



You Shall Not Remain Indifferent Erev Rosh Hashanah 5779 Sermon Rabbi Dara Frimmer

THE RALLY.

In late June, thousands of people gathered in Grand Park in DTLA to protest the cruel and inhumane policy of separating children from parents at the border. It was a loud and raucous gathering, with calls for comprehensive immigration reform, #metoo, and Black Lives Matter.

A group of us from Isaiah had arrived early as the crowds were beginning to assemble. Gathered in the corner of the park, we watched a Latinx brass band march by blaring horns and tapping drums. Colorful signs and placards bobbed along: Families Belong Together. Love has no borders. No human being is illegal. Proud to have an immigrant Grandpa.

And it was there, in the center of protest signs and political t-shirts, emblazoned with images and epithets that would be inappropriate to mention in front of the Torahs, that a group of Jews from across the Westside began to sing Hineh Ma Tov.

That morning, we chose to ground ourselves in tradition. We began with Shabbat morning prayers and then we looked to our Torah for guidance. Now, Bible verses are not the easiest to translate into catchy, rhythmic, marching chants, but they are powerful nonetheless:

[The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself. \(Leviticus 19:33\)](#)

[You shall not oppress a stranger for you know the feelings of the stranger having yourself been strangers in the land of Egypt. \(Exodus 23:9\)](#)

From the very beginning, our tradition has commanded us to build a just and compassionate society. It's taught us how to recognize and restore the dignity that is afforded to all human beings, especially the most marginalized. How to protest corruption and deceit. How to speak truth to power.

This is who we are. We've been resisting tyrants since Pharaoh.¹

¹ T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights tagline.

When members of Temple Isaiah fight for justice, as we've done for 70+ years, we are tapping into an ancient tradition. Our language of protest sounds different. It echoes the prophets who shouted in the town squares. It returns us to the foot of Mt. Sinai where God first revealed the Torah to the Children of Israel.

This is who we are. We build a more just and compassionate world by grounding ourselves in Jewish values, text and tradition. And what Isaiah does best is help you get back in touch with those powerful and provocative texts, those resonant and still relevant Jewish values, and a very long tradition of fighting for justice.

THE QUERY.

A few months ago, I was meeting with a bar mitzvah student who asked why religious school in 7th grade was worthwhile. (Hard to believe, I know.) Did he really need to relearn the holidays and prayers?

He's right. He doesn't need a review of Apples and Honey or the Amidah. Our 7th grade program is focused on teaching these emerging young adults how to take ownership of their Jewish identity and Jewish tradition.

By way of example, I asked him about Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who, in mid-June, had "used a Bible verse to defend his department's policy of prosecuting everyone who crosses the border from Mexico, suggesting that God supports the government in separating immigrant parents from their children."²

And I asked this bright, articulate teenager if someday he wanted others to tell him what his tradition and sacred texts thought about immigration and family separation, or if he wanted the tools to be able to explore the verses and decide for himself.

And now I'll ask you: Do you want to learn how to interpret Torah and figure out how ancient texts are still resonant and relevant in your life? This is what it means to pursue justice at Isaiah, in 7th grade and for every grade and stage of life. We help you make the connections between scripture and real-world engagement with the goal that, someday, you'll do this on your own and maybe even begin to teach others.³

That is our commitment to you: To teach and model HOW we plant our roots in the rich soil of Jewish values, text and tradition.

I also want to say something about WHY we do this work. WHY we purposefully and thoughtfully expand beyond direct service into advocacy, lobbying, and shaping public policy.

That's the stuff that makes some of you say, "Of course. That's why we joined," and it's what causes others to lean away, concerned about the intersection of pulpit and politics.

THE LOBBY.

Here's a recent story that illustrates HOW and WHY we do our work: In early August, a group of Isaians joined me in Sacramento, alongside 200 other California Reform Jews from across the state, to lobby our representatives on public policy, in particular the Bail Reform Bill, SB-10.

