

RED LINES AND GREEN LINES

YOM KIPPUR 5775

Rabbi Caryn Broitman

I, like lots of children around age 4 or 5, used to impatiently wait for my parents to wake up on weekend mornings. I couldn't understand why someone would rather be asleep than be awake. So I could relate when I saw a *New Yorker* cartoon last April that depicted a 5 year-old boy jumping on his parents' bed, pulling on their sleeping bodies and shouting, "Mommy! Daddy! Wake up! You only have 30 or 40 years left to live!"¹

Sleep and wakefulness, as a child knows, is serious business. Our morning prayers describe God himself as "the Lord who neither slumbers nor sleeps. *Hashem lo yanum v'lo yishan*. He rouses the sleepers and wakens the slumberers." The Talmud teaches sleep is 1/60th of death. As Psalm 115 says, *lo hametim yehaleluha*. It is not the dead

who praise God, nor those who go down to the silent grave.”

It is those of us who are alive and awake.

Jonah, whose story we read this afternoon, is a prophet who likes to sleep. God calls Jonah to go to the city of Ninevah, one of the largest and oldest cities in Mesopotamia, and “cry out against it for their wickedness has come before Me.” In response to the call, as you know, Jonah runs the other way. Unlike Amos who proclaims, “let justice roll down like the waters!” and Isaiah who challenges Jews on Yom Kippur demanding “is this the fast I ask for?” Jonah would rather not offend or get involved. He hears the call to speak truth to power. He briefly weighs the consequences. And he takes a shluf, a nap.

Jonah has a knack for sleeping through almost anything. When the ship he is escaping on encounters a life-threatening storm, and the sailors are all working desperately to save the ship, Jonah is down below sound asleep. The captain approaches him and said, “How can you

be sleeping so soundly! Arise and cry to your god!” Jonah suggests simply throwing him overboard, preferring the eternal sleep of death rather than facing truth.

The first word God says to Jonah in the book of Jonah is *Kum!* “wake up!” Why would a prophet, whose job was to wake people up, want to sleep? Was he sleeping out of fear of the consequences of speaking the truth? Was he sleeping to avoid risking saying something that turned out to be incorrect, thereby protect his reputation? Was he sleeping out of despair, thinking nothing he could say would make a difference? Or was he sleeping out of anger at God or human beings for the mess that the world was in? The image of Jonah in the belly of the great fish, which is designated as feminine, seems to imply that seemed Jonah preferred going back to the womb. He couldn’t face the world.

The shofar, one of the central symbols and rituals of these Days of Awe, is about calling us to wakefulness. What do we need to wake up to on these Days of Judgment? What

is calling us? There are more answers to that than people in this room. But many of you acted like a shofar to me, these last couple of weeks when I was thinking about this question myself.

Last October, a JCPA (Jewish Council for Public Affairs) survey reported that a 1/3 of non-Orthodox rabbis of all views, but especially liberal ones, feel very fearful to say what they believe about Israel to their congregations and censure themselves because of fear of repercussions. In this fall's issue of Reform Judaism, Eric Yoffie, former President of the Union for Reform Judaism, wrote an article called "Muzzled by a Minority: Many Rabbis Don't Talk about Israel." A few days before Rosh Hashanah the New York Times ran an article on a growing number of Rabbis reluctant to share their views on Israel with congregants and noted that many rabbis they interviewed even feared to be interviewed on the record.

“It used to be that Israel was always the uniting factor in the Jewish world,” my colleague in Montreal Rabbi Ron Aigen was quoted in the article. “But it’s become contentious and sadly, I think it is driving people away from the organized Jewish community. Even trying to be centrist and balanced and present two sides of the issue, it is fraught with danger.” The article included a report on Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, a colleague of mine who is the rabbi Beit Simchat Torah, the largest LGBT synagogue in the country. Rabbi Kleinbaum created a peace prayer at a service this summer where she interwove names of both Israelis and Palestinians who had died in the war. She woke up the next morning to see herself vilified on the internet as a lover of Hamas and find that two of her board members publically and angrily quit the synagogue.

Around the time that these articles were published, a number of people in the congregation approached me after

having read them. “I don’t envy you,” they said. “It will be hard talking about Israel this year.”

“Not really, I said. I’m not talking about Israel this year.”

“Really?”

I’m talking about Jonah?

“Really??” they said.

