

Vayeitzei 5774 Speaking Out

Shabbat Shalom.

All right, the truth: how many of you in the Lexington area went to vote on Tuesday?

Come on. Be honest.

How many made the mistake that I did and headed to the polls, only to remember that we are voting on Dec 10 for a new congressperson?

I sort of forgot about that.

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But on Wednesday, I had much more success in participating in the political process. Half a dozen members of Temple Emunah joined with 250 others from the Boston area to participate in an “Action Day” at the State House.

We were joined by a nice contingent from Temple Isaiah and the Lexington area including some of our local churches. We were inspired by several speakers to redouble our efforts to prevent gun violence. From there, we lobbied our state representatives and senators about laws we want to pass to keep people safe.

It was wonderful to see the diversity of the participants – men and women – rabbis and ministers from Lexington, Imams from the city, and Episcopalian priests from the South Shore, Sikhs from the suburbs, African-American Baptists, and more. There are few places where such a diverse group comes together - but we all came to work on the scourge that is gun violence.

One of the speakers was a young African-American man who grew up as a child and teen in a neighborhood where guns and gun violence were rampant. Weapons were easily obtained and he got caught up in a culture where gun trafficking was common-place. While he had gotten caught up in that world, he was able to break away and now mentors young African-American men, hopefully placing them on good paths.

The guns he spoke about are often brought into our Commonwealth from other states or bought by straw purchasers who then traffic the weapons. Sometimes, women – wives and girlfriends – buy the guns; sometimes, they are coerced into doing so. Since there is no legal limit on the number purchased, these guns become plentiful.

Incidentally, one of the things we were lobbying for is a limit of one gun per person per month. This seems pretty logical. Why would anyone think they need more? To defend oneself? With twelve guns?!?

Another speaker spoke of her aunt who took her own life with an unsecured gun. Another reminder that of the over 30,000 who are killed by guns in America each year, 18,000 are suicides.

Did you hear about the shooting at the Garden State Plaza in Northern NJ? My parents live a few miles away and frequent its movie theater. While thankfully, my parents weren't there at the time, the shooter was a young 20 year-old from Teaneck, who was intent on taking his own life – and did.

The speakers ranged from a Jewish suburban mother to an African American pastor to supportive politicians. While we were lobbying for several measures that will save lives - probably a fair number of lives, we were reminded that even if we only save one person, it is worth our efforts.

Our Mishnah teaches this: "The one who saves one life, saves an entire world."

I have heard the following argument: "Rabbi, how much of a difference do you really think you can with these gun laws? People will still kill each other!"

"True, but let's make it a bit harder for them!"

This sense of helplessness and perhaps, apathy is pervasive in our culture.

At times, our country can be apathetic and too inwardly focused. This can occur in foreign policy, as it is today and in domestic matters as well when people don't want to help the poor, the hungry or the uninsured. Part of this insular thinking comes from our country's individualistic history. In *Democracy in America* written in 1835, the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out that ours is a country where people are quite focused on themselves. He decried the "crass individualism" that had already taken root in the country.

People's natural tendency is to focus on themselves, and while some societies work hard to create a strong, cohesive community, America privileges the rights and needs of the self, a "pick yourself up by your own bootstraps" mentality.

In the last two centuries, that has continued, if not increased. Today, we remain focused on ourselves. We live in a society that feels very connected on the one hand - where we have devices that instantly share information with people around the globe, but, it is not substantively connected. It is a light, even a superficial, connection.

People feel ever more isolated and alone in our world and yearn to be in connection with each other - a real "face-to-face" relationship, like what we experience here in shul on Shabbat when we put aside our phones and actually see, talk and listen to each other.

That yearning for connection reminds us that we can make a difference in the world, that we should not remain fixated solely on ourselves. As Hillel said two millennia ago, "*u'kh'she'ani l'atzmi, ma ani* - but when I am only for myself, what am I?"

"Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile."

Who said that?

Albert Einstein.

But let me return to the argument that we cannot make a difference. In Ghana last summer, the other rabbis who volunteered with me and I were building a school for children who had been child slaves. It felt as if we were doing something.

