

The Still Small Voice

(Rosh Hashanah 2018/5779)

By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

Individuals behave differently than groups. Most of us would never dream of seizing a sobbing child from her distraught mother, no matter our views of immigration. If a refugee showed up on your doorstep, your first instinct would likely be empathy. His desperation would pierce the lining of your sympathetic heart. When you looked into his eyes, your own dread would stare back at you. “This could happen to me because I, too, am human,” plays a role in how you engage others. We recognize this emotion when we visit suffering patients: a mixture of compassion, but also nagging anxiety: “this could happen to me.”

Innate human empathy animates your relationships, shaped and honed by the moral code you learned over time. Two thousand years ago, Jewish sages pronounced the foundation of morality. All moral philosophy since is either an explanation or a variation on this theme: “What is hateful to you, do not do unto others.”

An even stronger articulation of the biblical command to love your neighbor as yourself, the Sages assert that morality is best understood through personal relationships. We are most aware of our moral obligations when we experience moral offense ourselves. “How does it feel to me?” gives rise to an understanding of my obligations to you. If the behavior is hateful to me, it is not right to perpetrate it on you.

Countries do not act this way. Nations have national interests. The state views misery differently. The collective looks into the eyes of a refugee and sees not what you see. The nation sees security, legality, demography and economy. Rightly so. No country can long exist if it does not concern itself with collective needs. Thus, the political imperatives of the collective never fully align with the moral imperatives of the individual.

Personal virtue does not easily transfer to national policy. The relationship between groups, domestically, and between countries internationally, is governed by power and interests. While you may voluntarily compromise your own needs to those of others, collectives, generally, do not. For example, *tsedakkah* actually reduces your net worth. You give, nonetheless, because other motivations drive you: compassion, empathy, ideological sympathy or personal relationships.

It is not how countries behave. The American foreign aid budget – as impressive and generous as it has been since World War II – is not charity, nor is it about compassion. It is about national interests. Even the word “generous” in the context of a country’s financial relationship with another - is misleading. American aid to Israel has different motivations than your aid to Israel. You have personal values and relationships. America has national interests.

Knowing that collectives think more about power and interests and less about morals and values – it is the job of every morally sensitive individual to help align national policy with moral probity to the extent possible. The more we can influence the collective to view poverty as we view one poor person – with compassion and mercy – the better life will be for both the individual and the country.

It is a frustrating task. We cannot suspend the laws of nature that impel the strong to devour the weak. The lion and the lamb will not lay down together – not now – and not for a very long time. Neither can we suspend the laws of human nature that drive us to dominate, conquer, compete, and grab more for ourselves. Jewish sages teach that there is a civil war raging inside each of us between our desire to do good for others and our impulse to do good for ourselves at the expense of others.

Nonetheless, year after year, generation after generation, century after century, we seek to tame the human animal, pacifying our destructive impulses, and bending the collective's behavior more towards the long arc of justice. Human beings cannot survive on power alone. Self-interest is not our only motivation. We need love in our lives. We need friendship, compassion, gentleness. We need meaning. While the state has national interests, and must be powerful to ensure human happiness, it must also be just. Otherwise, the internal contradictions will overwhelm us, weakening the nation itself.

In free societies, moral cohesion is what makes us strong. Some of our greatest leaders understood this: "Let us have faith that right makes might," said Abraham Lincoln, "and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty, as we understand it." (Cooper Union)

"Right makes might" is our faith as well. In fact, Lincoln probably learned it from Judaism – he was an avid student of the Bible.

"You who turn justice into wormwood and hurl righteousness to the ground...God shall hurl destruction upon your strongholds so that ruin comes upon your fortresses," proclaims the prophet, Amos.

The essence of the prophetic tradition is the dire warning of the Hebrew prophets that society cannot ignore justice and righteousness. It is not all about power, politics, pre-eminence and profit. If the collective disregards conscience - sooner or later the nation, itself, will collapse. We will prey on each other like the beasts of the field. The Torah, the Hebrew prophets and rabbinic tradition all assert that the very future of the nation is dependent upon its moral vigor.

The prophet, Micah, warns: "Hear this you rulers of the House of Jacob. You chiefs of the House of Israel who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight; who build Zion with crime and Jerusalem with iniquity. Because of you – Zion shall be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps of ruins."

Religion has an especially important role to play in free societies. We have moral imagination. Love of right conduct is the heart of the religious enterprise. We know how cruel human beings can be. We know how weak we can be – how cowardly - how easily our lifelong convictions can be set aside in one fell swoop of fear and anxiety. We know how selfish, domineering and rapacious we are – and thus – how dangerous we can be.

