

Hearken to those cries (or illegitimi non carborundum)

I am often reminded of a story about the second Lubavitcher rebbe, a renowned scholar, who was once so intent on his studies that he failed to hear the cries of his baby son. His father, the first rebbe, heard these cries, went down, and took the infant in his arms, rocking him back to sleep. He then went down to his son, still focused, and said, “my son, I’m not sure what it is that you have been studying, but if it made you block out those cries, it most certainly was not Torah.

Living such a deep and intensive life of Torah means significantly more than immersing oneself in the secrets of our textual tradition; it means embodying Torah, studying it so *that we might live it*, through our words, our bodies, our hearts, and our deeds.

When I decided to become a rabbi, what excited me most was the prospect of a lifetime of learning and teaching, of meditating and guiding others to a more spiritual life. There were plenty of other rabbis engaged in social action and justice work. Of course, I would spend some time as a congregational leader in acts of tikkun olam, but it would not be my focus. But then I was ordained, and reality set in. I realized that learning and spirituality are important, but the world needs so much more from us right now. Cries are coming forth, from all directions.

Cries come to us from our own brothers and sisters. This past decade, we’ve watched

as rates of Antisemitism steadily climbed throughout the world from both white nationalists and Muslim extremists, and we counted ourselves fortunate and safe behind our American borders. And then the bubble burst, and we learned that Antisemitism has been present here the whole time, laying dormant and waiting for the right moment and support to come forth. Charlottesville made it abundantly clear. Pittsburgh and Poway made it abundantly clear. Three synagogues across the nation vandalized with Swastikas on the same day made it abundantly clear, as did the three assaults on Ultra-Orthodox Jewish men in Brooklyn during the last week of August. And the Brooklyn synagogue having their windows broken during Rosh Hashanah prayers last week? More of that same awful message. Our people have reason to cry out, to seek safety, and look after our own.

But the cries ring out from others as well, from all corners of our nation: from the working poor, unable to get a foothold in society's economic ladder as the gap between the haves and have nots grows; from those overlooked who lack clean and safe water, who lack the resources necessary to look after their families when trouble strikes, who lack a safe home in the wake of natural disaster. Cries come from women who just want to be treated under the law as equals; from members of the LGBTQ community who just want to be treated as equals; from people of color who just want to be treated as equals. Cries burst forth from victims of gun violence and from those who fear for their children; cries come from the asylum seekers and refugees looking for safety and

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succor; cries come from their children separated and taken away.

Cries rise up from the earth as it is shaped ever more rapidly by human behavior; cries resound from the overwhelming number of species facing extinction and the collapsing ecosystems, and cries tear at us from the children who will one day inherit the remains of this world.

Are we really living Torah? Are we living the life that is expected of us, that we expect of ourselves?

Living Torah is difficult, particularly in the face of so much need. Where do we even start? And when our own are at risk, how can we afford to extend ourselves to others? And yet, how can we remain indifferent to the needs of others, and not help? *Im ein ani li mi li, u'kh'she'ani le'atzmi, ma ani?*¹ If I am not for myself, who will be for me, but if I am only for myself, who am I, asked the great Hillel.

We cannot hold back, refraining from action, and sitting in indifference, helplessness, indecisiveness, and fear. We act, one small step at a time. We remember the rabbinic

¹ Pirkei Avot 1:14

teaching, *lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor, v'lo atah ben chorin l'hivateil mimena*²— the work is not ours to finish, but neither are we free to hold back from it.

We do our part, in part, by answering the cries of our own. We've seen Antisemitism before. We know that there are people in the world filled with hate, consumed by fear of those who are different, and bent on our destruction. To quote Dani Dayan, the Israeli Consul General in New York, "we don't have the excuse of inexperience." We know what happens when those filled with hate go unbridled and unrestrained. We must be vigilant. We must build, foster, and sustain relationships with politicians, law enforcement, and media so that we can continue to advocate for ourselves and support Israel, our homeland and safe haven. We must sustain and strengthen our own institutions through participation, volunteer hours, and financial support, and we must keep our eyes and ears open, ready to stand up for each other. *Kol yisrael arevim zeh l'zeh*. Every Jew is responsible for one another, and together we must stand strong.

This also means, however, that we must fight hate wherever it appears. We are not the only targets of prejudice and hate. The plague of white nationalism is massive, and all minority groups and cultures are threatened. If we're going to come out on top, we must band together with others. And if there is a positive outcome of this awful outbreak, it's that Jews and Muslims in America have never before been so closely aligned, in interest and friendship. I recall how much support we felt last year at my synagogue,

² Pirkei Avot 2:20

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Temple Emanu-El, after the Tree of Life shooting from our local Muslim friends, along with friends from many of the other local houses of faith, and how at the end of Pesach, a nearby mosque supplied us with a feast of *chameitz* for a Memunah celebration. And I've heard similar stories from colleagues across the continent. I know that we all in turn have been there for our Muslim brothers and sisters after attacks on their *uma*, their Muslim community.

