

All Our Vows
a sermon by Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor
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Temple Beth El, Hillsborough, NJ

Yes, I have my doubts – and if you heard me last week, you know that doubt is my friend, because it causes me to think things through. And since I have made a promise to all of you that I would address my remarks on this evening towards the issues surrounding Syria and Egypt, my brain – and my soul – have been in doubt-filled over-drive.

We may have been pulled back from the brink of a military intervention, however limited, by a political solution to the presence of chemical weapons. And since the original outcry of August 21 and following, when the world woke up to Syria’s violation of the 1925 Geneva Protocol against the use of chemical weapons, and the “red-line” had been crossed, we have collectively wrung our hands as to the best way to punish the Syrian regime. A military strike to degrade the ability to use those weapons would certainly have been in order, and called for – and if this diplomatic arrangement removes the possibility of further use of such weapons: dayenu (it is enough). Though that little doubt monitor in the back of my brain has a familiar soundbite on repeat mode: “If you don’t stop hitting your sister with that toy, I’ll have to take it away from you...” So, has the crisis been averted? If you refer to the use of chemical weapons as “the crisis”, we will know in days to come. But, the bigger crisis – the real problem – that gnawing and sickening and festering crisis has not really been touched. And it is this: our silence.

Tonight we heard Cantor Pincus intone on all of our behalf the searing words and melody of Kol Nidre – in which we recognize that we are sometimes unable to fulfill promises that we have made – and if after honest attempts, we have still failed, may we be relieved of them, so that we can push ahead in the game of Life (unburdened by the weight of our past failures of heart, or courage or intent or ability). But what of promises made over and over and over again, and broken every single time? Can we really believe that the Kol Nidre absolves us of those promises?

From the darkest moment of our people’s history in modernity, the Shoah, we arose from the ash, rebuilt Jewish life again and vowed that Never Again, should we, or any other people, suffer so. The world finally woke up to the horrors of genocide – a term coined by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish lawyer for civil rights (and a friend of the Reform Jewish community). Lemkin originally used the term in 1944 to describe the atrocities visited upon the Armenians

at the hands of Turks in 1915. Promptly after its coinage, it was used to describe what happened to our people at the hands of the Nazis.

In the First World War poison gas was used against American troops, in the Second World War poison gas was used to eradicate a people. And by the second half of the twentieth century, the world had seen the horrors of the uses of poison gas, and the world had seen the horrors of wars meant to erase an entire community or people. And one would think that we have had enough. The whole enterprise of the United Nations was hauled into place in 1945 – called into being under a charter, in part written by my teacher and mentor, and the leader of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhood's, the late, beloved, Dr. Jane Evans.

We the people of the United Nations determined:
To save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice
in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind,
To reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth
of the human person, in equal rights of men and women and of nations
large and small...

And one hoped that in the face of evil, a confederation of the “good” would rise up and stop violence and slaughter.

So much for our expectations...

Just two weeks ago, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the remarkable March on Washington – made most memorable by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's “I Have a Dream” speech. But that was not the only speech offered that day, and he was not the only speaker. Rabbi Joachim Prinz came to the podium prior to King's speech and in his remarks he said, “When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those most tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence. (Rabbi Joachim Prinz at 1963 March on Washington)

Clearly Prinz saw the linkage between the oppression of our people and the racism extant in this country. President Barak Obama, highlighting the events of the March on Washington noted that Prinz shared the following insight: “In the realm of the spirit, our fathers taught us thousands of years ago that when God created man, he created him as everybody's neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic concept. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity.”

When the world learned of the atrocities in Kosovo, Rwanda, Darfur... we in the Jewish community stood up in solidarity - we exclaimed that we recalled the feelings of hatred, we knew the effects of violence and terror, we understood what it was like to be "the stranger", to be isolated and vilified. I stood in Washington DC on the site of what would be the US Holocaust Museum, joined by other Jewish leaders to protest what was happening in Kosovo. I stood with Jewish leaders across from the United Nations to protest the slaughter in Darfur. I protested in front of the South African Embassy in NY when we were outraged by Apartheid.

Add to these signal reminders countless other examples of injustice, intolerance, baseless hatred and you will often find Jewish organizations and leaders refusing to be silent. And yet, and yet... We have watched over many months the wholesale slaughter of Christians in Egypt. Members of the Coptic community, whose ancient roots are found in Egypt have become pawns in a war between Muslim factions. It was only our school-mate and friend, Rabbi Jonathan Miller of Birmingham, Alabama who publically decried this atrocity. Reminding us of the Biblical injunction: "Do not oppress the stranger, for you know the heart of the stranger as you were strangers in the land of Egypt..." Rabbi Miller states:

And the bulk of the Jewish historical experience among pagans, Christians and Muslims has been to be their "stranger." We have internalized in our spiritual psyches the pain of exile and our defenselessness before the brutalities of the powerful. We know that the glory of being a stranger is the glory of holding fast to our faith and our culture, even when we are vilified, vandalized and even brutalized by those who exert power without goodness, and display piety without compassion.

