

Judaism teaches us to lift up, not to tear down  
Rabbi Daniel Gropper, Rosh Hashanah 5744

I hope you noticed that your clergy are wearing matching talitot. This is not a fashion statement. It is a political one. These talitot were created to support [Women of the Wall](#) which seeks equality. All they want, is to pray and read Torah at the Western Wall on a monthly basis. That's it. The Supreme Court of Israel has affirmed this right. We wear these Talitot in solidarity with this cause. A year and a half ago Tamara prayed with [Women of the Wall](#) without incident. This summer, amid protests, whistle blowing and egg throwing, Rabbi Frankel prayed with them. She was front and center. Last month, Rabbi Frankel and Cantor Cooperman led a celebration of Rosh Hodesh in support of [Women of the Wall](#). Forty of you showed up! This is not just a woman's issue. It is an issue of gender equality that women be granted equal access to that wall which symbolizes our dream: to be a free people in our own land, in an Israel that grants in its Declaration of Independence equality of sexes. It is more than just a Reform movement issue. It affects all of us. Right now, my dear friend Rabbi Jaymee Alpert of KTI, a Conservative shul, is speaking about this – and I promise you, we didn't plan it. We are doing so because that same Israeli Declaration of Independence states that there is more than one way to be Jewish. We are speaking about this because at its heart, the struggle of [Women of the Wall](#) underscores so much of what I believe Judaism comes to teach: that we notice others – male or female, gay or straight, young or old, rich or poor – as being made b'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God, that we seek justice and that our goal as a people is to rise up and in turn, to raise others up as well.

A few dozen meters from the Western Wall plaza sits the Dome of the Rock. Below that golden dome lies a rock. Adam was buried there. Solomon built there. Jesus prayed there.

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Muhammad ascended from there. The legends say that this rock is the navel of the world, and that God issued the first ray of light from that rock, that pierced the the darkness and filled the universe, when it was no more than a threshing floor. It is said that this is the place where Abraham brought Isaac. In many ways, what [Women of the Wall](#) are trying to do is a lesson that the binding of Isaac is attempting to make.

Two valleys surround the Old City of Jerusalem. Kidron to the east separating the Temple Mount from the Mount of Olives, and Hinom to the west. The Hinom valley is known in Hebrew as Gei ben-Hinnom. The Greeks called it Gehenna. You might know Gehenna to be synonymous with Hell. Gai ben Hinom received this special distinction because, during the time of Abraham, when the Canaanites ruled the land, fathers used to bring their children down into that valley, down to be sacrificed to the pagan god Moloch. It was Hell or Hell's Gate, because, as our Israeli guide once said, "it was the worst place imaginable."

A few years ago, I stood on the ramparts of the Old City in Jerusalem and looked into the Hinom valley, a place I hope to stand with many of you this February. (Not to offer up our children but just to be) As my gaze moved eastward I noticed the stark contrast between the city on the hill and the valley down below. Then it struck me. Read in context, the Akeida, the binding of Isaac serves as a case AGAINST the biblical rite of child sacrifice. As others took their children DOWN to the valley of Gehinom, God told Abraham to take his child UP, Up to a mountain called Moriah, Up to a mountain whose name means vision, up to a place of dreams of possibility. In many ways, the Akeida is a statement of what Judaism is all about – we are here

to lift things up, not to tear them down; to move things from the way they are to the way they might be.

The commentaries on the Akeida go further. The rabbis of the Midrash chide Abraham for misunderstanding the Hebrew *ha-ahlayhu*, which should have been interpreted as “bring him up,” not “offer him up.” Accordingly, God called upon Abraham to take Isaac up the mountain and to prepare a burnt offering, not to offer him AS the burnt offering.<sup>1</sup> Again the rabbis’ commentary drives home this basic Jewish tenet: others might tear down, we build up. Judaism is not about guilt or darkness. We are not all about persecution and destruction. “They tried to kill us, they didn’t, let’s eat” might make for a funny bumper sticker but it isn’t the whole story. Just look at the opening lines of Genesis. Judaism is about light emerging from darkness; order out of Chaos. Services do not end with Kaddish to depress us. It serves as a doxology to remind us that in grief there is hope. Shabbat is a day of oneg, of delight. It is designed to uplift, not to constrain.