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/06/14/jeff-sessions-points-to-the-bible-in-defense-of-separating-immigrant-families/?utm_term=.454ec42e2836

³ Thank you, Pej Sabet.

We started from a place of Torah: Our tradition teaches “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great but judge your neighbor fairly.” (Leviticus 19:15) That was 3,500 years ago in the midst of an agrarian, small-town society. How do we reinterpret that commandment in the 21st century while living in the 5th largest economy in the world?

At Temple Isaiah, we believe our tradition still carries with it the expectation of commanded-ness, even if we no longer live on farms in the Ancient Near East.

Based on this verse from the Book of Leviticus -- looking through an ancient lens at our contemporary society -- Reform Jewish leaders noticed and named the biblically prohibited practice of favoring the rich over the poor. Under the current system of bail, those with money could buy their way out, return home and await trial. Those without funds could choose to stay in jail (at risk of losing jobs or homes), plead guilty to ensure an early release, or, they could pay exorbitant, non-refundable fees to a bail bondsman.

Was it okay that the system of bail in California worked for the rich but not the poor?⁴ No. And so, we lobbied to change the system.

Rep. Sydney Kamlager-Dove, in noting the economic interests of the Bail Bonds industry, told our group, “We need to start talking about the economic incentives for loving people...for rehabilitating people...not just jailing and bonding them.” And we nodded our heads in agreement. Yes. As Jews, we know something about love: V’ahavta L’rey-echa Kamocho. (Leviticus 19:18) You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.

And days later, when SB-10 was significantly altered by its authors in a final effort to ensure it had the votes to pass the Senate and be signed into law by Gov. Brown, Reform Jews had to be nimble and responsive. Would we still offer our support for this landmark and now deeply-flawed piece of legislation?

This is part of why synagogues stay away from public policy. It’s messy. It’s wonky. It’s subject to the influence of dark money, political egos, and, of course, special interests. (I actually had this idea while we were up in Sacramento that there should be a screen over the entrance to the Capital that says: Welcome and thank you for your civic engagement! Today’s lobbying groups include: the California Teachers Association, Big Oil, and Reform Jews.)

Here’s the thing we shouldn’t be embarrassed or shy to admit: As Jews, we also have a special interest. It’s called “creating a just and compassionate society for all people.” Which is why at Temple Isaiah, we’re not afraid to take our tradition into the public square or up to Sacramento.

We’re not intimidated by complexity. I think most of us actually enjoy the chance to learn something new. And that’s what we’re doing together - learning, practicing, growing, evaluating - we’re building relationships between one another, and also between Isaiah as an institution and our elected leaders, whose job it is to represent OUR special interests.

THE COMMUNITY.

And that’s another lesson we learn by doing this work through Isaiah: Both Isaiah the prophet and this Temple teach us the importance and value of collective power.

⁴ Thank you, Ron Stone.

Isaiah the prophet stood on his ancient version of a soap box and screamed himself blue trying to convince the Israelites to repent and return. It wasn't enough for one person to heed his call; he wanted everyone to practice teshuva. Isaiah understood the power of the collective: Calling out to God in a communal voice would catch God's attention. It didn't work with only one.

It was the same for our ancestors who languished as slaves in Egypt. Until they learned to cry out together, as a force to be reckoned, tradition says, God did not heed their cries. But the minute they learned to work together, and cry out together, collective redemption could begin.

So, too, with any change we hope to make in our city, state and nation. We must learn and relearn the power of working together - something we are uniquely poised to do as a Westside, faith-based institution and as a member of the Reform movement.

Look, many of us have individual power. I'm willing to bet that at least one of you here tonight has a direct line to Mayor Garcetti or even Governor Brown. I couldn't have arranged for Congressman Ted Lieu to be our Yom Kippur afternoon speaker without the help of one of your connections.

That's fine. Power and access to power are good tools to have, especially when you are fighting for justice and righteousness.

But if you are looking to make citywide or statewide change on behalf of many people, you'll need more than a phone number. You'll need people who are willing to show up and join their voices with yours - to amplify the message, to show that we, the collective, are serious about change.

