

Hear the Call, Be the Call
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Rosh HaShanah 5776
Community Synagogue of Rye

2000 years ago,
on the south west corner of the Temple Mount lay a stone.
Inscribed were the words,
“Le’beit Ha-t’kyah Lehach. The announcing corner”
From that place, on each and every new moon,
including this day of Rosh HaShanah,
a shofar would be blown. T’kiyah.
Then from mountain top to mountain top
throughout the land of Israel, signal fires would be lit.
Pregnant as it was with possibility,
it was a day for rejoicing.
Then, in the year 70,
when the Romans destroyed that Temple,
this stone was cast down,
a distance of some 30 meters,

onto the road below.

The archaeologists who found it felt exuberant.

They put the stone in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem

where I took my kids to see it this summer.

To the rabbis who could touch that stone in its original place,

the casting of it symbolized a crushing defeat.

It wasn't so much that the Romans had won,

for those rabbis, it meant that God had left the building.

They wanted to understand why.

Why did this great tragedy occur?

Their answer? Sinat Hinam ,

baseless hatred, fighting between Jews

instead of being united around a common cause.

In the old city of Jerusalem,
a single square kilometer
that still stands as the focal point of so much strife,
and holds promise for so much peace,

three Jewish groups existed.

There were the Pharisees

who counseled accommodation with Rome,

the Saducees

who wanted to maintain the rituals of the Temple

and the Sicarri.

The Pharisees believed in both the written and oral Torah.

They believed one could interpret,

even reform Jewish law.

Those who led the Pharisees

were known as rabbis.

We follow their teachings to this very day.

The Saducees were the Levites.

They wanted to maintain the priesthood and its rites.

They believed that if they prayed hard enough,

if they sacrificed precisely enough,

God would come to their rescue.

And then there were the Sicarri, the zealots.

Their name came from the Latin Sicarius
meaning dagger-men.

They carried little curved daggers
and were known to sneak up behind the Roman soldiers
and stab them in the buttocks.

Needless to say,
these Sicarri made a bad name for the Jews.

Their zealotry blinded them to the destruction
that lay ahead of the Jewish people.

Their aspirations were deluded,
actually thinking they could defeat Rome.

Since these three groups fought more with each other,
each thinking their view was right,

and objected to finding any unified approach
in their dealing with Rome,

Jerusalem suffered the consequences.

That stone designating where the Shofar blower stood
was cast to the ground,

the Temple was destroyed,
we, the Jewish people were exiled.
The reason the rabbis gave for this
destruction was Sinat Hinam , baseless hatred.
And I wonder,
was their teaching a rationale for past behavior
or a warning for generations to come?

After this summer, it feels like once again
we are living in the ancient streets of Jerusalem.
Parties have retreated to their corners.
There is no dialogue - only diatribe.
The zealots feel emboldened,
stabbing peaceful marchers at the Jerusalem Pride Parade,
burning down Palestinian homes with babies sleeping inside.
No one is listening.
Those on the periphery,
especially the growing cohort of young Jews

who claim to be Jews of no religion,
are tuning the whole thing out.

That, my friends, is my concern.

Have Jewish groups

become so entrenched in their views

and have so stopped listening to the views of others

that we have blinded ourselves

to what this behavior is doing to a younger generation?

Is our baseless hatred threatening to destroy us from within?

At year's end,

how do we realign an increasingly fractious Jewish community

that appears more eager to make charges against each other

than to make amends?

We all know

that so much of interpersonal strife

derives from our insistence on remaining

in, "a place where we are right"

as the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai once named it.

Our conversations,

supported by our sense of certainty

slide easily into conflict and standoff.

As Amichai so beautifully put it,

“From the place where we are right,

flowers will never grow.

The place where we are right

is hard and trampled.” How true.

During the summer, I posted on Facebook
that I would not be speaking of the Iran deal from this bima.

I won't

Besides, no matter how you feel about it,

it's a done deal.

It is no debate that Iran's regime

poses a serious security threat

to the people and nations of the region,

especially the people and State of Israel.

It is no debate that Iran

is a leading state-sponsor of terrorism

or that Iran is a massive violator of human rights.

It is no debate that Iran's hunger for nuclear weapons

has the potential of turning the entire Middle East

into a nuclear powder keg.

It is still unclear to me if this is a good deal or a bad deal.

I have too many questions.

