

Rabbi Suzie Jacobson
Rosh Hashanah 5777
“Jewish at the Ballot Box”

It is a privilege to stand before you this Rosh Hashannah. Quite literally. If privilege is an advantage available only to a particular group of people, then rabbinic privilege is standing in front of thousands of people two days a year and forcing them to listen to you.

Or at least the 70% of you who manage to stay awake...

Privilege is power - My role in this community allows me to influence, to teach, to have a public opinion. We Jews understand that words are powerful. God created the world with words alone, and in today's Torah portion, our foremother Sarah uses her privilege, her power and her words to change Hagar's destiny.

The Torah tells us that Sarah, as yet unable to bear children of her own, asks Abraham to take her handmaid, Hagar as a second wife¹. Sarah's assumptions are explicit: since Hagar belongs to her, a child born to Hagar from Abraham's seed will “build up” Sarah. Hagar, is now Abraham's second wife but she is still a mere servant. She is of lesser status than Sarah, and so Sarah assumes she will get the credit when Hagar bears Abraham's child.

But Hagar does not want to be seen merely as a possession. When Hagar becomes pregnant, she gloats over her own ability to conceive. Hagar's reaction angers Sarah and she tries to banish Hagar a first time. God speaks to Hagar through a messenger and sends her back to Abraham. Hagar bears her son Ishmael, and God promises a child to Sarah in her old age. Later, when Sarah sees Ishmael “playing” with her son Isaac she is reminded of her anger and seeks to cast Hagar out a second time².

Sarah says to Abraham: “Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” Abraham is reluctant. Ishmael is his child, just like Isaac.

¹ Genesis 16:1-16

² Genesis 21:1-21

God intervenes, saying - "Do not worry about the boy and the slave.. Do whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says."

Hagar and Sarah are both women, but there is no solidarity among women when one is master and the other servant.

Hagar and Ishmael are cast out, presumably to die in the dangerous wilderness.

This story may be new for some of you. For others, this might be familiar. For some of us, this story already causes us a bit of pain. It runs counter to our contemporary Jewish values. Many of us contemporary Jews would call ourselves feminist, and this story pits two women against each other. We are against slavery, yet this story involves the ownership of human beings. Perhaps mostly importantly, many of us are moved by the plight of those less fortunate, of images of refugees who are suffering, searching for a safe place, searching for home. Many of us want to bring people in, to welcome, yet this is about casting people out. It is a problematic story, even while we might also sympathize with Sarah and her desire for a child. Luckily, in the end, God plays hero and saves Hagar and Ishmael. But we can't ignore the fact that Sarah, woman, wife, mother uses her privilege, her power to cast out, abuse, and reject Hagar and Ishmael.

Holding privilege means you have the power to make a choice, to have a voice. A choice that heals or a choice that harms, A voice that advocates peace and justice, or a voice that encourages discord and violence.

We all have the ability to make choices, to raise our voices using whatever privilege and power we have. And these choices, the things we say and do are rooted in our identities and our deeply held values.

In this election season, I can't help but wonder -

When you act in the world, what identity and set of values do you speak from?

When you go to the ballot box do you bring your Jewish values?

Do we let Judaism direct our civic and political lives?

Do we use the privilege afforded to us to raise our voices and our votes?

On this Rosh Hashanah, we are five weeks to a presidential election. We are in a moment in American history when racism, xenophobia, transphobia, climate change are headlining the news. Many people are eagerly using their privilege to ensure that their voices are heard. Conservative Christianity is a faith that speaks up loudly on the issues of our time.³ Some conservative Christians seek to impose their religious ethics upon a religiously diverse American body politic. In issues regarding women's rights, abortion, gay marriage, immigration rights, there are those who resort to fear mongering, and hateful language in order to push voter turnout on election day.

This is not the justice minded, anti-oppressive, love based values we find in our religious tradition.

Yet Progressive Jews sometimes hesitate to speak as Jews in the public sphere. Perhaps we fear the backlash of anti-semitism. We are reluctant to call attention to ourselves when using the privilege of public voice. Perhaps we shy away from debates about who has the stronger claim to truth. Perhaps we don't understand what Judaism says about the issues we most care about.

But when we refrain from allowing our Jewish values to guide our civic action, we deny ourselves a grounding in a deep and meaningful ethic. When we engage our Jewish values in political action, we aim to broaden American politics by incorporating people who currently have no voice within the political process. When we speak out while grounded in our Jewish texts, we advocate for justice, equity and peace.

However, when we talk Jewish values, I am not sure we always know what we stand for. Powerful messages like tikkun olam, "healing the world," and "tzedek tzedek tirdof, justice, justice you shall pursue" are reduced to cliches. We call upon the Exodus from Egypt as proof text that we understand oppression, but that feels vague and distant. I've never actually

³ See: Slessarev-Jamir, Helene. Prophetic Activism: Progressive Religious Justice Movements in Contemporary America. New York: New York UP, 2011. Print.

been to Egypt! And in fact, I was not personally enslaved by Pharaoh. How do we ensure that justice is strong in our kishkes?