And after the fourth conversation in this vain, I started to wonder whether *I* was perhaps acting like Jonah. Was I running the other way? Was there was a call, so to speak, to talk about what is pressing and difficult, and my shipmates were saying—wake up! What are you doing asleep! Maybe talking about Jonah *meant* talking about Israel.

So I will accept that challenge, and talk about something that is difficult but I think pressing for us as a people. I will not talk about Israeli politics directly because while I think it is important, there is plenty of time for that during the year, and we need to create opportunities for real

conversation when many people can speak and listen. I do, however, want to talk the way we American Jews have been talking about Israel; the way we have been *not* talking about Israel; and the way we have been hurting each other and stereotyping each other and reading each other out of the Jewish community. Thankfully, I am not talking about *this* community, for the Hebrew Center has been working hard at having open and meaningful conversations, and we will continue to do so. I feel so grateful for the many people in the community who have committed to participate in respectful conversation about difficult and emotional issues. I have learned so much from all of you. But we are part of a larger Jewish world that cannot help but affect us, and as part of our journey to being an open synagogue, I want to talk about the problems we are facing today as a larger Jewish people in America.

We Jews are justly proud of our ability to argue, to disagree and to retain both the majority and minority

opinions as holy texts. That is what the Talmud is—a web of questions, challenges and dissenting opinions. Faith and dissent, Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, are two essential ingredients of Judaism. When people tell me what they love most about Judaism, it is often our ability to reject dogma and encourage challenging questions.

Dissent, in fact can be understood as a major theme of the Bible, beginning with Abraham's challenge to idolatry all the way to Job's challenge of divine justice. In between is the section of the prophets who are dissenters from the religious and political policies of many of the Kings of Israel. The Kings hire their own prophets to tell them what they want to hear. The biblical prophets, however, tell them what they *don't* want to hear, and it is *their* words, the words that cross the line, which our tradition makes sacred.

Today, however, as our disagreements around Israel become more emotional, intense and fear-laden, we are creating more and more lines. Mainstream Jewish

organizations are using words like “red lines” to establish officially what will not be acceptable in conversation, and using those “red lines” to disinvite or ban Jewish speakers or organizations who cross those lines. Words like “delegitimizers” are used to label those who criticize of Israel beyond what communal leaders choose to tolerate.

Underlying these red lines is an understandable sense of fear and besiegement. We are only a few generations away from one of the greatest traumas of our history, the Shoah. We haven’t even recovered our numbers from those who were murdered 70 years ago, never mind our language, Yiddish, our culture, our loved ones, our writers, rabbis and leaders. In the aftermath, Israel has been our rebirth and our lifeline. Yet Israel itself has been at war since its birth, and we fear for her security. In addition, a resurgence of anti-semitism in Europe adds to our vulnerability and heartache. When we feel we have no control over an enemy without—we try to name and control an enemy within.

Persecuted groups do this over and over again. There was recently a piece on this American Life about the refugee community from South Vietnam who are quick to accuse each other of being communists, even those who were fighters against the communists or prisoners of war or boat people. When there is fear, there are loyalty tests, and when there are loyalty tests, no one is assured of passing. I can't help thinking about that New Yorker cartoon of Moses with his staff leading the Israelites on dry ground through the Red Sea. Behind Moses are two Israelites talking about him. "He's alright," one says to the other. "I just wish he were a little more pro-Israel."

Tensions between dissent and loyalty are not new in our history and arise whenever there is a threat to survival. Take as an example the prophet Jeremiah, who lived at the time of the Babylonian invasion and the destruction of the 1st Temple in 587 BCE. The Judean King's policy at the time was to ally with the Egyptians over the Babylonians, believing that

would save them from invasion. Jeremiah insisted that it would not and for this he was labeled a traitor, beaten and put in jail. God tells Jeremiah to write all those troublesome and unwelcome words he has spoken up until now on a scroll and give them to the King. Jeremiah does as God asked. The officials begin to read it to King Yehoyakim, and after 3 or 4 verses the King takes a razor, cuts through it, throws it in the fire, and calls for Jeremiah's arrest. Time to quit? Time for Jeremiah, like Jonah to go to sleep? Not exactly. God tells Jeremiah to write the whole thing down again, on another scroll, and he did.

Fear for survival in difficult times often results in drawing of red lines, tests of loyalty and accusations of betrayal. Stakes are high, the dangers people feel are real and wrong decisions can have devastating consequences. But so can shutting down debate. During the time of the Roman conquest of Judea and Jerusalem, 500 years later, Jews were so enraged at each other's points of view that the

Talmudic rabbis later said the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed not because of the Romans but because of *sinat hinam*—baseless hatred Jews had for one another.

