



## ***“Are You Religious?”***

**Practice, Protest, Disruption and Discomfort**  
Yom Kippur 5778/2017 – Rabbi Dara Frimmer

Except for my husband, who never asked *why I became a rabbi* until a month into dating, the following conversation would emerge somewhere between the first email exchange and the end of the first date, when I was a single, female rabbi.

“So...you’re a rabbi...”

“I am.”

“Are you really religious?”

And I would think to myself, “Religious, how?”

- Black Hat Orthodox religious?
- Kashrut and Shomer Shabbat religious?
- More than twice a year in synagogue religious?

Did my date want to know about my childhood home? An orthodox-raised father who joined a conservative shul, kept 2 sets of dishes to honor his parents in Brooklyn, but who made exceptions for lobster when we vacationed in Maine?

Did my date want to know the role that Torah played in my life? How I thought about God and prayer? Why I felt committed to building a just and compassionate world?

No. (They did not want to know that.)

They wanted to know if I would disrupt whatever routine they had already established. They wanted to know if my faith and practice might make them uncomfortable.

It's not a great way to start a date, but, if you think about it, it's exactly what you want from your rabbi. So, with your permission, I'd like to disrupt your routine and make you a little uncomfortable.

In our 70<sup>th</sup> year, we are a diverse community – perhaps more so than we've ever been. We are a mixture of Jews by Choice and Jews by Birth. We are Sephardic, Mizrahi, and Ashkenazi. We are preschool, religious school, and empty-nesters. We are twice a year Jews and Shabbat regulars. We are Jews who pursue justice with the devotion of a Chassid. We are Jews who are not convinced politics belongs in the pulpit.

Within our Reform Jewish community, we hold a wide range of religious practices – how we eat, how we pray, how we celebrate Shabbat. We pursue justice through different means – some with direct service, some with advocacy and lobbying, some focused on Israel, and some on our city, state and nation and ultimately, the world

After a decade of serving this community, here is what I know to be true: More than an agreed-upon set of rituals or commitment to common cause, what we share, first and foremost, is our love of this community. A love developed over 30 to 40 years of membership, grounded in lifecycles, loss, laughter and tears. A love inspired by the first years in preschool, the embrace of wise and patient teachers, the support for parental rites of passage.

There is a lot of love in this community. And gratitude. And, for some, that might be enough to feel connected. But I would suggest there's something more that binds us together. **We share a community that invites us to engage in tradition from whatever place we currently stand.**

This is a community that lifts up a Judaism that is both traditional and progressive. A community that celebrates our narrative of Particularism - God chose the Jewish people, set them apart, and gave them a unique purpose; and, at the same time, God revealed a Torah with a message of Universalism: justice for the stranger, peace throughout the land, God's likeness upon every human face. This is a community that allows people to be challenged and embraced.

This is a community that invites us to practice Reform Judaism – a responsive and dynamic tradition, that far too often, is impoverished by a lack of engagement. This is a community that invites us to protest – a religious practice, in and of itself, that is diminished if we rest on our laurels.

This year, amidst the requests to build a boat, to wrestle, and to embrace fear<sup>1</sup>, I'm asking you to focus on what I believe are the cornerstones of our Reform Jewish community: **engaged Jewish practice and meaningful protest.** This is what we do best at Isaiah. This is who we are. Both

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<sup>1</sup> All references to clergy sermons on Erev RH, RH Day and Kol Nidre.

practice and protest can anchor us in the rough seas of daily living. Both can help us respond to a broken world and give reason to hope for a better tomorrow.

Practice and Protest.

Let's look at practice.

10 years ago, we invited our Friday night Shabbat community to practice a new ritual. We asked them to rise and face the entrance to the sanctuary as we reached the final verse of L'cha Dodi. This is a tradition that began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the mystics of Safed. Rather than simply recite the words of welcome to the Sabbath, personified as a bride, the Kabbalists left the synagogue and ran outside to greet her. In remembrance of that exuberance and intentionality, we rise and face the entrance as we echo those very same words. For some members of Isaiah, this change was long overdue. For others, it was a jarring turn towards Orthodoxy.

*Engaged Jewish practice means we are willing to disrupt routine and reconsider ritual. Engaged Jewish practice means we are courageous in learning new melodies, practicing unfamiliar Hebrew words, and sitting with the discomfort knowing with time and patience, the discomfort will ease. Engaged Jewish practice looks at our Shabbat celebration, or lack thereof, and says, "Let's take a spiritual inventory of what we do and why we do it."*

Here's another example: 4 years ago, a task force gathered to examine Kashrut practices at the synagogue. Some felt a Jewish institution should require kosher meat. Others were concerned that such a decision would limit personal choice, a defining feature of Reform Jewish identity; and so a group came together to examine the tradition. They studied Torah and rabbinic commentary. They looked for contemporary Jewish voices that would address concerns about the food industry's impact on the environment, workers' rights, and animal welfare. They engaged with the tradition and wrestled it down for answers. In the end, no one was 100% satisfied (which may be a sign of success for living in shared community), and what emerged was a Reform Jewish approach to food at Isaiah – a set of guidelines that strive for thoughtful choices, clear communication, and an appreciation for the challenge of changing food practices in a large, opinionated Jewish community.

