

A Voice Cries Out in the Wilderness (Isaiah 40:3)

For over 30 years, from the beginning of my Rabbinate, I have been active in interfaith dialogue, programs and initiatives. I cherish the opportunity to meet with clergy and leaders of different faiths. We explore text together, examine social issues together, and offer points of view that present challenges. For the most part these are quite thoughtful gatherings. Respectful. Sensitive. Sometimes even a bit solicitous as we're all careful not to offend or ruffle sensibilities. But sometimes, it doesn't quite work out that way.

When I was in Monroeville, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Pittsburgh, we had a particularly diverse group of clergy. We had ministers from several Protestant denominations, a Catholic Priest, a Muslim cleric, and leaders of the Hindu, Jain, Sikh, and B'hai communities. One of our major events each year was our annual Martin Luther King Jr. program. We built the program from year to year until it truly was a meaningful and beloved community event. We had civic leaders speak, we had art projects that involved scores of school kids. The event became so well attended that we had to hold it in a large community auditorium.

One year it was so successful that we were almost giddy with pride. And that should have been the first warning that our bubble was about to burst. At our very next Interfaith Clergy meeting, we spent the first several minutes congratulating each other on our tremendous achievement. And then, the very sweet, considerate, and thoughtful Hindu leader offered a humble suggestion. In addition to honoring the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., perhaps each year we should also honor a beloved figure from some other faith traditions. “What a wonderful idea!” we exclaimed. This way, we could educate the broader community about the richness of different cultures and religions. Smiles beamed as our self-congratulation expanded to fill the room. Backs were slapped, nods and winks exchanged and our collective chests puffed out. Surely, the entire region will be inspired by our new initiative.

Okay, so who should we choose first? Someone volunteered, “Let’s honor Gandhi!” The idea was an instant winner. “Everyone loves Gandhi! People even loved the movie, though it was over 3 hours long.

Well, as we were all going on, throwing out ideas for next year’s program, the Muslim leader was turning a deep shade of red. Our Monroeville Muslim community was composed mostly of immigrants from Pakistan. Slowly and carefully he began to express his concern but then the dam

burst and out came a flood of emotion: anger and hurt. “That man, that Gandhi, certainly is not considered a man of peace to our people. Because of him, millions of Pakistani Muslims were forced out of their homes in India. Because of him, many thousands died. Unimaginable suffering. My family was forced out. We’d lived there for centuries. If you honor such a man, I will no longer be able to be a part of this group.”

Furious, he stomped out. We were stunned. Who knew that not everyone loved Gandhi? We tried to walk back the proposal. Of course, then the Hindu representatives were deeply offended and hurt. Needless to say, we stuck with our MLK event. Wounds eventually healed and we resumed being a cooperative and supportive group. But we had also learned our lesson. Namely, that we live in a complex world with different perspectives and different historical narratives. And just because we believe something that doesn’t mean that that belief is universally shared. Indeed, one of the most important results of interfaith dialogue is the discovery of the truths, the authentic and valued world views of those who do not agree with you.

Believe it or not, even within the Jewish community there have been tremendous disputes! Yeah, I know, and they aren’t always easily resolved. Thankfully, there’s an important passage in the Talmud about the right way to conduct ourselves when we are in an ideological dispute. This passage

deals with two top academies of Torah scholars in the first century of the Common Era, some 2000 years ago. One was Beit Shammai and the other was Beit Hillel. As leading schools, they also felt a bit of competition with one another. It is taught in the Talmud:

For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel. This one asserting that “The halakhah [Jewish law and practice] is in agreement with our views.” And that one said, “The halakhah follows our views!” Then a voice from heaven declared: “*Elu v’Elu divrei Elohim chayim*: These and those --- both are the words of the living God, but the halakhah is in agreement with the rulings of Beth Hillel.”

The Gemara continues with the question: If both are the words of the living God, why was the halakhah fixed in agreement with Hillel’s rulings? It was because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai. And not only that, but they would also mention the teachings of Beit Shammai before theirs. (Eruvin 13b)

From a combative, competitive perspective, that Talmudic teaching is rather frustrating. There’s a part of us that wants to know: “So who is right and who is wrong?” But the Talmud was teaching us quite a different way of approaching a dispute. That is, we need to try to find the value, the significance in the arguments and positions of those who disagree with us.