To be a stranger in a strange land is disorienting and frankly, even frightening.

He goes on to remind us that 10 percent of the Egyptian population is Christian and yet we have ignored their suffering. He reminds us that buried in the back pages of our newspapers for months upon end, are stories of churches firebombed, schools and businesses ransacked, theft of property and land, beatings, rapes and murder.

And then Rabbi Miller makes a profound statement:

I know the heart of the Christian. The heart of the Christian today in Islamic Egypt is no different than the heart of the Jew in France, Sweden and Belgium, or the heart of the Israelite living among the Pharaohs. They are told that they are now the strangers in their own homes. They know what it is like to be a stranger in a foreign land.

At this time of great turmoil, when Islamic radicalists and secularists are battling on the streets of Cairo for the future of their country, and hundreds upon hundreds have been killed in civic clashes, some are turning away from the battles at hand to lay harm to Christian innocents who are unable to protect themselves.... Too often, when human beings feel powerless or hopeless or frightened, we build ourselves up by knocking down someone else. The Islamist mob in Egypt is no different than the bully in the schoolyard....

The Bible tells us to be kind to the stranger, to take care of the stranger. It is perhaps the most difficult thing to do, to be consistently kind to someone or some group we define as being different from us. Throughout history, the targets vary. Sadly, the bullies remain the same.

I am so profoundly grateful to my friend Jonny Miller for speaking out as he did. But here is where I am stunned – this cry did not come from the Christian community. Where were the Christian voices? Where were the protest rallies? The placards? It was a lone voice from Birmingham Alabama that pricked my conscience. This time it was a Jewish voice from Birmingham. Fifty years ago, from the same Birmingham Alabama, while sitting in a jail, another voice called out to pierce our souls: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." (MLK - 16 April 1963, Birmingham, AL)

And we, as a community, for the most part, have been silent for too long about what is going on in Syria. Here, too, Christians are the pawns in a war between Muslims – but Muslims themselves are also fodder as one side or the other tries to gain control. And by the time the world actually looked up, and noticed that there were not only rampant atrocities, but that chemical weapons had been employed by government forces to decimate civilian centers in which rebels held sway, over 120,000 souls had been murdered, countless civilians fleeing the fighting raped and tortured. My good friend, former colleague and incisive blogger for the Jewish News Service (and Commentary Magazine as well) Ben Cohen wrote on September 3rd ("Syria Debate Shows Our Moral Decline")

“...the use of chemical weapons by Bashar al-Assad’s regime at the end of August was decidedly not the first time these had been deployed. Back in June, as I and others reported, the French government declared it had “no doubt” that “the regime and its

accomplices”—which include the Islamist terrorist organization Hezbollah—had engaged in chemical attacks against civilian centers. ...[W]hen presented with devastating and credible evidence of chemical weapons use, the response of many Western politicians has been to equivocate and demand further evidence.”

Trying to shed some light on arguments that have been obfuscated by ignorance, prejudice and isolationism, Cohen points out that: “The insistence upon further evidence has been accompanied by other rationalizations for not getting involved, all of them constructed from myth rather than fact.” From both left-wing and right wing isolationists we hear that Syria’s warring groups are all as bad as each other. Over and over again the pundits offer that the end of the Assad regime will usher in an Al-Qaeda one. But many serious journalists and observers have provided eyewitness accounts of politically moderate Syrian rebels defending Christian and Alawi villages from both the regime and from Islamist extremists. There are credible reports that as little as a month ago there were daily protests by thousands of citizens against Islamists in the north of the country. Moderate opposition forces—a collection of groups known as the Free Syrian Army— continue to lead the fight against the Syrian regime.

And it is that very regime, under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad, that chose to cross a recognized international legal and moral line and use gas against people that the government should be in the position to protect. And unlike conventional weapons, which are employed to fight enemy combatants, chemical weapons do not discriminate - and painfully and slowly kill everyone in their wake: men, women, children, infants, all living creatures.

After August 21, some wake up - but most shake their heads and say that we cannot be the world’s police. Our President, speaking on Tuesday evening spoke eloquently and laid out the reasons why this use of chemical weapons crossed the world’s “red line”, why we are compelled to act decisively, but willing to give diplomacy a chance. The President had the right by the War Powers Act, to do something first and ask the congress later. Instead, he gave “the people’s representatives” the opportunity to join him and call for action - and by doing so, he gave each of us the opportunity to use our voice. And we failed. Politics reigned and morality lost. We were effectively silenced.

