

A Grain of Prophet in Everyone
Rosh Hashanah- 5784, 2023
Rabbi Stacy Friedman

One week ago today on the last Shabbat of the year, I rose before dawn, grabbed a cup of hot tea and a few towels, and headed to Rodeo Beach. With a flashlight in hand, I directed about two dozen women to the ocean's edge for our annual pre-High Holy Day mikveh. Before we entered the water, we sang songs, chanted blessings, and set our intentions for the ritual. We would immerse ourselves three times- the first time to release the past, the second time to embrace the present moment, and the third time to immerse ourselves in the possibilities for the future, for this New Year. And did I mention that the water was 59 degrees? As we entered the ocean, the waves came at us relentlessly. The water was rough, and it was hard to find an opening, a way to walk forward without being pushed down over and over again. But we helped one another up, and eventually, we each found our way into the depths of the ocean, once, twice, three times, finally emerging into the light of the rising sun.

Today is Rosh Hashanah and a new year has dawned, and yet, it is so hard to take a step forward, to find a clear and smooth path beneath our feet. With the chaos and darkness in our world, it feels like we are being knocked down over and over again, struggling to get back on our feet. We are encountering too many dark and murky places, and we aren't sure how to see the horizon, how to find the light. Anne Lamott, beloved local author, recently said, "I have catastrophe burn out. Ukraine has taken up most of my compassion budget, the earth's heat wave has used up my allocation for terror... and this doesn't even include the grief I feel for the people in my own small galaxy. Life has been way, way too lifey this summer. And we have a democracy to save for our young. " And we do!

In a recent national poll, when asked, "do you believe that American Democracy is imperiled," seven out of ten people answered yes. And when asked if our country is headed on the right track, a full 67% said no, only 20% said yes, and 13% can't decide.¹ How can we be on the right path when 45 states have introduced over 300 restrictive voting bills this year alone.² How can we be on the right track when gun violence goes unchecked and our nation's children are its unwitting victims, and guns are now the leading cause of death of children in this nation. And our democracy disintegrates as state after state bans and restricts abortion access, denying a woman's right to choose what is best for our bodies and our families. This is not the right track! And just two weeks ago Canada issued a travel advisory to the U.S. for members of the LGBTQ+ community, warning that laws enacted in some states could pose risks, policies like the "Don't Say Gay," law, bathroom bans and other restrictions on transgender people. And censorship is growing in our country as thousands of books are being banned from our schools and removed from our libraries. These bans largely target Native American and minority authors, books on racism, slavery, teen health and sexuality, and works

¹ Suffolk University/USA Today poll, 6/27/23/

² Brennan Center of Justice, non-partisan law and policy group.

deemed as just too violent, like *The Diary of a Young Girl*, by Anne Frank, Pulitzer Prize winner, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and the graphic novel *Maus*, for which Art Spiegelman also won a Pulitzer Prize. The stated reason they were banned? The books were too scary. The Holocaust is scary. Slavery, war, and bigotry are all scary. They are supposed to scare us. And if we hide these essential truths of our history, it means they didn't really happen. Then how will our children learn from the past in order to build a more just society for the future? How will they learn to dream of something better?

And it's not just here in America. In Israel today, a crisis is raging as democracy is under direct attack. Since the new coalition took power, it has worked rigorously to overhaul the judiciary and limit the justice's power of checks and balances. This dangerous move toward autocracy is evident in the dismantling of minority rights, disregard of pluralism, and flagrant corruption, and more. And when the reasonable clause was struck down at the end of July, it was heartbreaking, devastating, but sadly, not surprising. Just last Tuesday, all 15 members of the high court began deliberating next steps, and the battle rages on. For Israel, this is not only a political issue, it is a moral issue, this is a Jewish issue, this is our issue as well.

Channeling the tradition of our prophets, Israelis have taken to the streets in protest against this assault on democracy. I shared with you this summer what it felt like to be among the protestors. Every week since January, hundreds of thousands of Israelis gather across Israel to march for justice and for freedom. This is equivalent to 60 Americans demonstrating for 37 continuous weeks! "Democratya, Democratya, Democratya..." people cried out while holding the flag, their babies, and the future of Israel in their hands. This is a fight for the soul of Israel, this is democracy in action, and I felt so moved, so alive, and so honored to be there, my voice among hundreds of thousands fighting for the soul of Israel.

I returned home inspired and energized by the nationwide demonstrations for justice. Yet, I have to tell you, that when I returned home, I looked around and asked myself, "Where is the communal protest here? Where is our collective outrage?" Where are the 60 million protestors? Where is our vision for something better? To be honest, I felt a bit demoralized. I'm not just speaking about our protest against what is happening in Israel, but here at home as well. It was just over a year ago that the Supreme Court struck down *Roe v. Wade*. Where is the protest? Where is the collective voice of our nation as state after state introduces legislation that undermines our democratic ideals? I know that many of us, and people throughout our country, fight to uphold our democracy and rights every day. But still I wonder if complacency, resignation, and despair have seeped into our national psyche? Have they seeped into our souls as well?

An ancient rabbinic commentary imagines the angels asking, "When does Rosh Hashanah begin?" The answer, they learned, is not found on the calendar, but in our deeds; when we recognize the humanity in every human being and act accordingly.³ Our world calls out to us today to stand up and speak out and to heal what is broken in our world. Last year on Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about our climate crisis, and today I

³ Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:14.

am speaking about what Rabbi Jonathon Sacks called our “culture climate crisis,” and what Judaism demands us in response. It is time to work to repair our fractured nation and to restore decency and dignity both here and in Israel. There is just too much at stake. On Rosh Hashanah we are called to restore a moral vision to our world, one based on our highest values of *chesed*, compassion, *kavod*, respect, and *kedusha*, holiness which resides in every human being. **Our task for this new year 5784 is to look at the world as it is and to imagine it as it can be. And then, to do everything in our power to manifest this vision in our world.**

I remember this summer, hearing from an Israeli commander about how his new soldiers would hold their heavy backpacks with their heads bowed down buckling under the weight, with their eyes focused down at the ground. He taught them, “Your job is to look up and see what’s on the horizon. To walk forward, even with the heavy burden on your backs, you must see where you are going.”

