

This summer, one of our oldest congregants asked me to come for a visit. "I want you to know my story," she explained. She showed me pictures of her parents, spoke about her happy childhood and leafed through her 80-year old scrapbook filled with good wishes from teachers and classmates. Then, she handed me her passport. I trembled when I saw the eagle and swastika emblem, for this was a Nazi passport. On the first page was a large red "J" for *Jüde* (Jew), indicating that Lottie Berger, born in Vienna, Austria, was now an unwanted member of the *Deutsches Reich*. Turning the pages I saw the visa issued by the American consulate allowing the then 14-year old to leave Naples, Italy. The date on the visa was September 1, 1939. "That was the day the war started!" I exclaimed. "Yes," Lottie, now a woman of 93, recalled. "We left that morning. I remember going through the Straits of Gibraltar with the ship's lights turned off because Italy and Britain were at war."

Two weeks after I met with Lottie she passed from this life, but luckily for me I was witness to a witness. No matter how many times I hear from survivors of the *Shoah* or those who barely got out of Europe before it became a graveyard, I still find their stories hard to believe. How is it that nations of culture and learning, law and science, could become places filled with inhumanity and depravity? How could millions accept a leader who claimed lies were the truth and allow themselves to cast aside human decency? What illness allows democracy to wither and thugs to take over, to worship violence as good? Lottie told me that in the years before the Nazis marched into Austria, welcomed in with flowers and open arms, she was told, "It could not happen here." But it did.

The tragic reality is that again and again the unimaginable did happen to us as a people. I like to travel. The more I do, however, the more upset I've become, because in so many places I feel like all I'm doing is visiting ghosts. In Syracuse, Sicily I went on a walking tour in the

former Jewish ghetto. Almost nothing remains of that once vibrant Jewish community that disappeared in 1492, when all the Jews were forced out, as Sicily was part of Spain. "This is where the Jews used to live" is the all-too-familiar a refrain we can hear in many lands. In the Atlas Mountains of Morocco – "this is where the Jews used to live." In the cities of Lvov and Krakow in Poland, in Harbin, China and Alexandria, Egypt all one can find are the ghosts. There are ghosts in the small towns of Tuscany and the ancient city of Aleppo, Syria. "This is where the Jews used to live."

After visiting so many places where Jews used to live, hearing Lottie's story this summer was a harsh reminder that no corner of the world is immune to the pernicious hatred of Jews. In too many lands we have grown comfortable and secure thinking, as did the Jews of Europe in the 1930's, that "it cannot happen here." But the many ghosts I've met in my journeys have made me wary and suspicious.

Some of you have heard me say, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, "when you are Jewish you can't have too many passports." I'm not running for the exits yet, but that said, our history bears witness to the fact that even mighty nations can lose their moral bearings. Yes, even here, as the journalist Murat Halstead wrote, "The American people have no exemption from the ordinary fate of humankind. If we sin, we must suffer for our sins, like the Empires that are tottering and the Nations that have perished."<sup>1</sup> He penned those words in 1867, a sober reflection on our great Civil War.

America affords us – and so many others – the gifts of liberty, equality and opportunity. Those blessings are not guaranteed, however, and we should ever be mindful of the dangers presented by the tyranny of the mob or the blandishments of a deceitful leader. There are dangers from the far right – neo-Nazis and white supremacists and from the far left

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<sup>1</sup> Murat Halstead, *The War Claims Against the South* (1867), p. 36

– Antifa and those who are virulently anti-Israel ... and let us never forget jihadists and Muslim extremists, who not only seek the destruction of Israel, but of the Jewish people as a whole.

