

To Heal and Be Whole
Yom Kippur Morning 5781
September 28, 2020

Unheeded voices, from long ago. So there they were, reviled, alone, ignored, with dire warnings no one wanted to hear. Hard lives, they led. Not a job for a nice Jewish boy or girl. Not if you wanted friends, or to have fun.

Still they stood there, tweeting out our faults and flaws. “Is this what God wants?” we heard this morning, empty gestures and showy spectacle? “Why do you bother?” Isaiah asks, before telling us – again – that we are doing wrong, and informing us in great detail what we should have done instead. No wonder the prophets were lonely.

I have always been a bit surprised that this searing critique made it into the Hebrew Bible at all. It’s not like a high percentage of the literary output of the ancient world survived, after all. Much remained literally underground, dug up only over the past century. We don’t even know what else there was, buried still or never preserved at all. This is what survived?

But to view the prophets through a distance of time and space runs the risk that we miss the point. Over time many have said: look! Look how awful, how evil, how obstinate *those people* were! Bad Jews, bad! The prophets tried to change them, *but they, the Jews* were just too stubborn to listen. No wonder God needed to... you know where this is going! It plays right into what once was the prevailing attitude of “replacement theology,” used to justify the very need for Christianity, and displacement of the Jews.

Many have used them this way... but the prophets were not meant to be tools to point fingers at *others!* You can't read this in second person, or third. That's a misread, almost an abuse of the holy to prop up your own position.

Who preserved these words? Indeed, who made this into sacred literature? It was the people being criticized! This is not a "look how bad *they* were!" This was about "us." It is a collective "we."

At their core, in their essence, the words of the prophets were meant as a self-critique. This is one of the hardest things in the world to hear, and to do.

Centuries later, in Europe, a Chasidic Rabbi called Asher of Stulin noted the following behavior by many his fellow chasidim. When they came before their rebbe, the charismatic leader of their circle of disciples, they would engage in a common and very human act. To impress, find favor, gain standing they would accentuate their good points, and conceal the bad. Pad their resumes. Puff up and preen.

But, Asher of Stulin seems to say, what's the point in that? How are you going to get better if you behave that way? Whereas I, when I come before my rabbi and teacher, Shlomo of Karlin, I try to conceal from him the good. I show him the evil that is in me, because a rabbi is like an ancient priest, and we are taught to "show the infection" to the priest.

A few years ago a single chapter in a well-written book nearly tore Israel apart. It was Ari Shavit's powerful *My Promised Land*. And the chapter was about an Arab town. The town was called Lydda.

Over the course of several days in mid-July of 1948, as the young state was fighting for its very survival, through a combination of circumstances Lydda was cleared of its previous population. But the Arab residents were not just moved elsewhere. There was also, Shavit says, a massacre.

Strategy or self-defense, planned or provoked, the controversy goes on. But what Shavit wrote next is perhaps even more chilling. "Lydda is the black box of Zionism. The truth is that Zionism could not bear the Arab city of Lydda. From the very beginning there was a substantial contradiction... If Zionism was to exist, Lydda could not exist. If Lydda was to exist, Zionism could not exist."

Two things, right away. First, it is worth remembering that Shavit is himself a Zionist, a life-long Israeli, a passionate defender of Israel. What he is talking about here is a price to be born, *not* one he was unwilling to pay.

And second, even if the details in that chapter were not disputed – they are – his conclusion is not obvious or necessary. Why this village? Why this tragic tale, over so many other examples of moral behavior, cooperation, specific plans made for minority populations, attempts at reconciliation? Shavit's words caused quite a stir: anger, outcries over fairness, and deep discomfort.

It is the discomfort which interests me at the moment. His questions ricochet from far away, and resonate with us right here, in our country, on our island, even to the very building we wish we were actually in, right now.

What is the cornerstone of a country? For all its accomplishments and achievement, for all its citizens feel for it, what if there were things done which were very wrong, in the days and ways it came to be? How do we handle justified pride... for something built on a bedrock of sin?

Racial justice. Gender equity. Equality under the law. Control of our bodies. Control of our country. Consent of the governed. The will of the people. The future of democracy. Black Lives Matter. Blue Lives Matter. Defund, defend, debate, destroy...

This moment has been called an “inflection point,” a confluence of events when things are so shaken, so stirred up that it seems there may be a real chance for change. It may have felt that way a bit more a few months ago than it does right now, but I still believe this is, potentially, a truly potent moment, one at which we can ask not just about how things are, but, also, how they should be.

To echo of some of what I said last week, our lives, our world, the way we relate to one another... It was broken, or at least it is now. What is it that God wants of us? Can we be better? Can we make our world better than it was?

This past summer Yehuda Kurtzer gave a talk with a provocative title. “Can a society repent?” There are two ways, he said, to look at a country. The dominant story clung to by most American Jews sees our national project as fundamentally good, a positive and legitimate evolution of the human spirit. In this story, inclusion is an ever expanding circle, minorities can be at home, our own immigrant grandparents found a haven, and those inevitable national flaws and misdeeds, while real, can be remedied by reform. For this group, there would be wide understanding and support for taking down monuments and statues celebrating the Confederacy.