I know sometimes we just want to keep our heads down, look away, turn off the news, and run away from the heaviness of our world and its burdens. I understand it, and so does our tradition. In fact, that is what Shabbat is for: a day to turn off and put aside the news, a day to restore our sense of wonder, holiness, and vision. But day-to-day, how can we see the divinity in one another if we are looking down or looking away? Our Jewish values guide us to eradicate injustice and poverty, to redeem the oppressed, to respect every living being. Rabbi Jonathon Sacks wrote, “A nation is strong when it cares for the weak, it becomes rich when it cares about the vulnerable. If we care for the future of democracy, we must recover that sense of shared morality that binds us to one another in a bond of mutual compassion and care. There is no liberty without morality, no freedom without responsibility.”⁴ Our responsibility is to uphold the commitments we make today and over the next ten days. Our task this year is to keep our heads up, our eyes on the horizon, and our hearts open and caring and loving.

This is what our tradition and our prophets have taught for thousands of years. The prophets protested every injustice, repudiated evil, and assailed every indignity, and they never backed down. Still today their powerful message pierces our souls. “Let the oppressed go free, share your bread with the hungry, wipe out wickedness,” Isaiah cried out as he railed against complacency and indifference. Deborah the prophet was a righteous judge who upheld truth, respect, and justice. And Jonah is the reluctant prophet who tried repeatedly to flee from his task. Ironically, he was the only one of the prophets to successfully transform an entire society. When Jonah finally admonishes the Ninevites, “turn back from your wickedness,” the people fasted, put on sackcloth, and relinquished their corrupt and immoral ways. But for the rest of the prophets, the fact that their dreams were never fully realized did not deter them, for they knew that change and progress emerges in times of disruption and crisis, times like today.

This summer at the Hartman Institute, Yehuda Kurtzer asserted that, “If the dream is attainable in our lifetimes, then maybe we’re not dreaming big enough.” What a revelation this teaching was for me, and I have been pondering it ever since. So today I

⁴ Rabbi Jonathon Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, pg. 20.

ask you, are we dreaming big enough? With this question in mind, I asked you, what are your dreams and vision for America, for Israel, and for our lives in the coming year? Your answers are profound and prophetic: eliminate hate, justice for everyone, a strong democracy here and in Israel, respect and equality for all people, saving our planet for our grandchildren, and on and on. Your dreams are expansive and grand, noble and holy. It is a gorgeous vision for our world, one that embodies the enduring spirit of the prophets.

Abraham Joshua Heschel declared, "Let there be a grain of prophet in every person." And I believe there is; I see it in you every day in ways large and small. And we pass this grain down to our children, from one generation to the next. I remember walking door to door with my parents to collect tzedakah to support Israel during the Yom Kippur War 50 years ago. I joined my mother when she visited with elders in our community and brought meals to hungry and ill people in our town. She would walk door to door to canvas for votes. But eventually, she could no longer walk door to door, so she wrote postcards to get out the vote. Over time, her handwriting became too shaky, so she started making calls to battle ground states instead. She is undeterred! So is Monique who explained, "Today, both my voice and my hands are shaky, so now I put stamps on the postcards." She said, "There's always something you can do. Rodef Sholom makes it so easy to be good and do good."

In 5784, we will once again take part in the Reform Movement's Every Voice, Every Vote campaign to encourage voter participation and defend racial justice. In the 2020 and 2022 elections, these efforts reached 1.5 million people. You'll hear more in the coming months. And this year, I'll be working with our teens to fight censorship and advocate against book bans, and all teens are invited to join us. We'll continue our work against climate change, racism, and so much more. And I know that so many of us are deeply concerned about Israel, and want to know what we can do. Please join me for a series of classes and conversations about Israel over the next few weeks. We'll keep you updated on protest and rallies, and ways to support organizations upholding democracy in Israel. There are a few more spots left on our upcoming Israel trip, and Israel needs us to engage and to demonstrate our support for those fighting for democracy and decency. And for the many of you who are already on the front lines, who fight for justice and compassion every day, thank you for your leadership and inspiration. For those of us who feel overwhelmed and don't know where to start- just pick one thing. Just as Israeli Justice Yitzchak Amit says that "democracy dies in a series of small steps," so too can it be saved by a series of small steps as well. So take one step, then another step, and then the next, and we will find our way together.

Next year, the High Holidays take place only one month before the U.S. elections when so much will be at stake (they're late next year!). When we gather a year from now on Rosh Hashanah and reflect on the year that was, we will ask ourselves, what did we do to uphold decency and protect democracy. What did we do to sustain freedom and dignity and compassion into our world? And when children and grandchildren ask us, "What did you do to make things better," what will we say? What will our answer be?

In the Book of Isaiah, when darkness and danger surround the people, God looks out and asks, “Whom shall I send?” Who can I send to repair what is broken? Who will go for us?” Isaiah responds, “Here I am, send me!”⁵ שְׁלַחֵנִי הֵנִי.

Tonight, we too say, שְׁלַחֵנִי, send me.
This year, when we are called,
let us respond like Isaiah, and say,

send me.

שְׁלַחֵנִי Here I am.

שְׁלַחֵנִי

Just

send

me.

⁵ Isaiah 6:8.