

“Moral Courage: Let Silence Not Be Our Style”
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Shanah Tovah. Isn't it great to be home!

Darrell Loomis was a truck driver who hauled goods each week from Cincinnati to Atlanta. En route, he'd always stop at his favorite spot, Joe's Diner.¹ One summer afternoon, Darrell parked his truck, walked into the diner, sat at the counter and ordered his usual meal – a meat loaf sandwich, mashed potatoes, and iced tea.

In the distance came a loud roar as a twelve member motorcycle gang arrived on Harley-Davidsons. Upon entering the diner, the gang leader immediately spotted Darrell and remarked, “Look at the sissy at the counter.”

The twelve members of the gang formed a semi-circle around Darrell who remained silent. One gang member picked up Darrell's iced tea and poured it over his head. Darrell quietly dried his face with his napkin, but said nothing. Another gang member picked up Darrell's mashed potatoes and stuck a handful into Darrell's ear. Again Darrell remained calm, continuing to eat.

Though the gang persisted to taunt him, Darrell never responded. He simply finished his lunch, stood up, silently paid his bill and left the diner without saying a word.

The gang leader laughed and said to Joe, the owner, “What a wimp! That guy sure ain't much of a man!”

Joe, looking out the window of his diner said, “No, and he ain't much of a driver either. He just ran over twelve Harleys.”

This story, while extreme, highlights the hardships of standing up for oneself in the face of hateful actions.

Most of us, as adults, are not confronted with hooligans on Harleys. Instead we find ourselves at events confronted with nicely dressed, polite people holding prejudiced views. Most of our kids are not confronted with threatening gangs. Instead they face discrimination as they confront an insensitive child on a playground or a cruel teenager on Facebook.

Moral courage. Being unafraid to speak out for the difference that makes us and others unique and having the strength to stand up for what we know is right without being silenced by the fear of potential consequences.

¹ Opening story from a sermon by Gregg Barbour, “The Big Tease: How to Overcome Bullying,”
<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-big-tease--how-to-overcome-bullying-gregg-barbour-sermon-on-justice-144035.asp>

Moral courage. Speaking out against hate wherever we witness it – whether socially or locally, regionally or globally.

Moral courage. Calling out for change in the present rather than waiting for a time or person in the future.

Last year, we left our High Holidays to confront a national epidemic of teenage suicides due to bullying. In September alone there were nine deaths across our country of children ages 13 to 19. Nine deaths at the very start of an academic year. Nine families left devastated.

“Bullied Till Broken” was a program we hosted at Beth El in response. Two teens spoke about their experiences of being harassed here in Charlotte. One student had to stop taking the bus in sixth grade because of being tormented based on his perceived sexual orientation.

A reporter asked him, “Did anyone ever stand up for you when you were being called negative names?”

“Only one.” The student said, “In my seven years of Middle School and High School, only one teacher spoke up on my behalf.”

At that moment, I didn’t need the words of our viddui, our confessional prayer from Yom Kippur, to feel a sense of shame for the collective sins of our community. I felt the pain of judgment then and there.

Only one voice in seven years spoke out.

Moral courage is taught. Abraham, our first Jew, modeled how to speak up for others in Genesis when he tried to save the complete strangers of Sodom from God’s harsh judgment. “Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty?” Abraham challenged God. “What if there are fifty righteous in that city? Far be it from You O God to do such a thing!”

Abraham argued with God and God acquiesced. If there were even ten righteous, God would have saved that city of Sodom.

As we pass the Torah to our B’nei Mitzvah, let us teach them not simply to chant Torah aloud in our sanctuaries but to live Torah’s values proudly in their daily lives. Being different can evoke hostility, no matter the difference: weight, disability, race, sexual orientation or religion. We must teach our children to not stand silently by, but to support others in their differences and to defend ourselves in ours.

Josh Cohen, one of our Beth El kids, who is now a sophomore at UNC Wilmington, learned the hard way how to stand up for his faith.