*Engaged Jewish practice encourages curiosity. It yields space for more questions than answers. It allows for a practice of Kashrut or Shabbat or Prayer to be "for now" – as in, this is what is meaningful to me, or my family, for now; if or when its meaning shifts, I'll be ready to notice that change and re-examine my practice.*

**Here's my proposal: This year, I think we can go deeper in our practice of Judaism simply by re-examining what we already do.**

**The first step** is to examine the practices that are already a part of your routine. Ask yourself: Are these still meaningful? If the answer is no, give yourself permission to see how they might shift or change.

**The second step** is more challenging: Examine the absence of practice and re-visit the reason why you stopped. “We used to have Shabbat dinner as a family but then the kids got older and nobody wanted to stay home on Friday night.” “We liked coming to services but, ugh, the traffic.” “We keep kosher on Passover, but it’s too hard during the rest of the year.” There’s a reason why you stopped or limited your Reform Jewish practice. The question is whether that set of circumstances or preferences still holds true...or if the practice has simply gone unexamined. *It is possible to have a thoughtful and engaged life of nonobservance. But don’t confuse that with spiritual laziness.* Now is the time to reexamine.

**The third step** is allowing new practices to make their way into our routine. Truth be told, we may not always love this step. It can be awkward to start a new practice. There’s a fear of backsliding, inconsistency, looking silly. I asked members of our congregation to share some of their new Jewish practices, and the responses were personal and powerful:

**Madeline Wolf** added the Shema to her daily meditation over the last year and has found that it deepens her meditation practice and her connection to Judaism.

**Gary Rosenberg** now kisses the mezuzah on the doorframe when he passes by.

**Parisa and Farzin Kerendian** say the Shema with their children before bed each night and are comforted knowing God will watch over them as they sleep.

**Jody Greenblatt** found a Jewish practice for her children -- 4 weeks at Jewish summer camp has set the stage for a life time of Judaism which she would never be able to provide while rushing down Pico Blvd from one activity to another.

*I’m sorry I don’t have time to quote them all.*

There’s a beautiful teaching from the Netivot Shalom<sup>2</sup> that imagines the Israelites taking down the Tabernacle and putting it back up 21 times before it was officially blessed and open for business. Three times a day, for 7 days, they carefully took apart the rings and tapestries. They looked carefully at the boards and bonds, and then began to rebuild.

What would it look like to take apart just one of your practices this year? To carefully examine the components. To notice if there are pieces missing. And to consider who might help to rebuild your practice, or start a new family tradition.

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<sup>2</sup> Shemini

In my family, we started a practice of saying blessings before each meal. My husband and I discussed possible prayers, agreeing that Ha-Motzi would always be acceptable. I offered the



idea of saying “Baruch Atah Adonai, Thank you God...” and then naming all of the foods on the plate. We taught the girls to say, “Amen.” And knowing this would be hard to integrate while wrangling twin toddlers, I wrote the intention in Sharpie, on a notecard that was already stuck to the wall above their high chairs. So, the notecard then read: *Please buckle up the kids...and say a blessing or words of gratitude.* It

doesn't happen every time, but when it does, I feel good that we are building a ritual of appreciation and awareness.

That's practice. Now I want to talk about protest.

These days, protest immediately brings up images of marches, picket signs and professional athletes taking a knee during the national anthem. But protest is an ancient Jewish practice, beginning in Genesis with Abraham who protested Gods' plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses, who spoke truth to power, as he led our people out of slavery. You may not even know about the Daughters of Tzelophehad who overturned a patriarchal system of inheritance at the end of the Book of Numbers. Protest was the Israelite prophet, Isaiah being one of many, who stood in the city-square imploring the people to change their ways.

We've got a long history as Jews of standing up and declaring: *We can do this differently.*

70 years ago, Temple Isaiah was founded by Rabbi Albert Lewis (z'l) who channeled the voice of the Hebrew prophets, and demanded a response to the social and economic concerns of his time. In 1969, Rabbi Bob Gan joined the clergy team; and what followed were decades of service driven by a connection to Torah and tradition. And, today, members of our community like Gail Solo, Sherri Zigman and Kim Perry start initiatives to support victims of human trafficking, *recognizing the face of God in every human being.* Steve Fox, the chair of our Green Team, along with his talented and outspoken committee, educate and advocate to protect our environment, remembering God's warning that *the land is only on lease from the Heavens above.*

This is what we do. With every new challenge, we return to Torah and tradition to frame and guide our protest: Lobbying on behalf of DACA students, support for the LGBTQ community, outreach to Muslim-Americans struggling against Islamophobia. We see pain and suffering, we see intimidation and fear, and we respond: *We must do this differently.*

Jewish protest has a unique voice; a vision of the world that is shaped by lovingkindness, resilience and redemption. And Reform Judaism has a particularly strong commitment to moving that voice into the public square.