You and I are not, however, mere puppets to history. Our sages understood that we have power – even in the darkest times – to be good. Can we change society? Maybe. Maybe not. But, our traditions and these Days of Awe, teach, we can change our selves – and that is where the possibility of changing the world begins.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel (*Rashbag* for short) was one of the greatest sages of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century of the Common Era. As a young man he joined the Jewish revolt against Rome led by Bar Kochba. At the end of the war he was in Betar, the last fortress that stood against Emperor Hadrian's legionaries. Though the Roman soldiers massacred most in that bastion, Shimon escaped. He witnessed the persecutions Hadrian's armies committed against the Jews in the months that followed, with thousands murdered *en masse*. He saw the systematic attempt of the Romans to wipe out any Jewish connection to the land. Jerusalem was torn down to its foundations and rebuilt as a fully Roman city that Jews were allowed to enter only once a year – on the anniversary of the Temple's destruction. The name of the Roman province *Judea* was changed to *Syria Palaestina* to deny any Jewish connection to the land. Observance of Shabbat was forbidden and *brit milah* (ritual circumcision) made illegal. Many years later Shimon, by then *Nasi* (president) of the *yeshiva* wrote of the hardships of his generation: "Were we ... to write in a memorial scroll [all] our sufferings ... we would not have enough room for them all."<sup>2</sup>

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel did not, however, abandon the values bequeathed to him by the Torah. "The world," he taught, "stands on three things (על האמת) (על הדין), on justice (על שלשה דברים העולם עמוד), and

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<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 13b

on peace (על השלום)."<sup>3</sup> If you want a motto to live by, there is little better than this. Living in this moment in history, considering how we will act in the year ahead, these are three values that can be touchstones for living in a time of uncertainty and moral ambiguity.

## דין *Din* - Justice

One of my teachers in rabbinical school, Rabbi Richard Levy, tells a story of being at a rabbinic convention in 1964 when Martin Luther King Jr. sent a telegram asking rabbis to join him in a demonstration to integrate a pool at a nearby motel. Fifteen rabbis, including Levy, responded to the call. “[As] we came in,” Levy recalls, “[Rev. King] said, ‘Here come Moses’ children!’”<sup>4</sup> Though we usually call ourselves the “children of Israel (i.e. Jacob) Martin Luther King Jr. reminded my teacher (and us!) that we are also the inheritors of Moses, the great champion of justice.

In Jewish tradition, Rosh Hashanah is called יום הדין *Yom ha’din*, “the day of judgment.” The classic understanding is that on this day we are judged for the choices we have made – the good we have done as well as our errors of judgment, our kindnesses and our selfishness. But there is another way of translating יום הדין *Yom ha’din* – that this is “the day of justice.” As we begin a new year – and seek a way forward in our families, community, country and as Jews – this day urges us, “keep justice at the center.”

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel could have used other Hebrew words to convey his thoughts – צדק *tzedeq* or משפט *mishpat*. That he does not also teaches something. צדק *Tzedeq* is “righteousness”, but it implies a kind of self-righteous certainty, a lack of compassion and understanding of views

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<sup>3</sup> Pirkei Avot 1:17

<sup>4</sup> From interview at [https://collegecommons.huc.edu/bully\\_pulpit/charlottesville\\_huc](https://collegecommons.huc.edu/bully_pulpit/charlottesville_huc), beginning at 11:21

beyond one's own. *משפט* *mishpat* is connected with what is legal, but the great sage understood that the law can be twisted into allowing heinous things. What is "legal" can be used to justify expelling those regarded as "outsiders" from the country (as was done to us in Spain) or allow the state to tear children from the arms of their parents (as was also done to German Jewish children when the Nazis "allowed" them to leave on the *Kindertransport*). Neither the claim of righteousness nor to what is legal, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel realized, is sufficient to protect the vulnerable and weak from ethically bankrupt individuals or a morally rapacious society. Only justice will suffice.

Justice is the capacity for doing what is impartial and fair, seeking to balance different claims. A just society is one, Torah explains, where we are "not partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but judge ... fairly."<sup>5</sup> How do we know what is just? Of course, that's the hard part, but simply because it is tough dealing with these questions does not exempt us – in our homes or here in synagogue, in our universities or in our political institutions – from asking them.