These Days of Awe follow a similar spiritual progression. If today we do an auditing of our souls then by Yom Kippur we get to ask what our goals are for the future. If the Akeida reminds us that the space between life and death is as thin as a knife’s blade, then the texts of Yom Kippur remind us WHY life is worth living. Ten days from now, Moses will remind us *u'vecharta chayim* - choose life so that we and our descendants may live. That afternoon, we

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<sup>1</sup> “When I told you, ‘Take your son...’, I was not changing My promise that you would have descendants through Isaac. I told you to take him to the top of the mountain, not to slaughter him.” Quoted by R’ Stephen Pearce, “Wrestling With Abraham,” Reformjudaism.org, based on Genesis Rabbah 56:5

will be taught HOW – “*kedoshim ti'hi'yu*, be holy,” by following the Torah’s ethical and ritual obligations. How do we increase in holiness through these days? How do we lift things up and leave them better than we found them? By reminding ourselves to choose life and to be holy – through our words and thoughts and especially through our deeds.

I chose to become a Reform rabbi because of our movement’s long time commitment to egalitarianism and social justice. This fight for a woman's right to read Torah at the Kotel is a personal one. If my son were to become bar mitzvah there, I could not imagine my mother, wife and daughter having to stand on plastic chairs and peer over a wall as he chanted Torah. I similarly cannot tolerate the idea that my daughter could not read Torah in the same way as my sons. I cannot tolerate 50% of Jews having less than half the sky. Just as the "Who is a Jew?" question galvanized the North American Jewish community a generation ago, I would love the question of "Where and how can one be a Jew?" to invigorate our community right now.

Yes, Israel certainly has more pressing issues. We are concerned that the chaos in Egypt could spill over into her borders. Iran’s continued aspirations for nuclear weapons provokes anxiety. We worry that limited and strategic U.S. action in Syria will have negative consequences for Israel. I have read and thought a great deal since it was reported that Assad used chemical weapons against innocent women and children. I believe that limited and strategic U.S. action has no moral ambiguity. Our tradition teaches that the doing of good even when not for its own sake is a valuable and a critical step in fulfilling our human obligations. The question is whether our actions are morally defensible and serve universal well-being. In

this case when weapons of mass destruction were proven to be used against a civilian population, it does<sup>2</sup>.

Internally, Israel faces a demographic time bomb that can only be solved with a two state solution. Israelis care a lot more about how much an apartment costs in Tel Aviv and student to teacher classroom ratios than whether a group of women can read Torah at the Kotel and I don't blame them. Still, this issue of equal access to public religious sites cuts at the heart of what Israel is as a Jewish State. Israel may have accomplished much since her independence 65 years ago – from Rummikub to desalinization, from instant messaging to the 'God Particle.' However, if Israel is to truly be Jewish and democratic, then we should not be bullied to accept the religious decisions of a group of bearded men who so narrowly define tradition. All of Israel's innovations mean nothing if, at the symbolic site of so many of our prayers women and men cannot pray together, just as they pray separately. In their own way, [Women of the Wall](#) are trying to bring Israel up to Moriah, to the place of vision, not letting her slip into the fires burning in the valley below.

(Read from letter from Naphtali Bennett - impressed by response. A positive start, but underwhelmed. Concerned that 450 sq. meter platform (that doesn't touch wall will remain). Still, this is progress. We have moved the needle. Now we just have to keep moving it from what is to what can be...

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<sup>2</sup> See Syria, Moral Responsibilities and Ambiguous Circumstances, 01.09.2013, by Donniel Hartman, [www.hartman.org.il](http://www.hartman.org.il)  
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But a question I have today is: if our task as Jews is to move things from the way they are to the way they might be, do we limit this task to Jewish items, Jewish causes and Jewish people or, is our commitment to egalitarianism and social justice more universal? This summer I went to India with American Jewish World Service. It taught me that I am responsible to Jews AND to citizens of our global community. This experience that was so transformative that I want to spend a few minutes talking about it here and then revisit it again on Yom Kippur.

Founded in 1985, the founders of [AJWS](#) asked a simple question. Now that we as Jews have seen such success and have built strong Jewish institutions to serve our own communities, how might we use our power and influence to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world?