Accordingly, it is incumbent upon us to reach out to others, building bridges to those of different faiths and causes— because we're in this together, and because we need all the allies we can get. Back in Medieval Europe, rabbis often justified once forbidden interactions with non-Jews by way of a concept, *mipnei darchei shalom*, meaning 'for the sake of peace.' Though they may have invoked this concept because they thought the world would be a lot better if we could just live in peace with one another, I think it's more likely that they read it as meaning, 'if we want to have peace, we better have friends.'

With all this, we must continue to be there for others, because, quoting the Blues Brothers, we're on a mission from God. We are to be that *or lagoyim*—that light unto the nations—as God's partners in Creation. Just as we have what Rabbi Sidney Schwartz calls the Exodus mentality— a focus on peoplehood and a drive to protect ourselves

against persecutors, so too do we have a Sinai mentality— a drive towards holy nationhood with a sacred mission, given to each of us and all of us at Sinai.

Our very freedom as Jews is conditional and dependent on this life-affirming work. Exodus 19:4-6 reads, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagle’s wings and brought you to me. Now then, if you will obey me faithfully and keep my covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples... You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”³ Being this kingdom of priests and holy nation requires not that we live protected lives, but that we live holy lives.

We can do so, by following the path walked by generations past. Our Temple B’nai Abraham ancestors have set for us a fine example for sacred living, and we can always build on what we’ve done before. We have a strong history here of advocating for civil rights, of standing up against gun violence, of interfaith and interracial efforts, of working to eradicate poverty, of providing relief to the hungry, the homeless, and the disaster struck, and of taking measures to be more environmentally conscious. We've most certainly been involved in Israel advocacy and looking out for Jews around the world.

³ Isaiah 58:9-10

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But we can go farther and do even more. We can commit to operating at a far greater scale, where every member of our community gets involved, not only with his or her actions, but with his or her heart and mind. And we do so by supporting you all in following your passions and interests to make a difference in this world, by means of community organizing.

Tomorrow, you will be receiving by email a survey that I ask you to all fill out. This survey will list every tikkun olam topic we could think of, and there will be room for you to add anything we may have missed. You'll have the opportunity to mark every issue that interests you and that you would be interested in working on. There will be a space for sharing your reasons for your interest, and there will be another space for letting us know if you're already involved in a relevant project and if you would like the support of our community in your work. Once the data is aggregated and analyzed, we'll reach out and gather those interested in the same issues into working groups where they can then plan and lead a concrete effort to make a difference.

If even 10% of adults in this community—roughly 200 people—get involved, with 10 to a working group, that's 20 tikkun olam efforts we can pull off over the coming year.

Imagine if 20%, 50%, or dare I say, 100% of our members get involved?

Temple B'nai Abraham is known as one of New Jersey's leading houses of faith in bringing about positive change. Let us hold that standard high and respond to as many cries as we can. May we remember that while each of us may only make a small impact, all of us, collectively, can change the path of the world. Looking ahead to this year of 5780, we can, if we so choose, avoid the sins of inaction, of silence, of insularity and self-centeredness driven by fear. We can drive out hate and indifference by raising up all who have been brought low and by building relationships with all ready to extend a hand. We can, this coming year, stand up in strength and security, in pride and in sacred mission as Jewish people and as God's partners, as we fulfill the prophet Isaiah's teaching: "If you remove the chains of oppression, the menacing hand, the malicious word; if you offer your compassion to those who hunger and satisfy the suffering—then shall all light shine through the darkness, and your night become bright as noon." And if we do, we will be safe, humanity will be safe, and the world will shine ever so brightly.

There was once a monk, a priest, and a rabbi who came together for an interfaith clergy meeting, when all of a sudden the lights went out. The monk took the opportunity to teach his colleagues about the importance of meditation as a pathway to finding inner light. The priest followed his colleague with words about the power of God to illuminate

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our path. And the rabbi? He grabbed a flashlight.⁴

We are people of action and the world is very much in need of our light. May we be blessed with the strength, will, and fortitude to respond to every cry we hear and shine that light of Torah wherever it is needed.

Gamar Chatimah Tovah. May we all be sealed in the great book of living.

⁴. Korngold, Jamie. *The God Upgrade*. Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2011. 29.