent.

The Hebrew word for this kind of dissent took me by surprise: Chutzpah. This term is older than the yiddish meaning familiar to many of us. The

¹ To Heal the World, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

word *chutzpah* in the Talmud has a connotation of irrepressible strength and audacity. The Talmud uses the phrase *chutzpah afilu kelapei shemaya* “chutzpah in the face of heaven”--to describe the courage to stand up even to God for justice and right. Abraham possessed this audacity and so did Moses. The Talmud teaches that this *chutzpah* is as strong as monarchy without the crown.”² This holy *chutzpah*, this obligation to dissent against wrong is our legacy.

So much so that Rabbi Abraham Heschel writes, “Dissent is indigenous to Judaism.”³ Virtually every page of the Talmud reverently preserves minority opinions for posterity. Many of our customs reflect this deference to minority views. Our mezuzah’s tilt on the door post actually reflects a response to the dissent between great scholar Rashi and his grandson (another great scholar) on how it should hang. Rashi said it should hang vertically. Rabeinu Tam (his grandson) said it should hang horizontally. Today we hang it at an angle somewhere in between. Dissent can produce compromise. We may not get it our way, but we may find a new way. Consider the four cups of wine on our Passover table. The 5th cup for

² Sanhedrin 105a

³ Heschel, Dissent

Elijah is a new tradition born of dissenting views. Our sacred texts teach us that there is wisdom in listening to minority voices. We learn that hearing an opposing opinion is actually holy. We are taught to raise our voices to be heard because they will make a difference eventually.

Justice Scalia once made a point of sending Justice Ginsburg his dissent in a 1996 case as quickly as possible, so that she might better reckon with it in her majority opinion. “He absolutely ruined my weekend,” Justice Ginsburg remembered, “but my opinion is ever so much better because of his stinging dissent.”⁴

Isn't that what this day is about? We, too, are better when we can absorb the insights from those who challenge us and the ways in which we can challenge ourselves. Yom Kippur is when we dissent against our worst selves and stand up to be the best we can be. We embrace the notion, inherent in the idea of dissent, that we can do better. Our confessional is in the plural today. Not because we haven't committed individual transgressions. Rather because our holy chutzpah is communal. The

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/22/opinion/ruth-bader-ginsburg-antonin-scalia.html>

power of our “we,” even from our homes, is in the notion that we can challenge each other to be better people. As we each transform for the better we can lovingly and audaciously walk together to extend that chutzpah outward.

Dissent is about disagreeing without demonizing. Our tradition teaches that criticism can be based in love. If we didn't care we wouldn't dissent. Justice Bader Ginsburg dissented precisely because she did care about our nation.

She knew that Dissent is about building for the future. It is based in a boundless hope of what can be possible in our wildest dreams. She said in an interview with her dear friend Nina Totenberg:

"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.”⁵ Our strivings build a better future. Like the story of Choni the circle maker who plants carob trees whose fruit he will never live to see, we dissent for the future.

This past January I traveled to Guatemala with the American Jewish world service on a fellowship of rabbis and cantors. For me it was a life changing trip. Amidst astonishing injustice we were inspired by the individuals who worked tirelessly against relentless persecution. We heard from those who dissented in familiar ways—through legal means and civil channels. We met forensic anthropologists who dissented against the atrocities of genocide/ through meticulously returning remains to families. Our last days were spent with grassroots organizers who traveled hours by bus to speak with us. We could not share their names for fear of reprisal by the government. These brave souls dissented against repression through public art, music and dance. Another group of women claimed their power through raising their collective voices for their rights from within their families. We can each dissent in our own way, using our skills and

⁵ Ruth Bader Ginsburg in a 2002 interview with NPR's Nina Totenberg

passions. There is no one way to use our voices. We never know how one small rebellion can inspire another.

Let us not forget that we live in a state founded upon dissent against religious persecution. Roger Williams was unwilling to cave to the religious oppression of that colony to our North. Our beloved Rhode Island is the realization of his dream of religious freedom. It became our nation's dream as well when Washington declared "For happily the Government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, " Our dissent today creates a better tomorrow for someone else. This is true of us personally, for our state and for our nation.

Rabbi Heschel shares further wisdom, "The greatness of the prophets was in their ability to voice dissent and disagreement not only with the beliefs of their pagan neighbors, but also with the cherished values and habits of their *own* people."⁶ Consider the prophetic dissent we read on Yom Kippur. Isaiah offers scorching criticism of false piety and demands that we care for the vulnerable.

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Essential Writings*, 107

In this moment, when we are all vulnerable, we are still called to dissent against despair. That's what hope is.

We dissent against hopelessness when we believe in a brighter future.

In our busy lives, celebrating Shabbat can be a clear dissent.

We dissent when we connect with Jewish community in an ever secular world.

Every time we prioritize humanitarianism over power, that is dissent too.

We dissent every time we cast our vote for a brighter future.

When we summon our chutzpah, the audacity to stand against what we know is wrong for the greater good, we take our place with the great dissenters of our tradition. We each have a powerful voice that can change the world. Our dissent keeps us from stagnation. Our dissent is an act of renewal.⁷

No matter what 5781 brings or 2020 throws at us next, we can all be dissenters.

And our dissent can bring us renewal, hope and restored faith.

⁷ Heschel, Dissent Essay, Essential Writings