This demand for *דין* *din* means that, for Jews, there is no easy distinction between religion and politics. *Rashbag* understood that, and his call is a reminder that Jewish faith is not only about finding personal fulfillment and meaning. It is not simply about prayer, the preparation of food or gathering around the hearth for the holidays. It's about building decent families, upright communities and a just society. "Don't rock the boat" and "Don't talk about politics" are not Jewish virtues; politeness cannot be an excuse to muzzle the need to speak for what we know is fair, equitable and just. On this "day of justice" we are reminded that the command is to seek justice. To do so means, in this world still far from justice, being disturbed.

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<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 19:15

This is the season of facing who we are. What did I do? What did I fail to do? When did I retreat from what I knew what was right afraid to ruffle feathers? When might I have reached out in peace and caring for those with different points of view? This is a time for taking off the masks, for facing reality, for asking the moral questions and for forming human chains that will lift those around us who are threatened by floods of hate and bigotry, small-mindedness and self-interest.

### **אמת Emet - Truth**

In the 1948 presidential election, someone called out to Harry Truman, "Give 'em hell, Harry!" To this, Truman retorted, "I never give them hell. I just tell them the truth ... and they think it's hell."

One of the greatest dangers of our time is the claim that there are no truths. Despite what some pundits and political leaders would have us believe, there is no such thing as an "alternative fact." Yes, there are be different interpretations of evidence, there is bias and people interpret the same thing in very different ways, but there is – Rabban Shimon be Gamliel affirms – no denying that there is a truth. And, he understood, when we pretend otherwise – when we buy into the great lie that everything we do not like is just "fake news" - a world of justice and good cannot be maintained.

How, though, can we know the truth? The method for studying Torah and Talmud – called **תכרותא** *chevruta* (partnered-learning) offers three hints for how to discern truth from lie, reality from fiction.

- One, truth demands being open-minded, to hearing different voices. The two greatest compendia of Jewish history are the Bible and the Talmud. What makes them not only great is, in no small measure, neither offers a single, compelling vision. In each, rather, is a wide spectrum of perspectives, even contradictory views. They are both the

collected wisdom of generations, often of groups and individuals with quite different perspectives, but all of whom sought what God wants of us. In the place of surety and catechisms, they are living documents that the best way to hear truth is listening to the choir, not to the loudest soloists.

- Two, we need to be engaged in dialogue with those with whom we disagree, not only to sharpen our understanding of what is true, but also to see that the other may well have a legitimate claim to truth. **חברותא** *Chevruta* involves questioning, debate, re-thinking and challenging the other. It is grounded in a shared sense of searching, but a willingness to say that what I think may not be enough or even right. To actively listen and discuss with someone begins with both sides saying, "I just may be wrong here" or, at the very least, "help me understand why you think the way you do."
- Three, we must continually examine and re-examine what we believe. What I felt was true when I started in the rabbinate I do not necessary think is true anymore. So does Torah not provide immutable, eternal truth? I believe it does. The Torah did not change, but following the advice of the sages, to "turn the Torah over and over" I realized by continually reflecting on our tradition that I changed. This morning we will read how God tells Abraham to turn aside from the common religious practice of child sacrifice, that faith is not simply about obedience, but ethical behavior towards one another, to know that just because others say something is true, if it is not just it may not be. **חברותא** *Chevruta* demands not mere following the rules, but examining the truth in them. In short, the best advice may be from a book my daughter bought me titled *Zen Judaism* – "If you want to know The Way [capital "T" and capital "W"], don't ask for directions. Argue."

**שלום Shalom - Peace**

The first Jew to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court, Louis Brandeis, grew up in an assimilated family in Louisville, Kentucky. His journey to Jewish commitment – eventually assuming the leadership of the Zionist movement – began in 1910 when he mediated a strike that paralyzed the garment workers' industry in New York. Meeting both sides, workers and employers, he was impressed by their ethical attitude and capacity for empathy. "What struck me most," he later wrote, "was that each side had a great capacity for placing themselves in the other fellows' shoes. They argued, but they were willing to listen to argument."<sup>6</sup>

Those Jewish employers and workers from 107 years ago taught Brandeis that the way to justice is being willing to hear the "truth" of those with whom we disagree, with the goal of seeking peace. The Hebrew word for "peace" – שלום *shalom* is related to the word that means "wholeness" or "completeness." What this implies is that peace not the absence of conflict. Rather, in Judaism שלום *shalom* is learning to live with competing claims of what is just and true, yet finding a way towards reconciling those differences.