How do you find those people? And, how do you learn to work not only with Westside Reform Jews but people of different races, classes and faiths? You can do it through Isaiah.

Temple Isaiah helps us build people-power so we can act purposefully in the world. It's why we've partnered with One LA, a local, broad-based organizing group, for over a decade. It's why we partner with the Religious Action Center in DC, to be a part of a nationwide movement of Reform Jews fighting for justice, and also with the California offshoot of the RAC, formally known as Reform CA.

That's in part why tonight and tomorrow you'll have a card in your prayer books from the RAC asking you to make a commitment to vote. Reform congregations across California are handing out this CA-specific card and there's a version that's also being circulated nation-wide.

We are part of a movement - 900 synagogues strong in the US, with many more throughout the world - and while we may not all agree on service projects, public policy, or what melody to use for Mi Chamocha, we can agree that the Reform Jewish voice on justice is indispensable and that it is stronger when we cry out together.

THE OPPORTUNITY.

So, let's talk about this voting card.

Since the election of President Trump, many have been fearful for the future of our democracy. Routine checks and balances seem to be failing. The free press is under attack. Our representatives refuse to abide by the traditional practices of forbearance and mutual toleration -- the invisible glue that holds together an inherently fragile system of governance.

Since the election, there's been an unusually strong focus on who voted for Trump. There's no shortage of feature stories about the MAGA hat-wearers and those who voted for Obama in 2012 and Trump in 2016. Less sexy to report, is the story of those who never voted. Those who stayed home. Those who gave up. Those who said, "What does it matter?"

Can we talk about that group of people for a moment? Can we talk about a much more insidious threat to democracy that comes from inaction? Disinterest? Boredom? Laziness? Lack of faith that anything will change?

The Torah teaches "lo tuchal l'hitalem" (Deuteronomy 22:3) -- you are not allowed to remain indifferent. Now, in its origin the Torah was referring to seeing your neighbor's ox or donkey wandering in the street. You are commanded to rescue it and return it. Lo tuchal l'hitalem. You saw it - you have to do something about it.

But, as with most lines of Torah, there's a teaching that moves past the p'shat, the most basic reading of the text, and points towards a d'rash, a spiritual and political practice for every generation: You are NOT allowed to remain indifferent.

You see democracy crumbling - you are not allowed to remain indifferent.

You see racism, bigotry, homophobia, xenophobia and misogyny practiced in the public square or from the Highest Office, without shame or apology - you are not allowed to remain indifferent.

You know there are 1.1 million eligible unregistered voters in Los Angeles County - you are not allowed to remain indifferent.

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, a 12th century commentator, says the one who witnesses an atrocity and does nothing bears the same guilt as the one who committed the atrocity.⁵ There is a price to pay for remaining indifferent; and, what's worse, the price may not only be exacted from you, but also from future generations.

Lo tuchal l'hitalem - We will not remain indifferent.

That's why Isaiah has been offering non-partisan, voter-registration trainings, and creating opportunities for congregants to register voters across the city

That's why Isaiaans are learning more about the legal changes that impact refugee and asylum seekers, and how we might best support them.

That's why Temple Isaiah's Coalition Against Trafficking partners with CAST and the National Council for Jewish Women, so that they can attend to the needs of victims and pass statewide protective legislation.

That's why members of Am Tzedek: Isaiaans Pursuing Justice are building strong relationships with our elected city officials, to help us address the issues we care about, from traffic safety at the corner of Pico and Kerwood, to affordable housing on the Westside.

Lo tuchal l'hitalem -- We will not remain indifferent.

⁵ http://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/CJLIParashatMishpatim5775.pdf

That's why we're asking you to vote and to help increase voter turnout.

That's why we're asking you to learn more about Prop 1, which would authorize 4 billion dollars in general obligation bonds for housing-support and loans for veterans and low-income families.

But, we can't stop there.