The School of Hillel merited its preeminence not because its rulings were closer to the “truth.” The sages were far too humble to believe that they could declare that their teachings reflected “God’s will.” Rather, Hillel’s preeminence was predicated on their open-minded attitude. They took the time to carefully examine, study and appreciate the significance of opposing views. They did not indulge in mocking those who disagreed with them. They knew that only by considering other points of view could their positions be tested. Indeed, it very well may be the case that after listening to another’s point of view that we will adjust, reconfigure preset notions, incorporate new ideas, and thereby grow in understanding.

The relevance of that ancient teaching is readily apparent. The world is plagued by a long list of disputes and enmities. To make matters worse, we continue to create ways of dividing ourselves. Politically, we color coat states and whole regions, as if those who live there are some kind of other. The designations Red states and Blue states marginalizes the diversity found in every corner of this nation. Is it by media construct or our own inherent racism that people are labeled by their ethnicity, their race, their heritage and by their faith? Is it manipulative political strategy driven by questionable sociological data or is it our own personal prejudice that we lump members of this or that group into convenient pigeon holes?

Important social issues, vital issues that shape lives and determine the well-being of our neighbors are broken down into competing camps as if politics is nothing but some kind of sporting event. Root for this team. Despise that team. Complain about the rulings and indulge in conspiracy theories to explain why this one lost and this one prevailed. Often times the teams are sub-divided by race and religion, by gender and sexual orientation, by age and by education, by wealth and by employment. And so we are pitted one against the other, opponents not neighbors, competitors with competing interests, a battle of the fittest, a struggle for victory and heaven help the losers. Indeed, heaven help the losers.

It should be both painful and an embarrassment for us to admit that 111 years after the conclusion of the Civil War, racism and bigotry against African Americans is still a national problem. Here we are in the 21st century and there still exist pockets of overt racism, bigotry, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and misogyny. The recent events have alarmed and alerted us to issues of race and feelings of racial injustice in our community and around this country. Yes, it is true that certain career activists stir the pot with over-heated rhetoric. But it is also obvious that the current climate in this country is not one of respectful discourse and reasoned debate. Rather, we see anger, destructive passions and exaggerated claims of

condemnation. We see neighbors who take political and social disagreements to such an absurd level that one demonizes the other and leaves little or no hope for reconciliation.

I'd say that we are witnessing a fracturing of the bonds of community but let's face it, the issues of bigotry, racism, and the neglect of the poor in this nation are nothing new. All who are of a certain age can remember the level of racism, bigotry and prejudice that plagued us when we grew up. We have made remarkable progress in this country. The progress that has been made is seen in the schools, in the workplace, in our neighborhoods, on our police forces, and in the government halls of power.

Progress, yes. But we still have a long way to go. And that progress is made individual by individual. It starts with our embracing the Torah's message that every person has been created *B'tzelem Elohim*, in the Divine Image. We are all of God. We are all blessed parts of this creation. Regardless of one's skin color, race, religion, ethnic background, gender or sexual preference, we are all blessed parts of God's creation.

We have to take personal responsibility to change attitudes. Instead of putting the blame on this politician or that activist for polluting the waters of our nation's social discourse, let us look first at what each of us can do to

make our society better. Thirty-six times in the Torah we find a variation of the mitzvah to love and protect those who are most vulnerable in society: the orphan, the widow, the poor, and the stranger. This mitzvah appears more often than any other commandment and the Torah drives home the teaching by making it personal:

The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens: you shall love him as yourself, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Leviticus 19:32)

We know what prejudice and bigotry feel like. And we need to do what we can to make sure that all people are treated with respect and dignity.

One comes across a sentiment that is expressed by even some otherwise thoughtful people that “organized religion is the cause of so much of the divisiveness and intolerance and war that plagues humanity.” Well, there are fanatics and fundamentalists in just about every religious movement. Some take their passions to extremes that lead to horrific consequences. Fundamentalism breeds intolerance. Those who think that they alone have THE Truth, then by definition, all who disagree with them are not only wrong, they are heretical. But fundamentalism is not just a plague on religious movements. Note that every ideological, political, nationalistic, or sociological movement can be perverted by extremists. Indeed, just about

every movement has bred extremists who have unleashed pain and mayhem on humanity and our environment.