Sharing his struggles on Jvibe, an online magazine for Jewish Teens, he wrote about a cruel comment that was made to him when he was 14 years old: “I hope you burn in hell, you dirty Jew!”

That comment was just one of a million he said he heard throughout his teenage life. Some of the statements made him cry. Others left him yearning to run away from his reality. Over the years, he became immune to the coins being tossed at him or the offensive Jewish jokes being told. Yet at some point he realized that he had gone too far in ignoring these offenses.

Freshman year in High School, he was angry with himself for not speaking out against his teacher who drew a swastika on the board, explained it, but never erased it the entire class.

Sophomore year, he was angry with himself for not responding when he told a teacher the he swore to God he wasn't talking and the teacher said, “You mean you swear to Allah,”

By his Senior year, he got to a point where enough was enough. When his teacher threatened to give him an “F” for missing a school play that fell on the first night of Passover, Josh fought back. He argued with his teacher, went to the principal, challenged the system and received a deserving “A” in the end – if not for his work on the play, then in my mind he got an “A” his ability to stand up for himself and his faith.

On a deeper level, moral courage calls us step into waters that bring about societal change even when we are unsure we will have the strength to swim the distance and make it to the other side.

The Great Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: “Cowardice asks the question: is it safe? Expediency asks the question: is it politic? Vanity asks the question: is it popular? But conscience asks the question: is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular- but one must take it simply because it is right.”

This past of year of 5771 we have witnessed the moral courage of the Arab Spring, that fight for human rights in the Arab world.

We have seen the valor of those who took the streets in Tunisia in response to the desperate act of a fruit salesman, Mohamed Bouazizi, who had his streetcar confiscated. With no court to hear his plea, no media outlet to share his story, and no fair electoral process for promoting change he marched to the local municipal building, took his life and ignited a movement for societal and social change across the Middle East.

On this day, let us pray that the battles for democracy in Arab lands are not being fought in vain. Let us pray that the long night of fighting will lead to a dawn of equality; that the Arab spring of struggling for human rights will lead to a summer of self-determination and a fall of freedom, rather than a weary winter – where extremist regimes find warmth for themselves alone.

In this coming year of 5772 let us show moral courage when it comes to our homeland of Israel.

In 1930, under the British rule in Palestine, it was forbidden to blast the shofar at the Western Wall to conclude Yom Kippur but the 26 year old Moshe Segal did and was sent to jail. For 18 years afterwards, others followed his lead, smuggled shofars to our sacred site, sounded those rams' horns to conclude the Holy Days, and when caught, were similarly jailed. That was moral courage. From 1948 to 1967, under Jordanian rule, no shofar was sounded as no Jew could stand at that Holy Wall.

In 2008, when a Security Wall was being put up in the West Bank to prevent suicide bombers from entering Israel, father Ayed Morrar and his daughter Iltezam, of the village of Budrus, stood in front of bulldozers that threatened to divide their village, destroy their olive trees, and deeply damage their economy. Ayed invited hundreds of Israelis to join his nonviolent protests, day after day, and together they succeeded. Israeli authorities rerouted the path of the Security Wall so that it would not encroach on the village. That was moral courage.

In January of 2009, when a retaliatory missile hit the Gaza home of Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish killing three of his daughters and a niece, he reacted not with revenge but by increasing his public efforts for pursuing peace. In his book dedicated to his daughter's memory called *I Shall Not Hate*, he describes the harshness of his life growing up in Gaza on one hand, and on the other shares the stories of Israelis who steadfastly supported him on his path. That is a moral courage.

This doctor, who worked saving lives in both Gaza and Beersheva describes the conflict with medical metaphors: "I believe that the disease affecting our relationship is ignorance of one another," he writes, "judging others without knowing anything about them."²

"Trust in the Middle East," he adds "is such a rare commodity, it's gasping for air."³

"As a physician," he concludes, "I do not lose hope as long as the patient is alive. But when the patient's condition is deteriorating, I need to be willing and creative enough to search for a new course of treatment."⁴

As liberal Jews we need to be creative enough to search for a new path to promoting peace by developing relationships with Palestinians by listening, by recognizing the divine on the other side of that historic wall, and by pushing for the health of a negotiated two state solution. We need to move beyond the painful experiences of Israel's past and open our minds to other perspectives. That will be moral courage.