We draw red lines out of fear. It was fear that led the Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam, refugees from the Inquisition, to excommunicate Baruch Spinoza, whose views probably reflect our own more than anyone on that particular excommunication committee. It was fear that led the Reform Jewish community at the beginning of the 20th century to reject Herzl and Zionism, nervous that a commitment to a Jewish national home would put into question their own loyalty to their home countries of Germany or America. It was fear that led a small group of ultra-Orthodox Jews to burn the earlier edition of this Reconstructionist prayer book and excommunicate its founder, Mordechai Kaplan. In both cases, what would Judaism have looked like if Zionism and liberal Judaism had been successfully repressed?

Zionism itself was a courageous and daring crossing of a red line. It crossed the line of religious faith that believed that only God would establish a new Jewish state. It crossed the line of liberal Judaism that said that Judaism was not a nationality but a religion like Catholicism or Protestantism. It crossed a line of assimilation that said that if we were only more like our neighbors there would be no more anti-semitism. If it were not for individuals like Theodore Herzl, Ahad Ha'am and others who crossed the line, Israel would not exist today.

I am a cultural Zionist in the tradition of Ahad Ha'am and Martin Buber who believes that Jewish vitality requires an organic national culture with our own language, land, and literature. I will leave to political leaders the borders and power arrangements as long as everyone's human and civil rights are respected. While I am a liberal Zionist, however, I do not, however, want to exclude from the conversation religious Zionists who believe God gave the land to Jews

alone, or non-Zionists who do not believe in the necessity of a specifically Jewish state to Judaism. I do not want to exclude from the conversation Palestinians who have completely different perspectives (themselves just as diverse) than we do, regardless of whether or not they believe in a Jewish state. I do not want to exclude from the conversation liberal Protestants who boycott some American companies doing business in the occupied territories or Israeli artists and writers like Amos Oz or David Grossman who decline to speak or perform at settlements. Nor do I want to exclude Evangelicals who want Jews to annex the West Bank or exclude Jewish families building homes there. I'm not just talking about the importance of free speech. I am saying that we need those voices in the conversation if we are to thrive and if we are ever to build a road to peace.

When I was in Israel in 1994, on a congregational trip with my husband's synagogue, we visited a West Bank settlement called Neve Daniel. It was the first time I heard a

settler talk about why he wanted to live in Judea, or the West Bank, and he talked very movingly. I understood the connection he had with the land as I had never understood before. If I had not visited him and listened to him, my understanding of the situation there would have been so much poorer.

About 10 years after that visit, I returned to the same area, this time visiting a Palestinian family, one of the few who have been able to stay because of the expansion of settlements like Neve Daniel. The owner of the land, Daoud Nasser, is well-known internationally respected peace educator who founded “The Tent of Nations” an educational and environment farm whose mission is to build bridges of “understanding, reconciliation, and peace.”

The Nasser family has been able to stay on their land, despite attempts to expel them, because they miraculously have kept their title that goes back to the Ottoman Empire. They have, however, had to endure being taken off the

electrical grid and water supply. To get to Daoud's house, one needs to park the car at a road block put there by the military and then walk a long road. While walking on the road, we met two young women coming back from a visit, one of them Jewish. I will never forget how her face lit up, when we told her we were rabbis. She knew she was crossing a line someone had drawn just by visiting a Palestinian home. But for her, she was visiting *because* she was Jewish, even though few in the Jewish community could understand that. When she saw us, she knew we understood. And she felt validated as a Jew in a very deep way. We would not turn her away. We affirmed her belonging.

That day, when we reached the house and spoke to Daoud, one of the things he told us about was a new effort to meet with Jews from the surrounding settlements and start to talk and get to know each other as neighbors. They had started their own dialogue group. Those connections became important because, just a few nights before, Israeli soldiers

had banged on the door and stormed into the house in the middle of the night in an intimidating way and then left. When his neighbors in this dialogue group heard what had happened from military friends, it was they, these settlers, who made connection with him and called him express their apologies.

If I had obeyed red lines that left out of the conversation Jewish settlers on the right, young Jewish student activists on the left, or Palestinian farmers, I would have had so much less compassion and understanding. There is so much for all of us to learn. If we truly want to build a road to peace, whatever the road will look like, and I do not pretend to know, we need to be awake to other experiences and perspectives.

As Jewish communal leaders draw red lines around conversations that leave some Jews out, many our young people, who have been raised by us to think critically about difficult issues, are drawing a larger circle to keep people in.