We also need to be thinking beyond the midterms, and the next Presidential election. We need to be thinking past the rebirth and rebranding of political parties and wondering if Oprah has a shot. Temple Isaiah helps lift our eyes to the horizon, as our ancestors taught us to do, and think about the long game.

SB-10, that Senate Bill on Bail Reform, was gutted by its authors, and after much debate, Reform Jewish leaders in California withdrew their support.

The bill squeaked through.⁶ Governor Brown signed it into law a few weeks ago. The campaign is over, but the work of pursuing justice is never complete, nor, as we learned, is it perfect.

When we talk about Tikkun Olam, healing the world, we are talking about the slow, deliberate, long-lasting effort to heal this broken world. We cannot expect to achieve all our goals in one generation. Nevertheless, we stay engaged, as tradition commands us to do.

That's why we joined Temple Isaiah: to build something powerful and transformative that lasts beyond our lifetime.

As Isaiaans, we don't have to choose the same path, but we need choose something. [Lo tuchal l'hitaleim](#). Find the path that works for you and step onto it in the New Year. Feed the hungry. Lobby in Sacramento. Sign up for FPC, the Family Philanthropy Club. Help us build a just and equitable city for all her inhabitants.

And for those who are ready to bring a unique and primal Jewish voice into the public square, join us as we build a powerful, paradigm-shifting cry that allows for city, state or even nation-wide change.

THE FINALE.

Now, tonight, as you leave, it's likely you will engage in the one High Holy Day tradition all Jews can agree on: Evaluating the Rabbi's sermon.

Some of you are going to say, "she didn't go far enough." The urgency of now demands bolder words and bigger actions. It's likely some of you will also say, "she went too far."

Here's our challenge: Hillel the Elder taught us the famous line: [If not now, when?](#)⁷ It has guided us for 2000 years to take action. To show up. If this resonates for you, there are pathways at Isaiah to meet the needs of those who are crying out for help before us. [Lo tuchal l'hitaleim](#). We must and we will respond.

But Isaiah the prophet, who also felt a sense of urgency, understood what I would call "the long game." The Israelite society was crumbling under the weight of corruption and deceit. Isaiah spent his days begging people to change their ways. They didn't...but, he refused to give up.

⁶ After revisions, the California State Assembly passed the bill by 42 votes. The minimum number required to send it back to the Senate for a final vote is 41.

⁷ Pirke Avot 1:14

He knew the end result would be repentance and return. It wouldn't happen in the first few hours, or even in the subsequent days, weeks or years. But change would come. He knew it by looking back at our history as slaves in Egypt. He knew it from every moment on the Wilderness trek when our ancestors seemed to take one step forward and two steps back.

Eventually, they made it to the Promised Land.

And though we think that's the end of the story, it's actually just the end of the Torah. Our story keeps going. 500 years later, the prophet Isaiah is now on a soap box, in the Promised Land, watching the Israelites squander their inheritance and causing God to wonder if their ancestors were worthy of being redeemed in the first place.

So join me as we continue to learn from the Prophet Isaiah: This is not our final chapter. We live in a culture of immediate gratification and Amazon deliveries that arrive the next day. Building and sustaining a just and compassionate society is the work of a lifetime. It won't happen overnight.

And that's where we come in: Temple Isaiah is uniquely suited to help you respond to the "urgency of now," and, at the same time, we are experts in the long game. That's one of the political strengths of being a minority. We've been navigating and surviving different administrations for thousands of years, and we're still here and we're still preaching a message of compassion and kindness and caring for the stranger.

But before we pat ourselves on the back, please remember with me, none of these qualities are innate. They are enforced and reinforced through our ongoing connection to Jewish values, ritual, text and tradition. They are taught and modeled through our ongoing involvement at Temple Isaiah.⁸

So, no matter how you decide to engage in the work, be it through direct service, advocacy, or community organizing, this year, and every year, help us to interpret and answer this ancient call: [Tzedek, tzedek tirdof. Justice, justice you shall pursue. \(Deuteronomy 16:20\)](#)

Shana Tova.

⁸ Thank you, Josh Heald.