But, thank God, there are also movements that have at their core the mission to repair this world, *Tikkun Olam*. Of all the groups that are dedicated to healing the wounds of bigotry and to creating an environment of openness and mutual respect, Reform Judaism is widely recognized as one of the leaders. Since its creation over 200 years ago, Reform Judaism has courageously built bridges over the chasms that separate people. We have been the initiators and the innovators in interfaith dialogues. We have been leaders in the battles for the civil rights, compassion and justice for all people.

That spirit of making connections that unite people of different faiths, races and ethnicities is also championed by you, the members of Temple Sinai. Let me name just a few examples of the inspiring efforts by members of Temple Sinai to build bridges of respect and cooperation.

First, on Yom Kippur just about every Sinai family has brought or will bring in a bag of food for the Jewish Family Service Weinberg Food Pantry. Your generosity literally feeds the hungry and gives sustenance to needy families. In addition, a number of Temple Sinai members are on the JFS

staff: Nancy Benyamin and Dee Trasen. And that is not to mention the scores who volunteer at JFS and all of us who proudly support financially this organization that feeds the poor, tends to the aged, and provides counseling and support for people of all faiths, races and ethnic backgrounds.

Also, note that Temple Sinai is the only synagogue that hosts the annual 9Health Fair, providing essential health services to several hundred people throughout this area. Many Sinai members who are doctors, nurses, EMTs and health providers give of their time to serve those who are underserved. Scores of our members staff the lines and keep this major event flowing. Major leaders of the city-wide 9Health Fairs include Sinai members Matt Gordon, Lin Sunshine, and Josh Zucker.

Consider the vital work of Clínica Tepeyac. It provides vital health services regardless of whether a person has documentation in the Denver area. This is literally a life saver to many in the Latino community. Major benefactors of Clínica Tepeyac are Max and Elaine Appel and their wonderful family, long time Temple Sinai members.

Just a few more that I want to mention: Lisa Friedman for her tireless work for our branch of Habitat for Humanity. She helps organize our Sinai members and others to build homes for the homeless.

BabiesNow! is a non-profit organization whose mission is to provide diapers and wipes to babies of impoverished families in the Denver area. This was created by Sinai member Roberta Greengard and is overseen by many Sinai volunteers!

Knitting for Charity is organized by Sinai member Suzan Markman.

Milestones is an organization that finds mentors from Temple Sinai to help first generation college-bound seniors. This important effort is headed by Sinai member Linda Stein.

Again, my list is by no means comprehensive. It is only a representative sampling to help us realize our proud legacy as Reform Jews and members of Temple Sinai. These and so many other initiatives are helping people of different faiths, races and ethnic backgrounds. Each one is making a positive difference to heal our world. Each is a precious gift that lifts the spirits of all.

No, we will never stop those extremists who do their best to create divisions and sow the seeds of contempt. There will always be those small

minded people who mock and denigrate others simply because they have different opinions or perspectives. I suppose, if we are honest, most of us have indulged in that kind of xenophobia and intolerance. But tonight, this night of all night, let us reclaim again the goodness, the compassion, and the generosity that are the foundations of Judaism. This fast of ours and these prayers of ours are designed by blessed tradition to soften our hearts and open our hands to tend to the needy. We will read the words of the Prophet Isaiah tomorrow. Consider the wisdom that our sages displayed in having his message read on Yom Kippur:

⁵ This is the fast I desire: To unlock bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke; to let the oppressed go free; to release those enslaved.

⁷ It is to share your bread with the hungry and to provide shelter for the homeless poor; and not to ignore your own kin. (Isaiah 58:5-7)

We know that the loving, compassionate spirit of Judaism is one that reaches out and strives to help this world. Our faith is grounded in the awareness that God has endowed life with meaning and purpose and our efforts are directed to create respect and justice. We are a people who champion the awareness that *Elu v'Elu*, this one's opinion and that one's opinion are both important to consider. We learn with an open mind, not just for intellectual curiosity, but so that hardened positions can melt to

reveal that which we have in common. And as we realize our common goals, opponents can be turned into partners.

We are Reform Jews. We build the bridges that bring people together. We do the hard work of outreach. Faith for us is not lived just through ritual observance. Rather, it is lived in how we treat one another and our neighbors.

May this day of Yom Kippur inspire us to bring that faith, that passion, that determination to better our homes, to improve our community, and to help heal this nation and our world.