Since the elections of 2016 especially, our synagogue has set out to do what religion does best: Through our words and our deeds, to remind our country that moral conduct is not a luxury of power politics, pursued only when convenient. It is necessary. Right makes might.

Hundreds of you have joined our efforts, and many of you have contributed money to the cause, allowing us to be our best selves. Stay the course – with discipline, conviction, enthusiasm and generosity.

Our synagogue’s job is to assume the mantle our tradition handed down to us from Sinai, itself: To realize our highest moral potential, as individuals, and to translate these personal standards of behavior to national policies. That collective actions reflect, to the extent possible, moral imperatives that are best understood through personal relationships.

Practitioners of realpolitik assert that words like compassion, empathy, love, sacrifice, fairness, truth, honesty, right and wrong – have nothing to do with policy, foreign or domestic. That the only principle relevant to collective action is “interests.” It is our job to push back; to insist that individual needs are part of the collective’s interests. We are obligated. Judaism leaves us no choice.

“Whoever can prevent his household from doing wrong but does not, is punished for the wrongs of his household,” say the rabbis. “Whoever can prevent his neighbors from doing wrong and does not, is punished for the wrongs of his neighbors. Whoever can prevent the world from doing wrong and does not, is punished for the wrongs of the world.” (Shabbat 54b)
Since societies navigate policies politically – so we are obligated to participate in the political process. How else to prevent the world from doing wrong?

As a synagogue, we engage the political process in a nonpartisan way. As individuals, you are entitled to participate in whatever partisan activities you want. The synagogue cannot. We do not support political parties, and we do not endorse political candidates.

Harder said than done. What is the synagogue in the end? It is a collection of human beings. Each of us has our own political ideas and loyalties. We will be tempted to stray into partisan politics. From time to time, we will be criticized – rightly – for crossing the line. Keep us on our toes. To engage in partisan politics is not only impermissible, it is also contrary to our institutional culture. We have a broad diversity of opinion here, to be cherished and respected.

But the risk of crossing the partisan line, cannot be an excuse for inaction. If what some people mean by “religion should stay out of politics” is that we should never engage in the social

challenges of our times – never speak about the here and now, only about the hereafter – it is something Judaism cannot accept. What are they arguing: that we should lament the sufferings of the persecuted but not be involved in how our country can alleviate their sufferings? That we should establish a shelter, offering beds to ten dispossessed men – but ignore the policies that caused their homelessness in the first place? That one poor person is the business of religion, but tens of thousands of poor people are not? That collective actions that might actually solve the moral indignity of poverty are outside our domain? Really?

The assertion that religious institutions should stay out of politics is, itself, a political stance. It takes you off the field – the public arena – where the contest of values will be determined – and leaves the field open to others, who have different values than we do.

Political competition trivializes the individual. We reduce people to stereotypes. I suppose that politics has always been practiced this way. Our job is to stand up in the public square and to remind the public and public officials that people are people, not cartoon characters – no matter who you voted for and what party you support. Mexicans are not all criminals and rapists and some good people as well – no matter what are your views on immigration. Muslims do not all hate America – no matter what are your views on security. African migrants are not s-hole people from s-hole countries. That in the sight of God, white Scandinavians are no more entitled to protection than dark-skinned Afghans – no matter what you think of naturalization.

Jews, of all people, know the destructive power of prejudice. We, of all people, know how, through their words and deeds, leaders can unleash the pent-up emotions of hate, fear and anxiety that dwell in all of us. Who has been blamed for social problems more than us? Who has been feared more than us? Jews of all people know how words not said – a wink and a nod – are enough to release the passions of the mob. Jews, of all people, know that there are no fine Nazis, even though some racists cuddle children, pet dogs and listen to classical music. Even if we are not the main scapegoat this year, prejudice is never good for democracy and is never good for Jews. Sooner or later it will come back to the Jews anyway. Our job is to stand up in the public square and to remind the public and public officials that freedom rests on telling the truth. Jews, of all people, know how public lies by public officials can destroy public trust.

The assault on objective truth in this country is a grave threat. The assumption that there are facts that exist outside of you – that you cannot simply make up an alternative reality – undergirds all progress in every field of human endeavor – including science, technology, medicine, philosophy, law, politics and even religion.

