

Freedom and Obligation

Sermon for Rosh Hashanah 5778

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Shana Tova. It is so good to be here with you together in this sanctuary, celebrating a New Year together. It feels particularly good this year to be together as we have faced disheartening developments over the past year in our country and in the world. Thank you for being here and for maintaining this loving community, a source of hope, support and inspiration for all of us.

Over the past month, many people have said to me: “Rabbi, you’ll have plenty to talk about this Rosh Hashanah.” Yes, this is quite a time in our country to be giving a sermon. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called the Days of Awe, and the responsibility demanded of

us in a time like this is indeed awesome. We are living in a moment in history that requires us to be fully present. It requires us to answer the call for moral vision and right action the way Abraham and Elijah answered God's call, with the word "*hineni*, here I am."

Let me first call out by name what is on many people minds-- the situation we find ourselves in. We are living in a time of an American president with autocratic, if not neo-fascist characteristics; a time of an invigorated white supremacist movement, emboldened by that same president; a time of rampant antisemitism, racism and anti-immigrant sentiment; a time of climate change denial that is sure to lead to more climate-caused tragedy; and a time of a plundering of public resources and a buying of influence that rewards the greed of the few.

These plagues were not created last November. They have been in the making for a long time, well before the election, and will require a long-term commitment of deep spiritual resources to confront effectively. Rosh Hashanah gives us the framework to do that kind of work. It is the celebration of the creation of human beings, reminding us that each of us was created in the image of God. It is the Day of Judgment, *Yom Ha-Din*, calling us to take a hard look at ourselves and at our world, believing that real change (*Teshuvah*) is available to each of us and to all of us collectively. It is the Day of the Shofar sounding, *Yom Teruah*, calling us to awakening—to action.

We cannot, of course, solve all our problems in one morning. Nor do I have a secret oracle from which I can explain the past and reveal the future. I do, however, want

to ask big questions. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that “religion is an answer to ultimate questions . . . [and t]he primary task of religious thinking is to rediscover the questions to which religion is an answer.”¹ Moral philosopher Michael Sandel said something similar: “the Trumpian moment highlights the need to . . . address the big questions people care about including moral and cultural questions. . . . [We need] to introduce directly into public discourse explicit debate about moral and spiritual questions. . . .”²

The question I want to ask this morning is about freedom. America is “the home of the brave and the land of the free.” We treasure our freedom. But what *is* true freedom and what does it require of us? Freedom does not have an obvious meaning. The word “freedom” is used in

everything from “Freedom Summer” of the civil rights movement to the “American Freedom Party” of the white nationalists. It is a word that progressives use and a word in the name of the most conservative caucus in congress --the “House Freedom Caucus.” The differences among us regarding the meaning of freedom underlie almost every polarized issue in our public life from guns to healthcare, from climate change to business regulation.

So what is true freedom, and what is its relationship to sacrifice. We Americans love freedom but we also recognize the need for sacrifice and value patriotism, which is about our obligations to the greater good. There have been times in America that sacrifice was wholly consistent with our idea of freedom. Who do we call the “Greatest Generation?” The generation that fought for freedom by means sacrifice and a

sense of obligation—from the soldier to the knitter to the victory gardener. My great uncles fought in WWII. My grandmother spent all her free time knitting for the troops. They felt themselves part of a larger effort. They believed in sacrificing some of their individual freedoms—their free time, their free use resources, even their lives-- for the freedom for all—both here and in Europe. Their freedom embraced obligation.

There have been other times, and this is one of them, where freedom meant being free to pursue one's individual needs and interests first and foremost. In this view, the notion of "obligation" takes a back seat to individual freedoms. Indeed there is an unavoidable tension between freedom and obligation. How we navigate that tension explains a lot about what kind of citizens and what kind of

country we want to be. This is not a partisan question — this is a moral and spiritual one. This is not an issue only for some folks out there. It is an issue for all of us.

Following Michael Sandel’s call to discuss the great moral and spiritual questions in our public discourse, I want to ask the question about the meaning of freedom from a Jewish point of view. Discussions of freedom have ancient Jewish roots. The foundational story of our people is the story of the Exodus and the march to freedom. The quote on the Liberty Bell, “Proclaim liberty throughout the land, comes directly from the Torah (Lev. 25:10). The medieval commentator Akedat Yitzchak says that the difference between human beings and angels is that human beings have freedom of choice and the angels do not.

All these examples of freedom in our tradition paradoxically relate freedom to obligation. Our freedom to choose is the ethical basis of our responsibility to each other. If we were not free, we could not be held responsible. So freedom and responsibility are inextricably linked in our tradition. Think about the Exodus. As soon as we were free from Pharaoh, we were free to receive Torah at Sinai. The Talmudic sages interpret a verse about the Torah from Sinai that says “the writing was the writing of God inscribed on the tablets.” In a word play with the Hebrew word for “inscribed” or *harut*, they say “Do not read ‘*harut*’ (inscribed)—but rather *herut* (freedom)” —in other words, don’t read “inscribed on the tablets” but rather “freedom on the tablets.” Why? For “there is no free person except one that involves her/himself in Torah learning” (*Pirkei Avot* 6:2).

