

Rabbi Lucy HF Dinner
Kol Nidre 5778

Temple Beth Or
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Pursue Justice in the World

I. When the Oppressed Walk Down the Aisle

I once heard a rabbi giving a sermon on the many meanings of tzedek – tzedakah – a donation to help the poor, tzedek – judging on the side of justice, tzadik – a person who pursues justice through their deeds. As he spoke, a homeless person entered the sanctuary, mumbling while she walked down the center aisle: “Somebody help me, can somebody help me?” The rabbi went on with his sermon. The woman kept advancing, mumbling, casting longing glances right and left. The rabbi ignored the disturbance offering examples of Tzadikim throughout the ages and acts of justice in the community. The woman ascended the steps of the bema. From her perch above the congregants she turned and implored, “Can somebody please help me?” Unable to ignore her presence any longer, the rabbi paused in giving his sermon. The president of the Temple gently approached the woman, escorted her back down the long aisle, and out the door. The rabbi resumed his sermon where he had left off, as if the event never had occurred.

At first, I had thought she must be a part of the sermon. When the president escorted her out and the service continued as if nothing had happened, I sat there stunned. “*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* – justice, justice shall you pursue” the rabbi was saying. Pursue it; don’t just talk about it. Pursue it, not by escorting the opportunity for justice out the door of the synagogue. Pursue it before the homeless person, who lives in the gardens outside the sanctuary, becomes so desperate that she has to walk up the aisle in the middle of services for help.

II. Isaiah 58:3-9

In the Haftarah portion for Yom Kippur Isaiah admonishes the Israelites for not pursuing justice. Isaiah's words ring true for our day, for the president escorting the homeless woman out of the sanctuary, and for a society subjugating the oppressed. Isaiah reproves:

58:3 "On your fast day

You see to your business

And tyrannize your laborers!

58:4 You fast in strife and contention,

And you strike with a wicked fist!...

58:5 Is such the fast I desire,

A day for people to starve their bodies? ...

lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Do you call that a fast, ...

58:6 No, this is the fast I desire

To unlock the fetters of wickedness, ...

To let the oppressed go free; ...

58:7 It is to share your bread with the hungry,

And to take the wretched poor into your home;

When you see the naked, to clothe him,

And not to ignore your own kin. ...

58:9 Then, when you call, Adonai will answer;

When you cry, God will say: Here I am...."

III. Pursuing Justice

God calls us on this Kol Nidre to "unlock the fetters of wickedness, to let the oppressed go free," can we answer: "Here I am?" Are we following the road of our ancestors? Present for the ritual but eviscerating the purpose of the season? On Rosh

Hashanah I spoke about seeking peace and finding comfort, in order to turn from our individual shortcomings, to center ourselves from this tumultuous year. That stronghold offers the platform from which we can and must move from seeking inner peace to pursuing justice for our world.

The assaults on humanity this past year have been rampant. Charlottesville brought it to a head as neo-Nazis and the KKK broadcast their message of white supremacy. They came armed with rifles and shot guns. They chanted slogans dripping with hatred and offered a platform of elitism and oppression that has simmered beneath the surface, and now, they unleash without abandon. Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, which fights anti-Semitism, racism, and hate, said: “white supremacists and nationalists” seemed to sense that “this was a moment of opportunity to move from the margins to the mainstream.”

And, though most Americans oppose the ideology of the white supremacists, “An *ABC News/Washington Post* poll found that 9 percent of people in the U.S. believe it is “acceptable” to hold neo-Nazi or white supremacist views, a number equivalent to approximately 22 million Americans.”

(<http://www.theblaze.com/news/2017/08/22/poll-nine-percent-of-americans-say-it-is-acceptable-to-hold-neo-nazi-or-white-supremacist-views/>). Another more expansive survey by *Reuters and Univ. of Virginia* found that nearly one-third of respondents (31%) strongly or somewhat agreed that the country needs to “protect and preserve its White European heritage.”

(<http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/new-poll-some-americans-express-troubling-racial-attitudes-even-as-majority-oppose-white-supremacists/>)

The stinging reports of the Charlottesville Reform synagogue rang the alarm for Jews who thought that we were not among the ones targeted by this repugnant, resurgent, movement. In a congregational e-blast I shared with you the report from Alan Zimmerman, the president of the Reform Jewish congregation in Charlottesville, detailing the police's refusal to provide security for the synagogue, the armed neo-Nazis standing outside the sanctuary during Shabbat services, and the reprisal of Holocaust era, anti-Semitic, slurs chanted by white supremacists marching in front of the temple.