Liberty cannot withstand a surfeit of public lies. Freedom requires a level of public honesty consistent with our ability to trust each other. Hosea, the prophet, knew this already 2700 years ago: “There is no honesty; false promises and dishonesty...are rife. For that, the earth is withered and everything that dwells on it languishes. Everything perishes. My people shall be destroyed.” (Chapter 4)

If there is no honesty, if lie follows lie, then, as Hosea warns, sooner or later freedom itself will collapse. Wave after wave of dishonesty will crash upon the protecting walls of democracy, eventually wearing them down. In the final analysis, trust is what protects civic morals, democratic values and the rule of law. Destroy these, and you destroy democracy's ability to protect itself from itself.

George Orwell put it best: “[Organized lying is] integral to totalitarianism. Totalitarianism demands a disbelief in the very existence of objective truth. Friends of totalitarianism argue that since absolute truth is not attainable – a big lie is no worse than a little lie...[but organized lying] weakens the desire for liberty. Any attack on the concept of objective truth threatens in the long run every department of thought.”

Objective truth is so fundamental to Judaism that Talmudic rabbis described truth as God's seal. “The world stands on three pillars: On justice, on truth and on peace,” said Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel. Remove the pillar of truth, and the world cannot stand. Justice and peace depend on truth. “Execute the judgement of truth and peace will be in your gates,” proclaimed the prophet, Zechariah (8:16). Do not execute the judgment of truth – and there will no peace, because there will be no public trust.

In our secular society, truth is as sacred a concept as it gets. How many have laid down their lives on its altar? It is not only a question of protecting my right to say whatever I want to say. It is also that truth, itself, is a glorious thing. Think of all those spirited souls whose devotion to facts, to objective truth, no matter where it led them, revolutionized our world: Moses, Socrates, Galileo, Spinoza, Leonardo, Einstein. Think of all the medical and scientific breakthroughs that defied conventional thought. Think of history's freedom fighters who challenged then-accepted social truths: Fredrick Douglass, Mandela, Martin Luther King.

Those who purposely undermine truth – who subscribe to a political theory of “alternative facts,” corrode civic discourse and public trust – the cement of democratic institutions. Once organized lying is normalized, social solidarity erodes.

It is one thing to point out the mistakes, distortions or prejudices of members of the media. But to describe them as “Enemies of the People” undermines liberty. “Enemies of the people” is a political slogan most often used by history's authoritarians and dictators. Mao, the Khmer Rouge, the Soviets – all employed this language. They learned it from the master orator of the French Revolution as it descended into violent madness: Robespierre said: “The revolutionary government owes to the good citizens all the protection of the nation. It owes nothing to the enemies of the people but death.” Thus, social cohesion was decapitated by the guillotine of extreme rhetoric, that, “progressively dehumanized adversaries, recognizing no middle ground between total triumph and utter eclipse.” (Schama, Citizen, p. 792)

It is one thing to point out the mistakes, distortions or prejudices of law enforcement agencies. But to describe them as conducting a witch hunt undermines the rule of law, the foundation of liberty.

The great American playwright, Arthur Miller, wrote a play, "The Crucible," about the real witch hunts in Salem, Massachusetts. It was a parable on the Joe McCarthy era that ensnared Miller himself.

He reminisced about his weekslong research in the libraries of Salem: "To lose oneself day after day in that record of human delusion, was to know a fear, not perhaps for one's safety, precisely, but of the spectacle of perfectly intelligent people giving themselves over to a rapture of such murderous credulity. It was though the absence of real evidence was itself a release from the burdens of this world. Evidence is effort. Leaping to conclusions is a wonderful pleasure....There are no passions quite as hot and pleasurable as those of the deluded...Compared with the bliss of delusion...the dull search for evidence is a deadly bore." (Collected Essays, p. 271-3)

We live in a topsy-turvy, upside-down world – where former cold warriors coddle authoritarians. Deficit hawks add hundreds of billions to the debt while big government types decry profligate spending. Law-and-order people attack the law-and-order establishment, while live-and-let-live people defend the investigative techniques of the FBI. Former advocates of the global system America established to preserve international peace, attack NATO with the kind of ferocity normally reserved for the harshest foes. Evangelicals, who preached a decades-long sermon about the importance of family values in the public arena, support, with almost messianic fervor, political leaders whose proclivities and actions contradict and undermine the very family values they preach.

How easily lifelong convictions are swept aside in one fell swoop. How could long-held convictions dissipate so dramatically? How could the country change so quickly?

In truth, change does not happen overnight. What looks to us like rapid change is usually the result of years, even decades, of bubbling social pressures building underground. The undercurrents are strengthening, even if the waters above look calm. Those who live even through the most revolutionary periods in history, generally fail to grasp its early signs.