² Izzeldin Abuelaish, *I Shall Not Hate*, (New York: Walker & Company), 2010. p. 229

³ Ibid. p. 101.

⁴ Ibid. p. 230.

Yes, there are Palestinian leaders who put up seeming insurmountable obstacles, yet we are not UN Delegates and we are not Knesset Members. We need to do our part by examining our personal prejudices and by changing conversations here. My deep love for Israel compels me to seek a new way. I hope yours will do the same.

The final component of moral courage calls us to act immediately not waiting for someone else to respond. As Rabbi Hillel challenged, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when?"

Rabbis can be bullied too. This past winter I was bullied online. I know the media experts warn us not to look at those Observer.com comments, but I did. I wrote an Editorial on the racism that has existed in our community, and was bashed with hateful, racist, sexist and anti-Semitic comments. I had to look up some of the names I was called.

One online anonymous commentator named "Gunslinger" quoting the New Testament said that women should be seen and not heard.

This individual caused me to be afraid. I imagined gunslinger with a gun attacking not my words but me or far worse, my family. For weeks, I hesitated to take media calls on any issue. If I kept silent, I would not be attacked.

Yet a friend's words woke me up. He said that Gunslingers' threats should inspire my next book, which should be entitled, "Silence is not my style." He suggested I use the pen name "Peaceslinger."

In this year of 5772, as members of Temple Beth El, let silence not be our style. When we hear a wrong, let us say it is wrong – against women, against foreigners, against Muslims, against gays and lesbians, against Israel, against Palestinians, against Republicans, against Democrats, against the Liberal Left or Conservative Right. We are, after all, heading into an election year where demonization of the other has become commonplace.

Last year, in response to the staggering surge of teenage suicides, an impressive campaign called "It gets better" began. In two months' time, ten thousand people recorded inspiring videos with the aim of giving youth the hope to hang on when times are hardest.

Yet it does not get better until we, with moral courage, make it better.

For the sake of a single youth - who is different in any way that his peers deem extraordinary enough to cause anguish. For the sake of a single adult – who fears their difference might lead to job loss. For the sake of the powerless stranger whom we do not even know, let us speak out, make a difference, and save a life. Even for the sake of ourselves. Let us resolve to teach and model moral courage for our kids so that it will become part of the fiber of their being.

The goal of a bully is to silence. Bullies can be Middle School students or bullies can be adults – unnamed online commentators. Bullies can be anonymous letters writers and nameless callers leaving threatening messages. Bullies can be extremist leaders of any faith who preach hatred and intolerance. Bullies can be abusive spouses – who use fear to control their home. Bullies can be brutal governments and harsh dictators.

The goal of a bully is to silence. In the coming year of 5772, let silence not be our style. Let us speak out each in our way. It may not be knocking down Harleys or making headlines, it may be simply saying, “I’m proud to be Jewish.” “My good friend is gay.” “I feel for the Palestinian plight.”

The French poet Emmanuel Eydoux wrote:
To open eyes when others close them .
To hear when others do not wish to listen.
To seek to understand when others give up.
To continue the struggle when one is not the strongest.
To cry out when others keep silent.
To be a Jew it is that
It is first of all that –
And further...
To remember when others have forgotten.

[light memorial candle]

Last September nine youth took their lives at the start of school year that felt too painful for them to continue on. Tyler Clementi, age 18. Raymond Chase, 19. Felix Sacco, 17. Cody Barker, 17. Billy Lucas, 15. Harrison Chase Brown, 15. Caleb Nolt, 14. Seth Walsh, 13. Asher Brown, 13 years old.

And I add Jamey Rodemeyer, 14 years old, who took his life last week.

In this New Year of 5772, may silence not be our style. May we be better. May we make it better.

Shanah tovah.