

Rabbi Rachel Isaacs

Kol Nidre Sermon

In 1934, American Ambassador to Albania Herman Bernstein proclaimed, “There is no trace of any discrimination against Jews in Albania, because Albania happens to be one of the rare lands in Europe today where religious prejudice and hate do not exist, even though Albanians are divided into three faiths.” Indeed, as Jews across Europe were being massacred en masse as part of the Nazi final solution, one country in Europe didn’t have a negative Jewish growth rate and that country, Albania, had a Muslim majority.

Prior to WWII, only 200 Jews lived in Albania, yet by the end of the war, about 2,000 Jews lived within the country because so many Jews fled Greece, Austria, and other locations in Europe to take shelter there. Indeed, the Albanian Muslims have an honor code known as *besa*, meaning “to keep the promise,” which mandates hospitality and protection of guests as if they are members of ones own family. Because of this Albanian honor code, many of the Albanians who saved Jewish lives during the Holocaust often didn’t feel that what they did was particularly extraordinary, for they asserted that anyone in their culture would do the same. What intellectual brilliance could not do, *besa* could -- it saved lives and staved off the long arm of genocidal evil. *Besa* was inculcated an ethical practice in a community that saved thousands of souls. *Besa* was an education of a different kind than the one we are used to, but it served as the basis of a righteous citizenship. It taught countless generations that there is no greater value than preserving life and dignity.

When we look at the Holocaust, we are often left with more questions than answers. For me, as a rabbi, educator, and citizen, one of the most central of those questions is: Does the cultivation of

great minds always lead to right action? When I look at Europe, all I can think is, “How does a continent that served as the birthplace to the enlightenment, democracy, and liberalism become home to the world’s most horrific genocide? How did many of Europe’s greatest philosophers, supposedly the brightest minds in the world, come to support the Nazism Soviet Communism, and colonialism or stand silent in their midst? Great minds, a “Western” education, and sophisticated ideas do not always translate into right action. A clever mind does not always lead to a discerning heart -- in truth, I don’t know if there is any connection between the two at all. Most of the Albanians who saved Jewish families and offered them shelter and sustenance couldn’t read, and yet, they made the right choice -- as Martin Heidegger, a master of the Western canon, who examined the deep complexities of being and time -- served as an enthusiastic mouthpiece for the Nazi party.

As Jews on this Day of Atonement, we recognize our potential to be leaders and educators each day of our lives. We look back to see the ways we have failed, and we look forward to see how we can complete both of those tasks better. How do we educate others and demand of ourselves a form of righteous citizenship? What does that education look like? Is there a specifically Jewish way to examine ethical questions and are there inviolable norms that distinguish us as community covenanted with our Creator?

If there is a Jewish spiritual education, a way or reading, thinking, and acting, it revolves around one core value: *hachnast orchim*: hospitality. And I believe *hachnast orchim* is not just a hospitality of the body, but also of ideas. It is about actively welcoming all individuals and ideas, in all of their beautiful and unpredictable diversity. We welcome folks into our homes, we welcome challenging ideas into our discourse -- for the sake of the other, and for our sake as well. It does the soul good to feed

others, and it feels good to be invited into another's home. Friendships nourish our souls and inviting new people into our worlds keeps our lives and our thinking fresh. Indeed, I also think that inviting people different from ourselves, even people we may not necessarily like, is deeply important as well. We live in a country that is incredibly polarized, that has lost the ability to be, think, and act together across partisan lines; we do not do our nation any good by surrounding ourselves exclusively with like-minded people. Providing an open table for Shabbat as a spiritual practice allows us to be generous, and forces us to open our hearts and our homes to a diverse group of people. When Hillel, or Beth Israel Congregation, or Mel and I extended open invitations for meals, we do so because it is a material expression of the most core Jewish value: providing sustenance to anyone who desires it.

I think the bigger challenge for us is providing hospitality for views we find difficult to countenance, especially as a Jewish community. One of the problems that we face as a community is that different denominations have taken on particular political valences -- if you are Reform, you are liberal, Orthodox, you are conservative, and Conservative -- we're always swimming somewhere in the middle and accused of standing for nothing. But no point on the ideological or political spectrum is the right place to be as a Jewish community. Rather, we should challenge ourselves to lead discussions in the classical Jewish style -- through vigorous debate.

