

KOL NIDREY SERMON (October 3, 2014) by Aviva Goldberg

On Erev Rosh Hashanah I mentioned that for a number of reasons, as a teenager and young adult I felt uncomfortable in the synagogue. What I did not mention was that the synagogue I was expected to go to as a teenager was the one that had a lay leader who gave most if not all the sermons – this lay leader was my father.

Now I could tell you that I was proud of my dad and that was certainly true, but although I loved him dearly – although I respected him greatly – although I adored his sense of humour – although I was in awe of his intellect particularly regarding all aspects of Judaism – I would hate to listen to his speeches. In fact I would often sit in my seat cringing and mortified.

You see it wasn't that my father was a poor speaker; it wasn't that his speeches were too lengthy; it wasn't that they were not intelligent – rather it was that these speeches, given in the nineteen seventies, were extremely political – and his position at this, the time of the Vietnam War was virulently anti-communist and unequivocally pro American.

And I who was much more radical, as many of us are when we are young, I who had several friends who were draft dodgers, I who marched at York University in protests against those companies who were recruiting graduates from our campus, companies which we called part of the American 'war machine', I who at that time was married to a man who had been living in the U.S. but had returned to Canada rather quickly when he stopped going to school and became 1 A and therefore eligible for the draft – something in all those years, we somehow neglected to share with my dad –

I would sit and listen to my father's tirades about hippies and draft dodgers and those opposed to the war and feel like screaming but because I did not want to create a rift in our family I remained silent. That may be why I am extremely reluctant to speak from this bimah on most if not all politically contentious and volatile subjects particularly as the theatre of war has moved from South East Asia to the Middle East.

But that is the shadow which hovers over us as Jews in the Diaspora and Jews in Israel, particularly at a time of year when we are as a people called to reflect on our behaviours and attitudes – when the words of the prophet Isaiah are read and we are reminded of our responsibility to our fellow human beings to “unlock the shackles of evil, loosen the thongs of the yoke, send forth crushed souls to freedom” . . . for as Isaiah wrote “our reputation for justice must precede us.”

I know that there are many at various synagogues throughout the world who have chosen to speak this evening or chose to speak on Rosh Hashanah on the difficult topic of Israel and Palestine.

I know as well that in some synagogues to make any public declarations that do not support unequivocally the policies of the present Israeli government, any comments from the pulpit that are in the least bit critical of the actions and policies of Israel, are forbidden.

I know that in some synagogues even here in Toronto to speak about the Israeli Palestinian conflict whether in support of Israel or in opposition to Israel is not allowed either during the High Holy days or at any other time of the year.

And I have read how the mere listing during the Mourner's Kaddish of the names of Palestinian children who died in this latest war prompted the indignation and resignation of several people from a liberal LGBTQ synagogue in New York.

And though this evening it may appear that I am taking the easy way out, I do not wish to publically present a particular stance vis a vis this conflict –

For in truth, I do fear that in doing so one half of this congregation will leave in protest because they hear my words as being too left wing and the other half will leave because they hear my words as being too right wing.

And that is actually what I wish to talk about this evening.

Our sages wrote that one of the reasons for the destruction of the temple and the exile of the Jewish people was baseless hatred; hatred and antagonism within our own people, the inability and the out and out refusal to listen to one another.

In this week's Israeli newspaper Haaretz there is an article by Don Futterman who is the program director for Israel, of the Moriah fund that for the past 25 years has worked towards the building of a and I quote 'civil society in Israel.'

Futterman states that on this Day of Judgment, this Yom Kippur, after a year of war and recriminations, and disillusionment, we, all those on the left, all those on the right, and all those in the center, must take stock do *chesbon nefesh* an accounting of who and what we are and what we are doing.

In keeping with the tradition of beating one's chest as we list our sins he provides a long list of what he calls are the sins of the leftist, the sins of the rightist and the sins of the centrists in Israel and the world and explains in what manner we should beat our chests.