But there is another story, one more of strength and struggle than open arms and beacons of light. Through this lens, dominion comes by Divine right, all due to the most deserving, the rise of one group over others. Here, success for some comes *as a result* of the suffering of others. Wall Street flourishes *because of* the slave trade. As the song in the musical 1776 put it: “molasses to rum to slaves. Who’ll sail the ship outta Boston?”

In this second story, if you like the way things are, there are questions you cannot hear, or even be allowed to ask. But if you want real change, you have to dive deep. The problem goes to the very roots of society.

Neither of those groups, neither reactionaries nor radicals, have much use for slow, patient, gradual reform. What is needed is either an all-in, do whatever you have to do defense of the way we were, or a toppling of icons and fundamental change.

Here, either Confederate heroes keep their place of honor... or the statues we argue about include the framers and founders as well.

My friends, at a time of masks and madness, pandemic and plague, demands for justice and anger all around, of stronger storms and spreading fire, of essential workers who bear the greatest risk being otherwise barely noticed -- treated and compensated as the very least among us, at a time of visibly heavily armed angry white youth walking free and unarmed, peaceful black men and women dead in shockingly high numbers – some of whom are shot in their own homes... at a time of more heat than light in word and air... we are broken, and things need to change.

But how? How deep do our problems go? Can we tweak, or do we need to tear down? What does tomorrow look like?

An old and now outdated saying noted that everyone has an opinion about the weather... but no one does anything about it. [Outdated because...]

Something I have noticed about people coming out of services or hearing sermons – often in Christian churches but sometimes in Jewish settings as well: boiling the hours of liturgy and tradition and community down to a single sentence people say the message they come away with is “be a good person!” And I think, great. Better than the alternative. But, um, how?

The Talmud knew this question too, and faced it straight on. Take a look, with me, at the law of the stolen beam.

ועל המריש הגזול שבנאו : תנו רבנן גזל מריש ובנאו
 בבירה ב"ש אומרים מקעקע כל הבירה כולה ומחזיר
 מריש לבעליו וב"ה אומרים אין לו אלא דמי מריש
 בלבד משום תקנת השבין

The Sages taught in a *baraita* (*Tosefta, Bava Kamma* 10:5): If one **robbed** another of a **beam** and **built it into a building**, **Beit Shammai say**: He must **destroy the entire building and return the beam to its owners**. **And Beit Hillel say**: The injured party receives **only the value of the beam** but not the beam itself, **due to an ordinance instituted for the sake of the penitent**. In order to encourage repentance, the Sages were lenient and required the robber to return only the value of the beam. The ruling is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.

A stolen beam, built into a structure which now stands. A wrong has been committed. Even if the one did wrong is ready to 'fess us, and make right – it's not that easy, or obvious, how to do so.

Look, maybe the original owner wants that particular piece of wood back! By strict justice that is what would happen; that which was taken is... given back.

But what about all the others, neither victims nor thieves, who use, or live in that building now? To give that particular beam back... means to tear down the building.

But even then, sometimes, you just can't go back to the way we were.

A fantasy, spun from current events.

So let's imagine a leader who wanted, at a time of tension, to bring a country together, to heal, to make whole, to restore, to repair.

In this fantasy I thought of one thing our current President could have done which would have been a small step in the right direction. With a new vacancy he could have turned to an old name. I dreamed that he tried to return the stolen beam, with a moderate, who would have been conservative on business and economic matters. I imagined that he made one particular call. Hashtag #AMG. Appoint Merrick Garland.

It was never going to happen. But even if it had, I realized: you can't go back. The house is built, other seats are filled. The building looks different, it has new occupants, it is not what it was when first that name came up.

L'havdil, in contrast, in the world of sports. Imagine Colin Kapernick, reconsidered, reconciled, embraced, and offered a spot as starting quarterback on any team he chose. But the gap is baked in, those years are gone. He may have launched a new awareness which is far more important than this, but what he could have achieved in his field, on the field is simply not... retrievable.

You can't go back. Not fully. Not exactly. Not completely.

The dilemma of restitution, of making things right is all around us, all the time. Tempting as it is, satisfying as it seems to point out the faults of others, to move forward, to pursue justice, to do the right and the good we must begin with ourselves. On this day of days we must be ready to acknowledge the wrongs and the harm which we ourselves have done.

The step after that is to work to make it right. Do we take a path of truth and reconciliation? Do we bare our soul but seek some balance between what was and what needs to be? Or do we knock it all down and start over? Can we really do a better job by doing that?

For our congregation, what if the very building we are so proud of is made from slave labor? For Israel, for the United States, what if the very foundation is made of stolen beams?

There is anger, and heartache, and frustration. These are deep and disturbing issues. Exposure hurts. Self-exposure hurts even more.

Look, and listen. The words are so hot because the stakes are so high. But asking these questions, confronting our own moral failings... is also healthy. And holy. And it may be the only thing which can heal us, and make us whole.

We are broken, and wounded, and wrong in too much of what we do.

But we have a job to do. We have eyes, and ears, and heart and mind.
And there is something which calls to us, which speaks from somewhere else,
and deep within.

When will redemption come? Our tradition answers with a verse from
Psalms: “*Hayom, im b’kolo tishma’u*. Today, if we but hearken to the voice.”

L’shana Tova.