Barely two weeks ago similar taunts rang out, again. This time in St. Louis, after the acquittal of a former, white, police officer in the killing of African American, suspect, Anthony Lamar Smith. Police in riot gear came out to respond to protestors who filled the streets after the verdict. The police encircled the protestors leaving them no room to retreat or disperse. They pelted the protestors with tear gas. Human rights activist Rabbi Susan Talve was among them. She opened the doors to her sanctuary, which was in the area surrounded by police, to the protesters. According to the *Forward* news: "St. Louis Metropolitan Police ... (then) surrounded the Central Reform Congregation ... and threatened to fire tear gas at the protesters inside. ... (During the standoff) a trending Twitter hashtag (from neo-nazis) called on the police to #GasTheSynagogue."

(<http://forward.com/fast-forward/382872/st-louis-temple-gives-sanctuary-to-protesters-march-turns-violent/>).

The Torah's call to pursue peace and justice, rises in answer to the beckoning words of Isaiah and all the more so in face of the horrendous deeds of our day. Do we sit silent while the homeless walk down the aisle of our sanctuary? Do we cower in cocoons while oppression beats at the door of God's world?

During these Days of Awe, I unite with my Reform rabbinic colleagues in offering a message in One Voice condemning the hatred that poisons our communities, our country and our world. Hundreds of rabbis in Reform congregations across America will use all or part of One Voice, a collaborative message of Reform rabbinic convictions and responses to these times. Herein I share the heart of that message with you:

“The Talmud teaches, “If you see wrongdoing by a member of your household and you do not protest – you are held accountable. And, so it is in relation to the members of your city. And so it is in relation to the world.” As Jews we are held accountable in ever-widening circles of responsibility to rebuke transgressors within our homes, in our country, in our world. One chutzpadik medieval commentator teaches we must voice hard truths even to those with great power, for “the whole people are punished for the sins of the king if they do not protest the king’s actions to him.”

“(Tonight) I speak words of protest, joining ...my Reform rabbinic colleagues across the nation in fulfillment of our sacred obligation. We will not be silent. We will, without hesitation, decry the moral abdication of ...(those) who fuel hatred and division in our beloved country. This is not a political statement. We, like the prophets before us, draw from the deepest wisdom of our tradition to deliver a stern warning against complacency and an impassioned call for action. We call on you to rise up and say in thousands of ways, every day, as proud Jews and proud Americans: “You cannot dehumanize, degrade and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation. Every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, black, brown, white, disabled, woman, man and child is beloved of God and precious in the Holy

One's sight. We the people, all the people, are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of the Divine. All the people are worthy of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."...

"As rabbis we are, from sea to shining sea, speaking to our congregations in every accent of America to declare in unison: acts of hatred, intimidation and divisiveness will not be tolerated in these United States. We stand upon the shoulders of the sages, poets and rabbis in every generation who fought for freedom. We speak in memory of every Jew and in memory of all people who tragically and senselessly lost their lives at the hands of evil oppressors. We call on our political leaders; progressives and conservatives alike, to rigorously uphold the values brilliantly articulated in the founding documents of our country, the "immortal declaration" that all [men] people are created equal. We call on every elected leader to responsibly represent our country's history and advance its noble visions of tolerance. ... (During this Sacred Season) WE are "Proclaiming liberty throughout all the land" [Lev 25:10].

"Something crumbled inside us when we watched the images of Charlottesville's beautiful streets filled with hate-spewing marchers." The wound reopened in St. Louis, and then again in the church shooting outside of Nashville this weekend. We dare not allow these explosions of hatred to become the standard from sea to shining sea.

In unison with my colleagues, I cry out: "How much more vandalism and targeting of people of color, how many clashes, which other cities? We must not accept or become inured to some warped version of "normal," of racist and anti-Semitic acts, of violent outbursts, or rallies popping in and out of breaking news cycles. Let us never grow numb to the brokenness, but let our

pain fuel our vows to respond – with peaceful protests, and with public calls for healing, by building alliances and by speaking in unison with other minorities and faith communities. Neither silence nor complacency nor waiting anxiously and fearfully for the next wounding event are options. Not for us.

“Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, possessed a rare understanding of unfathomable brokenness. His memorable words sound a warning to us today, “We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.” May we never be neutral, never silent in the face of threats or of discrimination toward any. Let us interfere as healers of the broken[hearted], and, binders of their wounds.