It used to be that those with a different position were political opponents. Now, those of different views are vilified as evil, if not traitorous. Is it any surprise, in such a toxic environment that those who are unstable resort to violence? And with the shooting of Congressman Steve Scalise by the man who posted on Facebook "Republicans are the Taliban of the USA" or with driver who drove his car into the crowd of counter-protestors in Charlottesville, we ought to be cautious about pointing fingers at one side or the others other. Nor is it only our leaders or those on the extremist fringe – the Antifa and neo-Nazis – who deserve all the blame. If there is a great societal sin in our time it is, I daresay, that we

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<sup>6</sup> *Louis Brandeis: American Prophet*, Jeffrey Rosen (Yale University Press, 2016) p. 148



suffer (collectively) from too much certainty. We're all so damned sure we are right – and in the process we allow hostility to override civility, chauvinism to trump respect, favor bigotry over tolerance and the denigration others over compromise.

Rashbag's teaching is a warning, particularly in a time of such hyper-partisanship and polarization, that justice and truth must never be divorced from peace. Without peace, justice and truth can too easily be precursors to zealotry, and zealotry inevitably leads to conflict. Justice and truth without peace is the hallmark of every fanatic, be it the religious zealot engaged in a crusade or a political extremist who so believes in a perfect society that anything that compromises that has to be torn down.

A yearning for peace, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel suggests, is the only virtue that can hold the tensions inevitable in any community or society or nation together. We must, our sages teach, be among the disciples of Aaron, not only seeking peace, but pursuing it.<sup>7</sup> *shalom* שלום demands an acceptance of nuance, of the legitimacy of different opinions and compromise. It is the recognition of half-realized claims – not a world transformed, but one that will slowly arise through the patient winning of others through negotiation, conversation, dialogue and love.

“על הדין – על שלשה דברים העולם עמוד” The world stands on three things – on justice, על האמת on truth, ועל השלום and on peace.” So, in the end – which word in this saying is *the* most important for our world? The mystics suggest it is not justice. It is not truth. It is not even peace. The most important word is “and”. Why? Because that word says that we do not have to choose. We must reject easy answers and strive, as tough as it is, to fulfill the dream of the Psalmist: “Righteousness *and* justice are the foundation

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<sup>7</sup> Pirkei Avot 1:12

of Your throne. Love *and* truth go before Your presence.”<sup>8</sup> That’s our struggle. That’s what our traditions and our history demand of us ... to refuse to be seduced by the desire for the ideal or to despair when it is not realized. We are to seek justice, even when it seems distant; to demand truth in a world where some claim there is none; to hope for and work tirelessly for peace even when everything feels uncertain, and we fear we may wake to our nightmares.

And, in the end, it is not up to someone else to make all that happen. It’s not up to the President or Congress. It isn’t up to the pundits or commentators or opinion-makers. It isn’t the responsibility of some political party or leaders of organizations.

As President John F. Kennedy once said, “If not us, who? If not now, when?” Or, if you prefer Hillel – “If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?”

We must not allow ourselves the naïveté to say the evil cannot come again. We dare not say all we hold dear cannot be lost. A world of injustice, a culture of deception, a society that justifies violence can happen anywhere. Yes, it can even happen here. This day inspires us, however, not to allow it come without standing tall against such things.

היום יום הדין *Hayom Yom Ha’din*. Today is the day of justice.

So ...

Rise up, children of Moses – be the bearers of justice.

Rise up, light amongst the nations – be the watchers in the night, those who demand the truth.

Rise up, O Israel, rise up – seek peace and pursue it.

Rise up ...

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<sup>8</sup> Psalms 89:15