That debate should happen,

but it should happen in the *beit midrash*,

in the house of study,

not here in the Beit tefilah, the sanctuary,

this place created to both comfort and yes,

to disturb us from our complacency.

Let's save the conversation on the Iran deal

for our lunch conversations

and our discussion period on Yom Kippur afternoon.

What I do need to address
is how this deal polarized the American Jewish community.
What should have been a policy debate
devolved into something much more pernicious.
It pitted Jew against Jew,
conservatives against liberals, hawks against doves.
It pitted donors against professionals,
rabbis against their flock
and in recent days rabbis against rabbis.
It feels like we are actually living in a time
of radical Sinat Hinam , radical baseless hatred between Jews,
in a time that is hard and trampled,
in a time where flowers will never grow.

Case in point.

When Senator Chuck Schumer
is accused of having dual loyalties, something is wrong.

When long time lover of Israel,
Congressman Jerry Nadler,
who said he would vote for the deal
is called a 'stinking kapo,'
a coward and traitor to the U.S. and Israel,
something is array.

Calling those who opposed the deal “war mongers”
shuts down constructive debate;
calling those who supported the deal
“enablers of a second Holocaust” ends thoughtful discourse.

As Amichai wrote,
“From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow in the spring.”

The Torah commands us
to not hate your brother in your heart.
It is there because it is easy to hate.
This summer's hit movie “Inside Out”

showed how anger could quickly take over.

We have to work hard not to hate,

have to work hard not to allow prejudices

that may bubble up from within not to take over.

This is why we must always remember that,

“Your fellow human being is a mirror to you.

If there is love and compassion in your soul,

you will see the goodness in others.

If you see a blemish in another,

it is your own imperfection you encounter.” (teaching of the Ba'al Shem

Tov)

The rabbis teach that a *machloket l'shem shamayim*,
argument towards a higher purpose
actually creates new worlds
while a debate that denigrates the other actually destroys them.
Not only is the vitriol around this issue
destroying the American Jewish community from the inside,

it plays into the hands
of those who doubt Jewish motives and loyalties
and whose anti-Semitism is apparent.
Simply put, this isn't good for the Jews.

I believe it is time
for the American Jewish community
to listen to the wisdom of our sages,
to set parameters for healthy debate
while showing deep respect for the other.
It is time for the leaders of our community
to publicly state
that it is possible to be a loyal American
and a fervent supporter of Israel
and to have come out on either side of the Iran deal.
And it is time to ask - and offer - forgiveness.
Before we expect our prayers and pleas
to be accepted on High,

we must first open our hearts
to those with whom we may have offended
through our strident views.

We are but 1/5th of 1% of the world's population.

In the end, all we have is each other.

But I think we must go farther than just stepping back,
taking a deep breath,
acknowledging that those who disagree with us
may have done so for honorable reasons
and seeking each other out to ask forgiveness
for our words and actions.

We must go farther because the sin of baseless hatred
affects more than one generation.

It imprints on our communal genetic code,
affecting how future generations treat each other
and what they think of Judaism in general.

When our children think of being Jewish in the world;

when they look for meaning and purpose from our tradition
that we tell them is tolerant and peace loving
but they keep hitting up against stories of Jews
denigrating other Jews in public, what must they think?
How will they respond?
After this summer,
when we need to marshall our community
to stand against anti-Semitism,
when we need to enlist American Jews
to do battle against the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement,
will we be too demoralized, to disoriented, to distanced,
to exhausted to stand up and fight for the things that matter most?

In this time
when it feels like we are being pulled farther apart,
I want to suggest something we could do right now,
something that could galvanize the larger Jewish community,
one that could attract the interest of millennials

and restore some of the political capital
whose luster has become tarnished.

As public awareness
over the Syrian migrant refugee crisis has grown,
a crisis that has seen
over half of the Syrian population
either having left Syria
or displaced from their homes,
we, the organized Jewish community
can find an opportunity for a leading role.
We, perhaps more than any other group
can empathize with these refugees.
We know what it like to be the stranger.
We know what it is like to be denied entry,
to be turned back at borders, to be put into camps.
We also know now what it is like to have a refuge.
This historical reality should move us

to find safe haven for some of those who will likely never go home.

You would have to be less than human
not to be moved by images of the migrant crisis:
the scenes in Budapest,
the 71 bodies found in the abandoned truck in Austria,
the 200 people drowned
when their boat capsized off the coast in Libya
and, most heartbreaking of all,
the body of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi,
lifeless on a Turkish shore.