Although I am not in agreement with all that he has on his list I noted that there are many similarities between the sins of the left, who he suggests should beat their breasts with their left fist, and the sins of the right, who he suggests should beat their breasts with of course the right fist.

And tonight I would like to share with you two of the 'sins' that are on these, what at first glance, appear to be opposing lists –

For the sin he writes of the leftist who dismiss those Jews who do not approve of them, as enemies of peace, rather than people who disagree with them, and denigrating too many of them as fascists racists, primitive or stupid.

And similarly for the sins of the right who call any critic, whether loyal friend or foe, an Anti-Semite and ostracize any Jew who does not agree with them by calling them traitors and encouraging their followers to belittle and despise them.

Forgive us, he writes, for these sins –

For the sin on the right for doing everything possible to avoid an open discourse about the future of Israel by vilifying opponents rather than engaging in their critique and wholeheartedly supporting the building of settlements by Israel during peace negotiations.

And similarly, for the sins of the left who blame only the right for the failure of the peace process as if the Palestinian government and organizations have no role, and no responsibility for this failure.

For the sins of the centrist Jews in Israel and around the world Futterman suggests beating their breasts with both fists. And on this centrist list he writes, forgive us for the sin of not presenting an alternative vision to that of the left and that of the right.

For all these God of forgiveness, concludes Futterman, forgive us, pardon us and grant us atonement.

Our sages wrote that if you have a dream featuring a river a bird and a cooking pot it is an indicator of peace.

The bird they say represents the dove that returned to Noah after the flood with an olive branch in its mouth, the symbol for the hope of peace. The river represents the Torah, our tradition, which is compared to water which we are urged to drink. And water as a life giving force serves as a herald of peace.

But what of the cooking pot?

One explanation is that there are no two greater enemies than fire and water; there is no way the two can survive together or even work together – only with the help of a cooking pot can the fire be used to heat the water. Thus the pot makes peace between the fire and the water and therefore a vision of a cooking pot is a portent of peace.

Contemporary Rabbi Levi Cooper continues with this metaphor and presents what I think is a most interesting corollary. He suggests that these three signs of peace indicate three modes through which peace can be achieved.

At the first indication of tension, a fight can be avoided by flight. This he notes is the manner of the bird –

The second path to peace is that of the cooking pot which serves as the intermediary between fire and water – only through an intermediary can these two opposing forces be tamed, for it is the pot that channels the heat to cook the food.

The third avenue to peace, he writes, is the way of the river - water, which winds its way through the landscape gushing forth when conditions allows and when necessary circumventing an outcrop, seeking the path of least resistance.

Peace, therefore, says Cooper, can only be achieved by being like a bird, a cooking pot and a river, flexibly adapting to counter potentially flammable situations.

I would go further and suggest that we cannot find peace, we cannot tame the combination of fire and the water in this political situation, if we ourselves as Jews epitomize these two elements – fire and water.

We have a responsibility as Jews, Jews on the left - Jews on the right - Jews in the center, young Jews and old Jews, Jews in Israel, Jews in the Diaspora, Queer Jews and straight Jews, to listen to one another, to not walk out in protest when an opinion is given in a shul or a public space or in the privacy of our living rooms to which we do not have agreement.

Thirty years ago the first Israeli born Reform rabbi spoke of reclaiming the symbol of the fist which had become associated with the ultranationalist Kach party – he wrote that we must awaken our hearts and recognize that our fist on Yom Kippur is a Jewish fist that it is one that is an expression of life that respects all of humanity with true integrity and hope for the future.

Although I agree with his words - I would propose that perhaps it is time that we uncurl the fingers of that fist and expose our outstretched palm and with respect, with patience, with honesty and yes, with difficulty, open ourselves to a variety of views and opinions learning from one another rather than silencing one another. Only then can the water and the fire and the bird and the cooking pot work together and finally bring peace.