I will never forget my meeting with Walter Momper, who was the mayor of West Berlin when the Berlin Wall collapsed. He told me that the day the Wall came down started like any other day. He was in the midst of a television interview, explaining that German reunification would have to wait at least another generation, when his beeper began shaking violently. (In the 20th century, they used beepers.) He needed to get to the Wall urgently. It had just been breached by thousands of East Germans. They demolished the Wall in three days. But its foundations were crumbling for three decades. We just didn't notice.

The struggle to preserve, protect and defend liberty is constant. It never ends. There is no relaxing. Perpetual vigilance is our lot. We will never rid the human heart of prejudice, aggression, the will to dominate and exploit, ego, selfishness, conceit. These are as human as love, compassion, generosity and kindness. In more stable periods, we ignore the beast that lurks in the dark places of the human soul. But once aroused, superstition and fear abound. Reason, conscience, common sense, common interests, commonality, wither. The restoration of domestic tranquility often involves profound social upheavals. "So foul a sky clears not without a

storm,” Shakespeare wrote. We must speak about these things now, before the storm. We must act to counter these things now, before the clouds gather.

“Raise your voice with power,” Isaiah urged. Remind yourselves daily what you believe in, and what American stands for. We are still the last best hope on earth. This constant, callous, cacophony of contempt is not who we are – at least not who we want to be.

Vote. Lobby. Protest. Respond. Challenge. These are the most patriotic acts, bespeaking a love of country at its time of need. Remain confident in the near-miraculous, self-correcting mechanisms of this country to restore equilibrium.

Consider joining one of our three task forces. Join one or both synagogue missions we are planning. We will travel to the American southwest, bearing witness to the struggle, pain, vulnerability and universality of the human condition. We will see for ourselves the suffering individual. We will reflect upon how – or whether – her condition – the situation of a single solitary mother – has any relevance to national policy. After all, the needs of the one are the beginning of morality. We cannot impose on her what is hateful to us. We will ask whether Jews have any special responsibility to her, by virtue of our historical experiences or duties required by our tradition.

A year from now we intend to travel to Western Europe to see for ourselves how the plagues of racism, xenophobia, fear and superstition are threatening European Jews. We will speak with individuals who have been bullied, assaulted or threatened. We will meet family members and friends of those killed. We will reflect upon how – or whether – his condition – the situation of a single solitary Jew – has any relevance to French, Belgian, and European policy. After all, the needs of the one are the beginning of morality. We will ask whether American Jews have any special responsibility to other Jews. We will ask whether Jews have any special responsibility to other hated groups by virtue of our historical experiences or duties required by our tradition. We will visit transit centers in Italy or Sicily or Greece or Spain and look into the eyes of a single solitary refugee. To step into the shoes of another is to step away from cynicism, sarcasm and scorn.

And we will consider the searing, painful truth that so many of us prefer to ignore: Some of the most pernicious anti-Semites are new Europeans – former refugees and immigrants from Muslim countries.

Join us. If all that happens is that it pricks your conscience, inspiring you to better appreciate what you have – how privileged you are – that, too, will be worthwhile. It will sensitize you never to take any of life’s blessings for granted.

One of the central prayers of the High Holy Days is “*U’netaneh Tokef.*” We recite it only on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. “*U’veshofar gadol yitakah*” – the great shofar is sounded in the court as our judgment day unfolds.

There is a phrase in the “*Unetaneh Tokef*” that always moves me: “*Ve’kol d’ma’ma daka yishama*” – a still small voice is heard.

That phrase, “*kol d’ma’ma daka*,” is taken from the Book of Kings describing the prophet Elijah. He was fleeing the idolatrous king Ahab and his wife Jezebel. He found a cave and hid inside. He was all alone. He was in despair – perhaps the lowest point of his life – and he asked God to die: “Enough,” he cried, “take my life.”

“Come out of the cave,” God commanded, “and stand on the mountaintop.” And then we read: “And lo, the Eternal passed by and a great and strong wind split the mountains and shattered the rocks – but God was not in the wind. After the wind, an earthquake – but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, a fire – but God was not in the fire. After the fire, *kol d’ma’ma daka*” – a still small voice.

The demands of justice and the pleas of righteousness are loudest
Not in bombast;
Not in bluster;
Not in braggadocio;
Not in conceit;
Not in disdain;
Not in pride;
Not in pomposity;
Not in pretension;
Not in presumption;
Not in swagger,
Not in scorn;
Not in vanity;
But in the still small sound of a single solitary suffering soul.