But then, one day we went for a walk into the main part of the city and saw the pervasive poverty. Looking into the eyes of a hungry child, we could see the enormous pain and suffering. And there were so many people in need. Were we really making any difference?

I challenged Ruth Messinger, the head of the American Jewish World Service: were we really making a difference given the scope of the need?

She said that we were engaged in vital work. While our minimal building had a small impact, she pointed me to the ripples. The good we were doing would touch a certain number of children and their families; from there, it would emanate out and touch more people. And the stories we would share would touch thousands.

Not to mention, she added, the starfish - referencing the famous story.

“A young man is walking along the ocean and sees a beach on which thousands and thousands of starfish have washed ashore. Further along he sees an old man, walking slowly and stooping often, picking up one starfish after another and tossing each one gently into the ocean.

“Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?” he asks.

“Because the sun is up and the tide is going out and if I don’t throw them further in they will die.”

“But, old man, don’t you realize there are miles and miles of beach and starfish all along it! You can’t possibly save them all, you can’t even save one-tenth of them. In fact, even if you work all day, your efforts won’t make any difference at all.”

The old man listened calmly and then bent down to pick up another starfish and threw it into the sea. “It made a difference to that one.”

We can make a difference in action and in words. Ours is a world the needs us to cry out and act against injustice.

If we don’t speak out, the Talmud states explicitly: “*shtikah k’hoda’ah dami* - silence is equivalent to acquiescence.” When we should speak out, but do not, we are complicit.

Ours is a tradition the REQUIRES us to speak out and even act against a wrong. While there are sometimes when we should be quiet; in general, if there is injustice that we can ascertain and confirm, then we must speak out.

Avraham, of course, is the model of this when he argues with God against what he feels is the unjust destruction of the righteous of the cities of *S'dom* and *Amorah*.

In this *parashah* as well, we find another interesting example. We are familiar with the opening narrative of Jacob lying down to sleep and his dream of the ladder with angels ascending and descending.

Waking up, he realizes the intensity of this experience, announcing: “*akhen yeish Adonai bamakim hazeh v'anokhi lo yadati* - Surely, Adonai, God is present in this place, and I did not know it!”

But then Jacob makes a vow. Anxious about what is to happen to him, he speaks out. Jacob bargains with God - if you will take care of me, then you will be my God.”

I always thought of this as a bit of *hutzpah* - a bit too gutsy.

But what he is really doing? He is stating what he thinks is just - help me, take care of me - that's what I need and that is just.

For us, we need to be able to do that, to articulate what we need and what others need, especially the many who do not have a voice and need our help.

How can we do this?

We must speak out. We must organize and find more ways to be active in justice - both with our community, in the Jewish community and in the world at large.

Now, this is challenging. After all, as a shul community we may disagree on what is just, but we must try to work it out. Perhaps it's easier in Orthodox and Reform communities where the opinions are a bit closer to unanimous on some domestic policies and on Israel.

Sitting with a group of rabbis this week and Jeremy Burton, who is the new head of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston, I was struck by how holy this work is, how desperately it is needed. The larger Jewish world and the world beyond are looking for leadership and for our active engagement.

They are listening for our voices. And you know that I will do that. I will call out against injustice that I see.

That said, if you disagree – PLEASE tell me and tell me why.

Let's have those conversations and talk about what we believe, where we agree and, where we disagree.

And let's find areas of general consensus, areas where our tradition speaks with a clear imperative, where there a clear moral voice.

And then, let's act - let's speak out and bring about change.

That is what our Torah and our Jewish tradition and our American heritage demand of us. For if we don't, we bequeath to our country, to our children and grandchildren, a world that is increasingly taken over by extremists who have no hesitation about screaming out.

On the issue of gun violence, most Americans agree that we need better laws - sadly we have not gotten there yet. This week we took a step, perhaps only a small step, but a step forward nonetheless.

There is more to do, but we do make a difference. The rabbis teach us: "*mitzvah goreret mitzvah* - when we do one commandment it leads to another."

This applies both to ritual commandments and to ethical ones - the more we engage in them, the more we do and the more that rubs off on others, creating even just a slightly better world.

But let us NOT be discouraged.

Hillel also taught famously: "*V'im lo akhshav, eimatai* - if not now, when? Shabbat Shalom!