The rabbinic tradition in Judaism is over 2,000 years old. Hundreds of rabbis and thousands of Jewish leaders have supported their arguments using traditional Jewish texts. Rarely, if ever, have they agreed. And how could they? Let me ask you all a few questions to illustrate the absurdity of ideological consensus on Jewish grounds: What is the authentic Jewish response to gun control? It is a Jewish value to preserve life -- so, do we arm everyone to defend themselves do we take tools of violence away from as many people as possible? What about the death penalty? Do we never kill

anyone with state power because human life is sacred, or do we kill murderers to prevent other murders? What is the Jewish response? Our tradition is naturally diverse and pliable; and it is this flexibility that has allowed it to survive over thousands of years in almost every nation in the world. Our tradition is too sophisticated to be pigeon-holed into contemporary American parties or position papers.

And yet, we are still called upon to act and pursue justice. How can we on one hand act righteously and confidently, and at the same time be humble about what we claim to know? The tradition provides two axioms that are deeply helpful in achieving this balance. In the Talmud we learn, “All words of Torah were given by the One G-d to one leader (Moshe); make your ears like a funnel, acquire a discerning heart to hear all of the differing opinions.” (Chagiga 3b) The Tosefta conveys this message with striking beauty, “Make for yourself a heart of many rooms and place therein the (conflicting) words.” In the Jewish tradition, God’s voice is polyvocal. God has intentionally placed conflicting opinions on this earth to represent different facets of truth, and to sharpen our analytical capabilities. So, in order to receive all of Revelation, we must open our ears like a great funnel for all conflicting opinions. Sometimes those conflicting opinions can be harmonized by great minds, and other times, we need to build within ourselves a multi-chambered heart for conflicting narratives, with elements of truth in each one. Living a life of Jewish leadership requires building many chambers in our hearts for different kinds of people, and conflicting opinions. The life of Jewish intellectual leadership is a life of openness, warmth, and perpetual intellectual tension.

I believe that this issue is directly relevant to our community in two ways. One was event that happened on Colby’s campus that has left a sour taste in my mouth -- the removal of Colby Christian Fellowship from the Pugh Center. One may ask, why would a queer woman, a liberal Jew, the faculty advisor to the Bridge and Hillel, two of the most progressive groups on campus, be opposed to moving

the evangelical group out of our multicultural center when they discriminate against gays and lesbians? This is why: the example of the Colby Christian fellowship is an extreme test case of my conception of Jewish leadership. I believe in a hospitality of all points of view, and encouraging change through dialogue and relationship instead of punitive measures.

Only a small minority of students and faculty hold Conservative points of view and live live traditional, religious lifestyles -- even fewer will be open about their points of view because of the professional and social costs. And yet, half of our country is Conservative, and many hold similar points of view to the CCF. We will only grow as a community and a nation when we draw near to people who live and believe differently than we do. Shaming and excluding people for their beliefs rarely leads to changes in opinion or policy. Rather, it leads to greater entrenchment in the shamed individuals' previous positions and the fashioning of a martyr complex. At the same time, sidelining minority opinions allows those in the majority to become intellectually and politically lazy. The more we marginalize a point of view, the easier it is to ignore, caricature, and mock it. And then, how much have we learned? How much have we grown?

And then, there is the example within the Jewish community, both in Hillel and the synagogue. To what extent do we limit what can be said about Israel? It is completely impossible to support everything the Israeli government does. There are dozens of parties currently in the knesset who often put conflicting policy in place on the same day. If you support Israel -- which Israel do you support? That of Labor or Likud or Yesh Atid, or Habayit Hayehudi, or United Torah Judaism? Israel's Communist party? The 25 percent of Israel's population who is Arab? The ultra-Orthodox? The settlers? The peace movement? The majority of Israelis who don't identify with any of these tribes? Israel has many problems - freedom of expression really isn't one of them. Whether you are on the

floor of the knesset or the back of a taxi cab, there is always room to scream your opinions, whatever they may be -- and opinions will also always be screamed at you. I think as an American Jewish community, we lack the passionate diversity found in Israel. We face a situation now, where some individuals with power in the Jewish world desire to limit what can be programmed regarding Israel on campuses and elsewhere.