These are but a handful
of the estimated 60 million people
who are displaced worldwide.

They are human beings made *b'tzelem Elohim*,
made also in the image of God. .

This is the greatest humanitarian challenge

faced by Europe since the Holocaust.

Angela Merkel was correct when she said:

“If Europe fails on the question of refugees,
its close connection with universal civil rights will be destroyed.”

If we fail on the question of refugees

our core value of caring for the stranger

because we were strangers should be called into question.

We are here today to stand alongside others in the community,

before our loving God,

and to hold ourselves accountable

for our actions and for our inactions.

How should we respond?

How should Israel respond?

If you have any doubt in your mind,
this refugee crisis is our problem.

The Torah commands,

“if a slave has taken refuge with you,

do not hand them over to their master.

Let them live among you wherever they choose.”

Commentators link these verses with the ones that precede them,

which deal with war and agree

that refugees include refugees from war.

On this, the great sage Maimonides writes,

“it is not enough to offer protection

to those who seek it from us,

but we also have an obligation to look after their needs,

to provide him with great benefits,

and not to embitter his heart in any way...

This law was established

regarding the most disenfranchised of people,

the ones on the lowest rung of society, namely slaves.

How much more so if a well-respected person asks for your protection.

How much would we be obligated to do for them!

(Guide for the Perplexed, III:39).

It is our problem.

If we are living according to our vision to be holy,
if we are truly to be a kingdom of priests and a holy people
acting as a light to the nations,
we have an obligation to assist people who are fleeing from danger.

What if the American Jewish community
decided to rally around this issue -
to raise funds, to lobby congress to crack open our gates, just a little?
This could be good for the Jews.
It could restore some faith among millennial Jews
in the organized Jewish community.
They would see our community doing what we do best -
helping others because they are human.
And as long as there are still places where it is a crime to be who you
are, don't we have a mandate to be who we are?

While I am saddened to hear that Israel
will not admit even a few refugees who sit on her borders

the way she admitted Vietnamese boat people,
I can find a little comfort knowing
that for the past few years,
in make shift hospitals in the Golan
and in hospitals in the north,
Israel has quietly treated victims of the Syrian civil war.
But wouldn't it serve
as an amazing piece of positive PR if,
instead of building more fences,
Israel found a way to safely and securely admit a few refugees?

If you do want to find something
to make you feel better about Israel during these days
and trust me, we all need to feel better about Israel,
Google IsraAid.

IsraAid is an Israeli non-profit,
non-governmental organization
committed to providing life-saving disaster relief and long term support.

They have a decade of experience
working in countries like Iraq, Jordan, North Africa and Nepal.
Iraq! North Africa! Not places historically hospitable to Jews.
IsraAid helps because this is what Jews do.
Right now, IsraAid intends to work in partnership
with agencies on the ground in Greece and Italy
offering psychological and physical assistance
while distributing food and non-food items .

Organizations that are providing on the ground support
like IsraAid need our help.

HIAS, the oldest Jewish refugee assistance organization,
founded 130 years ago
to aid Jews escaping the pogroms of Europe
need our support.

Supported by your board of trustees,
the Jewish Justice League and our Israel Action Committee,
we have joined at least 125 other Reform congregations

through the U.S. and Canada

as part of an education, advocacy and fundraising campaign called

“Hear the Call, Be the Call.”

Hear the call of the shofar waking us out of our complacency,

asking us to listen to the cry of those huddled masses

yearning to breathe free.

Be the call of the shofar,

advocating on behalf of those muted by circumstance.

It was the great 20th century Rabbi

Abraham Joshua Heschel who asked,

"if some thing were to shock us

like a baby's piercing wail of a fire bell in the night,

like a punch in the stomach or a puncture in the eardrum,

like a savage call to conscience or a frantic cry for help-

would we scream like the shofar and get mad enough to act?"¹

Would you? Right now you can.

¹ From Mishkan HaNfesh p. 279

This is your shofar (hold up iPhone).

It can amplify your message.

It can allow you to be the call.

It can send messages to politicians and donations to organizations.

What I am about to do

is well within the bounds of Jewish tradition.

Our Talmud teaches that we can suspend Jewish laws

if we are engaged in saving a life .

Our Talmud teaches that tzedakah

is equal to all the other mitzvot combined.