Eli Wiesel wrote, “I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. ... There may be times when we are

powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest. (Eli Wiesel)

Yes, there were thankfully some Jews and Jewish organizations that reached out to Syrian refugees: the Tanenbaum Foundation, the Hebrew Aid for Immigrants Society and World Jewish Relief, as well as the Joint Distribution Committee; and despite the efforts to raise almost \$350,000 for relief efforts for the refugees who fled to Jordan, what about the millions left behind still in Syria? Who cried out? Who screamed Never Again? I am heartened to note that not all Jewish hearts were turned to stone. A group of religious-Zionist Bnei Akiva youth started organized prayers on behalf of Syrian civilians who are at risk due to the ongoing civil war in their country. {I am grateful to Dr. Alan Brill for pointing this out} They asked Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, a leading figure in the religious-Zionist world and the head of the Petach Tikva hesder yeshiva, to help them find the ideal wording for their request for divine assistance for Syrian civilians. Rabbi Cherlow suggested that Psalm 37 and Psalm 120 would be particularly appropriate for the occasion. Both psalms speak of the plight of the innocent righteous when evil men plot against them.

Rabbi Cherlow also wrote his own prayer, which is beautifully translated by Elli Sacks of Modi'in:

Master of the universe, who makes peace on high

Though we are not accustomed to new formal prayers, we can no longer look at the slaughter taking place in Your world and fail to pray about it. Though we know that both sides in the war are guilty of wanton bloodshed, we are unable to keep silent when so many who are beyond the circle of conflict have fallen victim.

We beseech You in prayer to arouse in the killers their basic humanity and evoke mercy in their hearts, that they may recognize that we are all created in the image of God, and that there are limits even to human cruelty....

Grant us the wisdom to know how to act in this hour of distress, when the dark face of humanity's evil inclination is once again fully exposed and we are unsure how to stand against it. Enable us to act with all our energies to prevent bloodshed in Your world, above all in the Holy Land and its environs....

May God who makes peace on high, make peace upon us and upon all Israel, and let us say amen.

And in a beautifully researched, reasoned and written article by Rabbi Gluck's teacher and friend, Rav Donniel Hartman asked about our moral obligations in light of the carnage in Syria. He takes us through the many questions of consistency, self-preservation, the duties to others, and he offers:

Without doubt, moral inconsistency plagues us all, and our moral obligation is to strive to limit that inconsistency while knowing fully well that it will never be eradicated. The support of one's moral right to self-preservation versus the protection of the inalienable rights of others will invariably lead to dirty compromises and failures. The inability to be morally consistent, however, in no way undermines the moral legitimacy in those cases when one is acting justly....

When it comes to the purity of motivation, the ground is even murkier, as the line between mere political self-interest and the moral obligation of self-preservation is blurry at best. Kant argued that the morality of an act is inextricably connected to one's moral intent, but the Jewish tradition teaches that while purity of intent is preferable, the doing of good even when not for its own sake is valuable and a critical step in fulfilling our human obligations. The critical test is whether our actions are morally defensible and serve universal well-being....

In the Middle East our moral responsibilities and motivations are not always clear. It is not merely our hands which are dirty but reality itself. That said, there are times when our moral responsibilities are self-evident. When weapons of mass destruction are used, it is such a time.

("Syria, Moral Responsibilities and Ambiguous Circumstances" Sept 1.2013, by Donniel Hartman)

And, I am relieved to report, that just yesterday, our own Central Conference of American Rabbis released a statement Concerning Syria (Sept 12, 2013) but its focus is limited to the use of chemical weapons, the concern that Iran could still develop or obtain nuclear weapons, and Israel's safety and security - all valid concerns and a clear and concise statement. But is it enough? Could we not have said more? Could we have not spoken sooner?

In his searing poem "Shema," Primo Levi, the literary titan who survived Auschwitz, addressed "You who live secure/In your warm houses" reminding us of the dire consequences of not heeding our commandments:

*I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,*

*When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from you.*

(Thanks to Ben Cohen for the reminding us of this work)

As this eve of Kol Nidre stirs to us remember our promises, especially those promises that are compelled upon us by our obligations as Jews, let us vow that we will not keep silent. And let us counter the ground littered with our broken promises of the past with the vow uttered by our great teacher and sage Hillel, who said:

Im ayn ani li mi li? Uk'she'ani l'atzmi ma ani? V'eem lo akshav, aymatai?

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

If I am only for myself, what am I?

If not now, when?