In her book There Shall be No Needy, Rabbi Jill Jacobs⁴ boils Jewish justice to three essential principles:

The fundamental dignity in human life

The commitment to lessening disparities of money or power

And, The mutual responsibility between the community and the individual.

Jewish texts insist on the fundamental dignity of each human life - We are not merely created in the Divine image, we are each manifestations of the divine presence. (pause)

The rabbis teach that to “save a human life is to save the entire world,⁵” and Jewish law insists that any mitzvah can be ignored in favor of pikuach nefesh⁶, saving a human life.

Some examples of this principle in action:

Jews must advocate for accessible health care since an injury to one person is an injury to God.

Jews must deeply engage in humanitarian relief in the midst of a refugee crisis, because each human being, Jew or non-Jew, must be protected and saved.

The Second Principle: Our ancestors showed a commitment to lessening disparities of money or power. The rabbis never advocated for full economic equality, but halakhah, Jewish law aimed to mitigate inequality so as to prevent one person from exploiting or degrading another.

Some examples from Jewish law that are quite relevant in our world:

⁴ Jacobs, Jill. There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law & Tradition. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 2009. Print.

⁵ Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Yerushalmi Talmud 4:9, Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 37a

⁶ The Talmud contains several instances where the laws of the Sabbath are to be broken to save the life of another; these occasions include the rescuing a child from the sea, breaking apart a wall that has collapsed on a child, breaking down a door about to close on an infant, and extinguishing a fire (See Babylonian Talmud Yoma 84b)

Doctors are entitled to earn a good living, but medical fees should be determined by each physician and adjusted according to patient need. A story in the Talmud depicts Rav Huna giving out medications for free.⁷ Perhaps we won't go that far. A later law says that medicines may be purchased, but they must be at a fair price.⁸ No 400% epi pen markups.

Another relevant example:

Workers should be allowed a break in the middle of the day,⁹ but this can be disallowed at harvest time, when the crops are at risk of spoiling.

An example from the mishnah:

A tenant cannot be evicted without reasonable notice.

Quote: "If it is Winter, they can not evict him before the Spring Pesach holiday; in the summer, not before giving 30 days notice."¹⁰

Healthy salaries and land ownership and being a boss to many workers is allowed - But there must be a commitment to lessening oppressive disparities of money or power.

Our Third and final Principle:

The individual has responsibility to the community. The community has a responsibility to the individual.

Jewish law dictates that all members of a community should contribute to a tzedakah fund.

And that fund should be available to all members should they fall on hard times.¹¹

⁷ Babylonian Talmud Taanit 20b

⁸ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 336:3

⁹ Babylonian Talmud Baba Kama 116b

¹⁰ Mishnah Bava Metzia 8:6

¹¹ There is extensive discussion on how these tzedakah funds were established and used in both the Talmud and later legal works. For more on this subject, see Jacobs, There Shall Be No Needy, chapters 3 and 4.

In rabbinic urban planning, no person can build something that obstructs or detracts from another's property, and a single person cannot claim space designated for all.¹²

In rabbinic criminal justice, the individual is responsible to follow the laws of the community and to do teshuvah, repentance if they break the rules. When someone breaks the rules, the community takes responsibility for rehabilitating and reintegrating the convict.¹³

I'm not advocating that we fully espouse a particularistic Jewish code of law. In fact, Jewish law insists on *dina d'malchuta dina*¹⁴, that Jews follow the laws of the land.

But - When we root ourselves in the texts and laws of our ancestors we root ourselves in a Torah of love and justice.

We must take our Judaism to the ballot box, to the community organization, to the streets.

We must wield whatever privilege and power we hold to improve this broken world.

And we all hold some power.

The classroom teacher who informs the ethical behaviors of the next generation.

The lawyer who uses their training to advocate for the downtrodden.

The doctor who heals the broken

The volunteer who gives their time, because they can

The child who stands up to the bullies

The person who generously donates with their disposable income.

The person who thinks carefully about how they spend their money.

The person who not only recycles but encourages others to do so.

The blogger who passionately writes truth

The musician who soothes us

The artist who challenges us

¹² For an example, see Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 71

¹³ For more on this subject, see Jacobs, [There Shall Be No Needy](#), chapter 9

¹⁴ Babylonian Talmud Bavli Nedarim 28a, Gittin 10b, Bava Kama 113b, and Bava Batra 54b

The white person who is ally to communities of color
The straight person who is ally to LGBTQ communities
The men who reject sexism and fight for gender equality
The American community who works to welcome and care for the Syrian
refugee

In our Torah portion, Sarah uses the small power afforded to her to abuse Hagar. And God makes it right. God saves Hagar and Ishmael, blessing them, and allowing a great nation to come through their lineage. This how the Torah functions. Human beings make a mess and God makes it right. God confers blessing.

But here, in 2016, we don't wait for God to act. We must act. We grab what is closest to our hearts, our sense of goodness and morality, our Jewish values, and we act.

Take your Judaism to the ballot box, to the community organization, to the streets. And together, may we build the world we want for our children.

Together, may we heal and mend, change and innovate.

May we cause 5777 to be a year filled with justice and compassion, love and peace. And let us say: amen.