Focusing on the rights of women, girls and LGBT people; promoting recovery from conflict, disasters and oppression; and defending access to food, land and livelihoods, [AJWS](#) grants more than \$35 million annually to more than 500 social justice organizations in Africa, Asia and the Americas to overcome the inequalities and injustice that cause poverty and oppression in the first place. [AJWS](#) believes that people are entitled to realize their rights, that all human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim* - in the Divine Image – infinitely valuable and deserving of respect. To this end, [AJWS](#) roots its work in empowerment – understanding that the people affected by a problem are best positioned to solve it.

Thanks to a generous gift from the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust, a family whose goal is for people to get along better and who happen to be friends of this congregation, I, along with 16 other rabbis travelled to Lucknow, India. We went to volunteer, to see how [AJWSS](#) supports grassroots organizations seeking to better the lives of people where they live, and to learn about

issues of global social justice. Through the example of one woman, whose courage inspired me, I want to share a little of how [AJWS](#) lifts up others and in so doing, benefits Jews as well.

Kavita is 32 years old. Her skin is dark. She speaks Urdu, one of over 30 languages spoken in India. In her sari, she looks like a painting. Like many Indian women, her nose is pierced and she wears bangles on her wrists. Kavita is a Dalit, an untouchable. Her life was to be one of illiteracy and menial labor. Married just after reaching puberty, Kavita was sent, as is the custom in rural India, to live with her husband and his family. Not valuing education for girls, especially among the untouchable caste, she was pulled out of school. Wanting more, she fought with her husband and his family for this basic right we all hold dear. Then she fought to go to college and to get a master's degree. Kavita now edits the only newspaper published for rural communities that also happens to be written and produced completely by women. What is more is that this newspaper is helping to maintain literacy rates. In rural India, many women do learn to read but once out of school, they have no reading material so they lose those skills. This newspaper provides this service. This is how [AJWS](#) is moving the world from how it is to how it might be.

In many ways, Kavita's story and the struggle's faced by [Women of the Wall](#) are the same. Kavita wanted access to education, something her male and non-Dalit peers do not have even think about. Male worshipers – be they anywhere on the spectrum from secular to orthodox do not have to give a second thought to reading Torah at the Kotel. Why should women be banned from doing so? Even the strictest interpretations of Jewish law permit a woman to read Torah in an all-female setting. Those who come to protest [Women of the Wall](#) are protesting a

stereotype of what a Jewish woman should be. As you know, since Abraham smashed his father's idols, we Jews challenge stereotypes.

Now, two things might be crossing your mind. One. Rabbi Gropper, you're a rabbi. Judaism and Israel are supposed to be your focus. I understand the need to talk about [Women of the Wall](#). That's Jewish. But India? And second, how could you go to India and not meet with the Jewish community? There are so many problems facing the Jewish community. Why work in a rural Hindu village? Why worry about the needs and human rights of untouchables? There are so few Jews in the world that need our support. If we don't support Jewish causes, who will?

I guess it just comes down to how we see ourselves and what we believe is the mission of Judaism. Is the purpose of Judaism to make us better Jews or to lead us to a more meaningful life? Do we view the world in a tribal or global way? Is our responsibility to Jews, to all of humanity or to both? I ask you to consider those questions. In fact, as you gather this afternoon for lunch, instead of critiquing this sermon, spend time talking about them. They will be on our synagogue [Facebook](#) page following this service.

Upon our return from India, this debate asking to whom we are responsible played itself out in real time. One rabbi from our delegation who lives in San Jose was criticized by the grandfather of the bar mitzvah, a holocaust survivor who took issue with Jews doing for others, since "who was caring about what happened to us." A little farther north in Oakland, a different colleague received the opposite response. Following his sermon, a woman raised her hand, and said: "I'm so grateful that there are people who care about global justice. I wish there had been such people around during the Holocaust, for it might have saved my family's lives." Our Jewish

communities have flourished because of those who worked tirelessly to strengthen our tribal identity. At the same time, and perhaps for the first time in history, we have an opportunity to look beyond our own needs to be inspired by our tradition's universal outlook to repair the world.

If we don't, then we leave that work to a worthy combination of secular and mostly Christian relief organizations. Don't we want, don't we deserve a seat at the international development table?