I know what I am about to ask you to do is not orthodox

but neither are we.

Take out your phone.

If it's off, turn it on.

Go to HIAS.org.

Click where it says, "Take Action."

There you can sign a petition

asking President Obama to allow 100,000 additional refugees into this country over the current annual limit of 70,000, of whom only 300 are Syrian. And then donate. Imagine if every person in every synagogue during these Days of Awe did this. Our politicians would get the message. Our aid organizations would have so many more resources. Hear the call, be the call.

I understand that admitting 100,000 more refugees or donating a few shekels will have limited impact. Yet at a time like this, I keep coming back to that starfish story, the one where a man standing on a beach littered with starfish, bending down and throwing them back to the ocean one by one, responds to his cynical questioner with the retort, “it will make a difference to that one.”

It will make a difference to that one.

And it will make a difference to our self-perception as Jews
and the world's perception of us.

If you are not moved to give, not moved to sign a petition,
if you have too many lingering questions about the migrant crisis,
then ask those questions, seek answers,
give a little because babies are drowning,
and view this as an opportunity,
especially this year, to tell a different Jewish story.

Let the work of a group like IsraAid
allow you to feel a sense of Jewish pride

Let their work give you something to communicate to your friends and
neighbors - that there are Jews, Israelis,
who work and dream and live and create
despite the existential threats
and in spite of the political rhetoric because this is what Jews do.

That there are Jews

who refuse to go down the rabbit hole of Sinat Hinam,

of baseless hatred,

who say "let's try," instead of always saying No.

Feel pride in the ones who see it as a Jewish responsibility to help

others, not just Jews and not just Jews like them.

Feel pride in that sometimes,

as counter-intuitive as it may be,

Jews help those who are their stated enemies.

We do this because we understand that before you are a Jew,

you are a human being, deserving of dignity.

This year, make a resolution.

Find the human side of Judaism,

the IsraAid's and other groups like them.

Do not allow your perception

or your children or grandchildren's perception of Judaism

to be taken over by the politicians

and the vocal minority who claim to speak for all of us.

Too much is at stake. And learn.

This fall, we are bringing to our community iEngage,

an award winning program

designed by the Shalom Hartman Institute -

the place where Rabbi Frankel and I studied this summer.

Learning with some of the most captivating scholars

in the Jewish world today,

we hope to establish a new narrative of Jewish values and ideas.

Through dialogue, discussion, and even debate,

we will do what Jews have done for millenia:

we will wrestle with the core concepts of being Jewish,

we will question. we will seek to raise holy sparks.

And by so doing, we will keep away from the precipice of *Sinat Hinam*.

Do you know the difference between a prophet and a rabbi?

The prophets tried to create change

by hitting people over the head with their idea

until they succumbed.

But the only successful prophet was Jonah
and his audience were non-Jews living in Nineveh.

For the prophet,
the commitment to the mission
was more important than the loyalty to the people.

The prophet would rail against the people
because he was infected with God's word

The rabbi, on the other hand,
was committed to the people.

He was a teacher.

Through bringing the light of Torah to people,
the rabbi became an agent of transformation.

The rabbis took small steps to solve problems
instead of thinking they could flip a switch to create change.

The prophets led through anger.

The rabbis led through love and empathy,
longing to create a movement,

believing that the arc of history is long

yet it bends towards justice.

We are still here, I believe,
because we learn from rabbis
instead of blindly following prophets.

Right now, we, the Jewish people,
have too many prophets.
Each screams from his or her mountain top
thinking he or she is right.
And each is willing to lead our people
off the precipice to achieve his or her end.
However, the prophets never saved the Jewish people.
The rabbis did.

Now might be a time to listen to the “rabbis” in our midst,
to those morally courageous individuals
who live in the nuance;
to those who love the people more than the problem;
to those who labor in the vineyards each and everyday

to create movements of change;

to those who believe in morality and righteousness,
not just being right.

Now might be a time to listen to the sound of the shofar,
calling us, God's people,
to work for common causes
that raise us up instead of tearing us down;
that can unite us instead of dividing us.

And maybe, just maybe, when we do that,
a sound from that lonely hill in Jerusalem
will be heard once more,
the sound of joy and the sound of gladness,
the sound of children at play (after Jeremiah 33:11).

When that day comes,
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in Jerusalem no more (Isaiah 65:19).

To make the day come, please hear the call.

To make that day arrive, let the call be heard from you.