Psalm 147:3 הַרְפֵּא לְשִׁבְרוֹי לֵב זִמְחֵי לְעִצְבוֹתָם :

“The events of these simmering weeks are a wake-up call to our Jewish community. Racism is wrong whether it seeps into explicit anti-Semitism or not. The Talmud teaches that God created us all from the first Adam so that no human being could ever say, “my lineage is greater than yours.” ... if one minority group’s rights are threatened, we are all threatened. As Martin Luther King taught us, “We are all tied together in a single garment of destiny,” (On Yom Kippur there is a custom for everyone to wear the same simple garment, a white kittel, to accentuate that we are all part of one humanity,) whether we are the least powerful or the most powerful person in our world.

During these Days of Awe, through the united message of Rabbis around the country, I ask you to join with our Reform Movement in pursuing justice. “Tzedek tzedek tirdof the Torah cries out: ‘Justice, justice you shall pursue, so that you may live and inherit the land which I, the Lord your God, give to you” (Deut 16:18).

Our sacred text reminds us that for a community truly to inherit its place in the world, thoughtful leaders at every level must be dedicated to equality and to unity.”

On Rosh Hashanah, Temple’s president Ed Fleishman challenged you to be pursuers of justice by committing to a collective 18,000 mitzvot to heal our world over the next two years. To that end, this summer Temple’s Board of Trustees passed a resolution to join with our Movement in *Brit Olam*, the Reform Movement’s Covenant for Our World. The *Brit Olam* asks congregations to commit to advocating to those in positions of power to create, support and enforce just policies that break down barriers to the oppressed and remove the shackles of oppression. The *Brit Olam* commits us to align our convictions with our actions, to join in coalition with the interfaith community, and with those of likeminded values, and to stand up to the oppression that cripples people of color, the LGBT community, immigrants, and the impoverished.

Some may think 18,000 mitzvot is a stretch goal. Ed Fleishman, our president, had to be backed down to that number. He believes we can achieve that plus thousands more.

Yes, we will begin with the needs of our own members who face hunger, poverty, illness, or are in need. If you need those services, or know someone who does, and don’t know how to access them, contact me or Rabbi Citrin.

Beyond our own, the needs of the oppressed outside of our community are far greater than the needs within. Today’s xenophobia requires an immediate and united response. In order to fulfill Temple Beth Or’s commitment to our Movement’s *Brit Olam* the Social Action Committee has developed the **Mitzvah of the Month** program, highlighting mitzvot that will meet those

ends. For each month of the year our congregation will focus on a specific issue with opportunities for **action, advocacy and education**. The mitzvot will include housing, combatting racism, the environment, LGBT discrimination, and poverty to name a few.

In addition to the Mitzvah of the Month program, the Social Action Committee recognizes that so many of you are engaged in social action work beyond the temple's doors: working at the soup kitchen, advocating for cleaner transportation, serving as guardians ad litem for children, fighting for a livable wage, standing up for Dreamers, and so much more. We want to unite with you and support your individual efforts. To that end, we have developed a web site to chronicle all of our mitzvot and track our progress toward those 18,000 mitzvot.

We will give you a link to sign up and register your first acts of healing the world tomorrow when you drop off your donations for the Interfaith Food Shuttle and Mazon. Any acts that work toward healing the world count:

- whether you bring food for the hungry,
- or advocate to end world hunger at the United Nations.
- whether you speak up when someone makes a racial slur,
- or you educate the community on understanding diversity.
- whether you tutor a child living in a homeless shelter,
- or build a house for that child through Habitat for Humanity;
- whether you volunteer at TBO's table at Out Raleigh
- or you join PFLAG or the LGBT Center.
- Whether you plant a tree on Tu B'shvat,
- Or lobby local industries to protect the environment.

My friends, there is a homeless person right now walking down the center aisle of a sanctuary, begging for help. We can answer that call with the prayers of our hands and feet, or we can go on praying, moving our lips and ignoring the very words of our mouths.

We have heard Isaiah's cry to those who gather and pray one way and live their lives another. "You fast in strife and contention, And you strike with a wicked fist!" Justice requires marrying the resolve we make within these walls, with the actions we take where humanity lies afflicted.

That first step, showing up, is the hardest and the most important. The reward once you open the door will change your life and change the world. Together, with our commitment to our Movement's *Brit Olam* -- Covenant with our World, we can heal the pain of oppression.

"Every community relies on passionate and engaged citizens; it relies on you to be insistent advocates for tolerance and enduring kindness between the diverse peoples of our nation. To pursue justice is to create a society that protects and enlivens every citizen. Let us be relentless, tireless builders of that society in our city and in our country -- in this New Year."

AMEN

The "One Voice" Reform Rabbis sermon is in quotes unless other citations are noted for the quoted texts.