In a week, I will be attending the first conference of the student led Open Hillel movement with hundreds of students and Jewish leaders from all over the country. Open Hillel does not stand for any particular point of view but rather for openness and pluralism. The movement arose in response to International Hillel's "partnership guidelines" that were put into place in 2010. Those guidelines make co-sponsoring events with Palestinian students or inviting more left wing Jewish speakers or organizations almost impossible because of the red lines they draw. Since the implementation of those guidelines in the last few years, a number of speakers that students have wanted to invite have been denied, including at Harvard, the former speaker of the Knesset Avram Burg, because he was to speak at an event co-sponsored by Hillel students and a Palestinian student group who supported some form of boycott, as most Palestinian groups do. In addition, both the UC Berkeley Jewish Student Group and Boston University Hillel voted not to allow a J-Street student

group to affiliate with Hillel. Open Hillel advocates that the pluralism that Hillels have been famous for “should be extended to the subject of Israel, and that no Jewish group should be excluded from the community for its political views.” They also believe that “it is essential that Hillel-affiliated groups be able to partner with other campus groups in order to share perspectives, cooperate in those areas where we agree, and respectfully debate in those areas where we disagree.” The message of their conference, as their video invitation says is “I want my Jewish community to include people like me.”

Having once been a student president of Hillel and a Hillel Program Director, I know how much a pluralistic Hillel contributed to my own Jewish growth and commitment. I don't think I would be here today without the truly pluralistic Hillel that I experienced. When I was at Hillel, I was part of a movement that worked to fully include Gay and Lesbian Jewish students. The Jewish people is not at its best when

we write people out. Not then and not now. These are our children and grandchildren. We want are Jewish community to include them.

As many of you know, our daughter Galya was in Israel during this last summer for 5 weeks on an amazing program called Nesiya. This past summer was a very difficult time for all of us—for our brothers and sisters in Israel and for all of us here who have such a deep love and concern for Israel. One ray of hope that I had, however, was that Galya made deep friendships and had real conversations with teenagers and teachers in the group who were truly diverse. There were religious and secular Jews, Jews on the left and the right from kibbutzim and from settlements on the West Bank. There would be lots to talk about and disagree on at any time. But last summer was an especially difficult time. There were serious discussions, and tears, but there was a commitment to listen and to talk. Through those discussions Galya's commitment deepened, and she came

home asking real questions. As a parent, I can't tell you how happy I am to have a child not mimic what her parents say but to ask real questions. Going beyond the red lines wakes us up, as we see, understand and have to assimilate new perspectives. Judaism is about being awake across the borders.

Our Hebrew Center community is very special in that we are truly diverse. We don't have the luxury of establishing a separate shul for every difference of opinion as is the custom off-Island. Yet that is really our blessing. I have learned so much from people in this congregation in all the many different ways people experience Israel. I in turn have tried to effectively communicate my own passion for Jewish language and culture that is alive in Israel in such a unique way. I look forward to deepening our own conversations over the years, not to persuade but to listen and learn. I would like us to be one of the synagogues who courageously forge a path of engaged, compassionate

pluralistic conversation about everything Jewish.

We, like Jonah, need to move from sleep to wakefulness. I will end with a teaching on the shofar, the sound that tradition says awakens us from sleep. On Rosh Hashanah we traditionally listen to 100 different blasts—3 sets of 30 and then 10. Rabbi Fivel Glasser, the director of Nesiya, shared a teaching from the Talmud on why we blow Shofar in sets of 30. The Torah tells us to sound the shofar but there are no instructions or recordings about how to sound it. So there arose different traditions of how to blow the shofar. Some commentators suggested that there are so many different traditions because we lost the knowledge of the correct one. If we blow the shofar in three sets of 30 thereby including all of those traditions, somewhere in there is the correct one, and we are sure to do it.

There is another commentator, however, in the 10th century named Rav Hai Ga'on. He says that we do sets of 30 blasts not because we lost the correct way to do it, rather,

because they are all correct, and, out of a sense of communal unity, everyone should blow all of them and include everyone's truth, so to speak.

How much less rich would Rosh Hashanah be with only one note? Being in community means treasuring all those notes. Let us speak and listen to each others' truths with compassion, as we awake to a deeper truth that carries all of them. The Tekiah Gedolah at the end of this day will be long because it will lift up all our voices into one.

¹ Carolita Johnson, *New Yorker*, April 28, 2014.