As a Jew I understand the importance of standing up for Jewish causes AND for human rights issues throughout the world. It's not always an either/or proposition. Some human rights causes - like [Women of the Wall](#) - are Jewish causes. Maybe some are not explicitly Jewish. When the cause is one that does not directly seek to aid Jews, I am guided by the Talmud teaching which reads, "We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor; visit the non-Jewish sick with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, for the sake of peace."<sup>3</sup> When we act this way we remind ourselves and others that the role of Judaism is to move the world from how it is to how it might be. And when we act this way, the spillover effect is also good for the Jews.

A True Story: On the last day of an extended service trip in Ghana with [AJWS](#), a young man named Josh went for a walk. A local farmer called Josh over and asked, "Are you one of the Jews who has been working here?" "Yes," said Josh, introducing himself. "Well," said the farmer,

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<sup>3</sup> Gitten 61a

“I want you to know that this summer, I have decided that I am Jewish.” “Really,” said Josh,

“why is that?” Because said the farmer, “I also want to leave the world better than I found it!”

You see, for many of those we met, we were the first and perhaps the only Jews they will ever meet. Instead of Bravo TV’s, “Princesses of Long Island,” that nauseates and infuriates me, isn’t this African farmer’s understanding of who we are the kind of reputation we want for ourselves?

That we leave the world better than we found it – not just for ourselves, not just for our own little tribe or corner of the world but for the global community?

We all can’t travel to India to meet women like Kavita. We all can’t travel to Jerusalem to stand with [Women of the Wall](#) – although I would love as many of you who can, to travel with us this February. But there is a lot we can all do to lift up ourselves and others.

This summer my kids showed me a YouTube video called “Dumb Ways to Die.” It began in November, 2012 as a public service campaign by Metro Trains in Melbourne, to promote rail safety. As of a week ago, it had been viewed close to 58 million times! It has spawned numerous parodies. [My favorite](#) is by the Maccabeats, that accapella group from Yeshiva University who performed here two years ago. Their version is called, “smart ways to live.”

Here’s a little of what they say: (sing)

Help an old lady cross the street/ Give the homeless something to eat/

Give someone a compliment/ Leave a note when you accidentally make a dent/

Smart ways to live/ so many smart ways to live

Leave your waiter a nice big tip/ Make sure to never double dip

Turn off your phone at the movies and table/ Thank God for being healthy and able

Smart ways to live/ so many smart ways to live

As one of my professors used to say, “This is Torah you already know.” We do these things because they are the right thing to do, we do them because your mother told you so. We also do them because they have cosmic significance.

We are familiar with the creation myth in Genesis; the one that begins with the universe being unformed and void and after six days, there is a nice ordered world with everything in its proper place, a man and a woman in a garden and God about to enjoy a day of rest.

There is, however, another creation myth, this one written by Rabbi Isaac Luria, in the 16th century. Here’s how he told it: At the beginning of time, God’s presence filled the universe. When God decided to bring this world into being, to make room for creation, God first contracted into God’s self. From that contraction darkness was created. When God said, “Let there be light,” the light that came into being filled the darkness, and ten holy vessels came forth, each filled with primordial light.

God then sent forth those ten vessels, like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of light. Had they all arrived intact, the world would have been perfect. But the vessels were too fragile to contain such a powerful, divine light. They broke open and the holy sparks were scattered like sand, like seeds, like stars, falling this way and that, blown to the four corners of the universe.

That is why, according to Luria, we were created — to find those pieces of light, to gather the sparks, to restore the vessels and to repair the world.

How might we do this? There is an incredible insight from the world of Hasidut which says, “If you want to help raise person, do not think it is enough for you to stand on top and reach down to offer him a helping hand. You must go all the way down yourself, down to where he is. Then take hold of him with strong hands and pull him and yourself out into the light.” You cannot help someone from a distance above. The person who has fallen or who is laid low must be extricated from the pit. To help him, you must enter the pit and get yourself dirty. You must stand in his place, not above.

In a few moments we will blow the shofar. This year, let the shofar be like a bugle, calling us to charge forward, to rise up. In this year, in 5774, let us do what is necessary to lift things up – to move things from how they are to how they might be, to give us the strength and courage to help lift up those in bondage who need our help, wherever they are: here, in Israel or throughout the world. This was Dr. King’s message 50 years ago when he said, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning if its creed.” This is what it means to be a Jew. This is our charge from God - to help others rise up. When we do, we become a holy people. When that happens, we bring God’s blessing onto our lives. Amen.