In other words, you cannot separate freedom from what you do with it. As Rabbi Heschel writes, “freedom is not only the ability to choose and to act, but also the ability to will, to love. The predominant feature of Jewish teaching throughout the ages is a sense of constant obligation.”³

Think about the obligation to the greater good that is the context for the Torah verse quoted on the Liberty Bell. The context for that verse in the Torah begins with the idea of the sabbatical year. First, the Torah commands environmental regulation. One must let his or her fields lay fallow on the 7th year so that they will remain fertile for the future. Second, the Torah commands tax policies and bankruptcy laws that say one must release debtors of all debts on the sabbatical year. And finally, the Torah commands redistributive economic policies that say that

when one counts 7 sabbatical years—or 49 years, you shall sound the shofar on the Day of Atonement and declare the *Yovel* or the Jubilee year. In that year, all economic inequality will be erased and the Israelites will go back to their original landholdings. It is here where our verse says, “You shall make holy the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants.” The liberty referred to on the Liberty Bell is the liberty that comes from living in a society where its citizens fulfill their obligation to act for the greater good.

Contrast this moral economics of freedom with the freedom of unrestrained free markets, whereby a corporation can make a decision to increase already healthy profits by closing a factory that is the foundation of a community. Not only do families suffer, but the ability of

the community as a whole to thrive is sometimes irreparably impaired. This is not freedom in Jewish thought. Social bonds and public welfare are integral to freedom in the Torah. Imagine the fraying of social bonds that have been taking place in our country where obligations to each other have been eroding at every level. Take economic inequality as an example.⁴ In 1965 CEO's made 24 times the wage of the average worker but in 2009 they made 185 times that wage. At the same time as that amassing of wealth of the few, there are about 750,000 Americans who are homeless on any given night, 20% of all American children live in poverty, and 38% of black American children live in poverty.⁵ Why isn't this a moral emergency? These facts are a result of decades of social policies that have valued a particular kind of freedom—unfettered free markets

engineered to help a few—in place of a freedom that comes from caring from one another. It pursues what Michael Sandel calls an individualist and consumer idea of freedom, as opposed to a civic conception of freedom.⁶ But following our desires is not true freedom according to the Torah. As Rabbi Heschel writes that freedom “is not an absolute but a relative possession, an opportunity. We are free only when living in attachment to the spirit. The blessings and opportunities of living in a free society must not make us blind to those aspects of our society which threaten our freedom: the tyranny of needs, the vulgarization of the spirit are a particular challenge.”⁷

We are living in a time of the vulgarization of spirit. It does not help that our commander-in-chief is also our “vulgarizer-in-chief,” but let’s not give him all the credit. As

our tradition says, in a place where there is no *mentsch*, be a *mentsch*. It is up to us to make our public conversation also a moral and spiritual one. We should not leave the language of morality to a narrow slice of our citizenry. Our religious traditions are a source of insight and wisdom. And while it is true that there has been much in those traditions we have rightly rejected, the wrestling with ultimate questions within those traditions remains a treasure for us.

It is that wrestling we can learn from as we address the challenges of today that imperil our freedom at every level: impoverished communities, the threat of national tyranny, potential environmental catastrophe caused by climate change. These are challenges that call for all of us to work together for the greater good. As psychologist Barry Schwartz wrote in his book *The Costs of Living*, we need to

ask ourselves “What is the extent of our responsibility to other human beings, and to the society to which we belong?”⁸ As an answer, he notes that “What seems to contribute most to happiness [is that which] binds us rather than liberates us.” When I officiate at funerals and people reflect on the most meaningful part of someone’s life, people mention those ties and commitments that bind — family, community, movements for justice, country. People talk about how the person gave to others, and how through the gracious fulfillment of those obligations there was meaning.

Good education for all including accessible quality public university education, health care for all, living wages for all, these are expensive, but they are well within traditional Jewish and American concepts of freedom.

Jefferson believed that only an educated citizenry could

protect democracy. These public goods are costly but so are the costs of a disengaged citizenry pursuing only their own interests.

I imagine there is much I have said that people agree with and disagree with. I look forward to our discussions, for that is also a sacred part of being in community. It is not easy being a part of community. Successful communities require patience of spirit, graciousness, generosity and a willingness to put aside one's own interests for the whole. It is about connection and obligation, spirit and love. It is exactly these qualities that our country needs right now, and just being here is standing up for them. You were all free to be somewhere else at this time—but you have chosen a different freedom—the freedom to celebrate our heritage in our community. May we come together to know the deepest

freedom of the spirit, as we pray for each other and for our country.

L'shana tova tikatevu

¹ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), p. 4.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoF8KfkkjPk>

³ Heschel, p. 13.

⁴ <http://inequality.stanford.edu/publications/20-facts-about-us-inequality-everyone-should-know>

⁵ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/14/black-child-poverty-rate-holds-steady-even-as-other-groups-see-declines/>

⁶ <https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2016/11/23/the-november-our-discontent/WXWkvkgSWp7MaKoHIdEzbK/story.html>

⁷ Heschel, p. 18.

⁸ Barry Schwartz, *The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994), p. 125.