This community knows full well that I am a passionate Zionist and supporter of Israel. And, whether we are talking about the Hillel or the synagogue, both institutions have very small budgets that I think should be dedicated to spreading Torah, not hosting anti-Zionist speakers. If one desires to hear anti-Zionist points of view, they are readily available in our classrooms and social circles. So why do I think that these policies are a bad idea? Because I think it goes against my core beliefs about Jewish leadership. If such a policy were in place, many students, Jewish and non-Jewish, wouldn't feel comfortable affiliating with Hillel because of their conflicting personal points of view. If there were speech codes in the synagogue, intelligent, critical people would start asking us the right questions: what are you afraid of and what are you hiding from me? When we place limits on speech, we are not being hospitable to minority opinions and the people who hold them. And then, what have we learned? How have we grown? How strong can our community really be?

What does Jewish leadership look like? It is a leadership of the ear, the heart, and only then, of the mouth or the hand. It is a leadership that demands we not become intellectually lazy. It is a leadership that cherishes, encourages, and preserves minority opinions, even if they are ultimately proven wrong. It is a tradition that demands that we continue to think and construct solutions to problems that seem ostensibly intractable, to harmonize diametrically opposed opinions for the sake of a better thinking and more ethical living. If a tradition as diverse and complicated as Judaism can be said

to have an ethos -- it would be this -- an aversion to the self-satisfied and the self-righteous. Let us not forget the full pasuk that we learn from the book of Micah:

8 You have been told, what is good, and what the

ח הגיד לך אֲדָם, מֵה-טוֹב; וּמֵה-יְהוָה דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ, כִּי LORD requires of you: only to do justly, to love
אִם-עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד, וְהִצַּנְעַ לְכַת, עִם-אֱלֹהֶיךָ. mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. {S}
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Activists, right or left wing, seem to forget about the last part of this statement. Humility is a core part of our mission. Though we must act with justice, we must not stop listening to opposing points of view, and leave open the possibility always that we may be wrong.

We learn of a time in the Bible when all people were of one language and one point of view. In Genesis, we encounter the generation after the flood, who came together, in unison and lockstep, to build a tower to the heavens.

ו וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה, הֵן עַם אֶחָד וּשְׂפָה אַחַת לְכָלָם, 6 And the LORD said: 'Behold, they are one people,
וְזֶה, הַחֲלָם לַעֲשׂוֹת; וְעַתָּה לֹא-יִבָּצֵר מֵהֶם, כֹּל and they have all one language; and this is what they
אֲשֶׁר יִזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת. begin to do; and now nothing will be withholden fro
them, which they purpose to do.

ז הִבֵּה, נִרְדָּה, וְנִבְלָה שָׂם, שְׂפָתָם--אֲשֶׁר לֹא 7 Come, let us go down, and there confound their
יִשְׁמְעוּ, אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ. language, that they may not understand one another'
speech.'

It is not always a beautiful or righteous thing when all the world is agreement. Without a minority point of view to make us pause, think, and refine, what will stop us from going full steam ahead with a horrendous idea? When we leave those with minority opinions outside of the fray, how can we show the hospitality that is at the core of our tradition? What will keep us humble? How can we learn? How can we grow?

From the moment rabbinical Judaism was born, one of the greatest challenges we faced was building a Jewish community with individuals who held diametrically opposed points of view. The two greatest sages of the mishnaic era, Hillel and Shammai, would often disagree about what food was kosher, how to light a chanukiah, and how to set aside tithes appropriately. While these may seem like minor debates today, to them these were GIGANTIC, CRITICAL important issues for observant Jewish scholars. And yet the tradition teaches us, they would eat in each other's homes, and marry each other's daughters. For *eilu v'eilu dvarim elohim chayim*. Both of their opinions are the words of the living God. (Eruvin 13b) As human beings we tend to shut down important conversations when we are most sensitive, the most afraid, the most injured, and the most rushed. We are reluctant to lay ourselves bare to the reality that we may be wrong. On this Yom Kippur, let us strive to be a truly confident Jewish community, exercising leadership not through executing a pre-packaged agenda, but by cherishing and safeguarding an openness to all ideas and all people. It is only when we are humble and open that we can live the righteous lives that God has challenged us to live. Ken Yehi Ratzon. May it be God's will. Gmar Hatimah Tovah. May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life.