In an age when discrimination, humiliation and hate have pushed their way into the headlines, our message of dignity and compassion must move beyond the walls of the sanctuary. At a time where consumption, perpetual dissatisfaction, and greed drive the budgets of individual families, cities, and nations, our devotion to community and recognizing a shared destiny must serve as an alternative.

Judaism can and should be a light unto the nations; **and we are all capable of learning to teach and preach its message.** Not sure you're ready? This is the year to learn.

Now, many of us are interested in exploring protest as a practice, but we don't know where to start. We don't know how to get involved. Let me help. Along with our new social action coordinator Cantor Lilah Sugarman, our VP of Community Affairs, Debra Silverman, and the Chair of Am Tzedek, Janet Hirsch, we can guide you towards one of the many justice groups at Isaiah. We can direct you to readings about policy issues and legislative bills; identify your elected representatives and add their numbers to your speed dial. And, thanks to Temple Isaiah's Family Philanthropy Club, we can help your children learn this practice, too.

Most importantly, let us introduce you to Jewish texts that reveal the long history of protest in a world that targets the vulnerable. Let us show you how the observance of Shabbat can serve as a protest to our fast paced, consumer-driven society. Let us teach you how to preach – not from this pulpit twice a year – I'm talking about a daily practice in which you wake up and acknowledge, things could be different. The weights of judgment and compassion could be shifted to favor compassion. This nation could be more just and equitable. Our community could practice love with a fuller heart. The members of my family could be kinder.

This year, in both practice and protest, I'm asking you to go deeper.

This year, your protest may stand on the Biblical command: "Lo tuchal l'hitale'm"<sup>3</sup> – you will not remain indifferent. Recognizing the epidemic of homelessness in Los Angeles, you will pack and donate a lunch once a month as part of our Preschool's collection for PATH.

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 22:3

This year, your protest may be a call to action, telling your friends, family and community, “You cannot dehumanize, degrade and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation. Every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, woman, man and child is beloved of God and precious in the Holy One’s sight. We the people, all the people, are created *b’tzelem elohim*, in the image of the Divine. All the people are worthy of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>4</sup>

This year, your protest may be for the sake of Israel, national healthcare, poverty, or climate change. Whatever path you take, let us help you find your voice, and join it with the voices of your ancestors, with Abraham and Moses, with the prophets and rabbis. This can be a year of personal transformation and, we pray, a year in which our city, nation and world transform, as well. Towards goodness. Towards righteousness. Towards peace. Towards love.

There’s a midrash in Avot de Rabbi Natan that examines the idea of discomfort in holy spaces. While the Temple stood in Jerusalem, it was the destination for every Israelite, 3 times a year, to offer sacrifices. Understandably, there was concern for housing the influx of visitors, as they did not yet have Airbnb... Still, “No person ever remarked to another, ‘Jerusalem is too crowded for me to be able to stay over there.’”<sup>5</sup> In other words, they made it work so that everyone could share the holy space.

This year, what if we imagined our community at Temple Isaiah not as one of 100% comfort, but one in which everyone is a little uncomfortable? Either because you’re trying something new, or because someone else is trying something new. And, maybe their protest is getting in the way of your practice...or your practice is interfering in their protest. That’s okay. We are part of a community that encourages a little disruption and discomfort as we reach for wholeness and holiness.

Look, first dates are always awkward, but we push through in order to get to, what we hope, are meaningful and long-term commitments. So, in that spirit, I want to invite you on a date this year – either with me to discuss Practice & Protest – or with your friends, your family, and ultimately, with yourself. It may get uncomfortable. There may be awkward and provocative questions asked, but we rarely grow from places of comfort, and perhaps there is value in accepting that we might all be a little uncomfortable in our most holy spaces. Moreover, that might be a sign that we’re doing something right.

I’m asking you to make 5778 a year of practice of protest. May we draw closer to one another through our love for this dynamic and sometimes disruptive Jewish community. May we draw closer through our commitment to deeper engagement in the year to come. Shana Tova.

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<sup>4</sup> Excerpt from “One Voice,” authored by Rabbis Elka Abrahamson and Judy Shanks, shared with Central Conference of Reform Rabbis for use at High Holy Day services, 5778.

<sup>5</sup> Avot de-Rabbi Natan 33