

My friends, I'm filled with deep emotion this morning. Cincinnati for me is Ir Hakodesh. It is the place where I first learned Torah seriously. This Bimah is *Makom Kodesh* because I and the class of 1969 were ordained on this bimah by Nelson Glueck z'l. To have the privilege to address you from this bimah in this holy place is truly overwhelming. Next year we will go to Yerushalayim the eternal *Ir HaKodesh* of the entire the Jewish people. To have the opportunity and privilege to go from Cincinnati to Jerusalem is indeed an honor and the fulfillment of a journey which began a long time ago.

Where do we get our best material? Where do we get the *chomer ledrush* that is most important? Well, if you have a long time spouse or a long time partner, you know it's they who provide you with the best material. So when I told my wife Elaine, of 42 years, that the subject of our convention was moral leadership, she forwarded to me the following story. It is a story which fits into the category of 'everything I needed to know I learned in kindergarten.' Did you hear about the teacher who was helping one of her kindergarten students put on his boots?

He asked for help and she could see why. With her pulling and him pushing, the boots didn't want to go on. When the second boot was on, she had worked up a sweat. She almost whimpered when the little boy said, "Teacher, they're on the wrong feet." She looked and sure enough, they were.

It wasn't any easier pulling the boots off than putting them on. She managed to keep her cool as together they worked to get the boots back on, this time on the right feet. Then he announced, "They aren't my boots."

She bit her tongue rather than get right in his face and scream, "Why didn't you say so?" which she would have liked to.

Once again she struggled to help him pull the ill-fitting boots off. He then said, "They're my brother's boots. My Mom made me wear them."

She didn't know if she should laugh or cry. She mustered up the grace and the courage she had left to wrestle the boots on his feet again. And now she said, "Where are your mittens?"

He said, "I stuffed them into the toes of my boots."

Sometimes, being a rabbi feels like that teacher. But like the teacher, to quote our late colleague Edward Friedman, we need to be a non-anxious presence, persevering with moral courage and leading from principle. I am deeply grateful to Rabbi Lewis Kamrass for making this historic pulpit available to us. I am deeply grateful to all of you who have conducted and led our worship service, and I feel so fortunate that this week's Torah portion is *Tazria* - it could have been *Metzora*. This morning is a Bar or Bat Mitzvah nightmare.

We heard Sally read the following words:

אָדָם פִּינֵי הַגֵּה בְּעוֹר־בְּשָׂרוֹ שָׂאֵת אֹי־סַפְּחֵת אִוּ בְּהִרְתּוֹ הַגֵּה בְּעוֹר־בְּשָׂרוֹ לְגַע צָרָה וְהוּבֵא אֶל־אֹהֲרֹן  
הַכֹּהֵן אִוּ אֶל־אַחַד מִבְּנֵי יוֹהָדֵי הַכֹּהֵן יָמָּ: וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הַגֵּה בְּעוֹר־הַבְּשָׂרָה

“When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into a scaly affection on the skin of the body, that person shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons, the Cohanim, and the priest shall examine the affection on the skin of the body.” (Leviticus 13:2-3)

When an infection was visible on the body, it was the ancient practice to bring that person to the priest, the one who represented God who must declare that person either *tamei*, impure, or *tahor*, pure. Our ancestors believed that skin diseases were dangerous not only to the person afflicted but to the community as a whole. What appears on the surface is potentially a sign of something more ominous. While today when faced with these skin diseases we turn to dermatologists to provide us with creams and ointments and antibiotics to cure these afflictions, the passage offers us an entry point to consider the diseases that afflict the body of our nation, our world, and our people and our role as moral leaders-- as guardians of the holy engaged in the messy and complicated work of diagnosing and curing the moral rot which threatens the body of our society. To stand near the infection is potentially dangerous but we cannot affect a cure from a distance.

The theme of our convention, as you all know, is moral leadership. Last night we were treated to the “Voices of Justice”. We heard our colleagues from the past who spoke from their pulpits, on television, at major rallies calling our country to justice, righteousness, and peace. Our convention could not come at a more important time in American history. We are involved in perhaps one of the most important political campaigns of the last 50 years. It is our responsibility as religious leaders, as today’s voices of justice, to hold each one of the candidates, to hold each one of the political powers to account and to tell us with clarity and without equivocation where they stand on the moral, social, and political rot that threatens the body of our society and our world.

We hear all the time religion decried as irrelevant at best and the source of the world’s problems at worst. We are all familiar with the atheist debunkers of religion who are producing bestselling books, and we’re deeply troubled by the preaching of the religious right which inflames the public square. The conflict in the Middle East and between the West and terrorism is often identified as a religious war.

At the beginning of February, I had the privilege of representing all of you at the US Islamic World Forum in Doha, Qatar, an annual meeting which was created by the Brookings Institution and the government of Qatar after 9/11. Its avowed goal is to bring together leaders from the United States and from the Muslim world to see how we can work together to improve our relationship. It was three days of intense conversations and networking. Yet in one startling way it was a wake up moment. One of those moments that you rarely have in your life, when you discover that there is truly a disconnect between what you understand as reality and what the other understands as reality. I learned a strange but I will tell you important fact: that in the Muslim world, polls show that many believe the United States’ primary goal is the spread of Christianity, and the vast majority of people in the Muslim world do not believe that the Arabs carried out 9/11. There is a disconnect between their reality and our reality.

On the other hand, in our fear in this country and in the West, we have allowed Muslims worldwide to be identified with terrorism and we remain silent when talk radio commentators and politicians and religious leaders use terms like Islamo-fascist to describe our Muslim brothers and sisters. We all know that those who speak for God have frequently created violence and mayhem, and we are rightly cautious about religious rhetoric which turns people against one other. But let us be clear: the Muslim minorities in our society and their place in our society requires our considerable attention. In Europe, they are alienated, often susceptible to the inflammatory rhetoric that leads to violence. The situation here is different but it could change if we do not help them to integrate into society to become full participants in the work of *tikkun olam*. I applaud Rabbi Eric Yoffie's Biennial Initiative of Jewish Muslim dialogue, but ask that together we move beyond dialogue to activist coalitions to counter the xenophobic demagoguery of the media, political and religious leaders---the fear mongers who pander to our insecurities, our ignorance, and our prejudice.

Among the participants in the Forum were a small but idiosyncratic group of Faith Leaders. I was the only rabbi present. The organizers did not know quite what to do with us. In two brief gatherings this diverse collection of faith leaders declared, "We must work together." However, it was clear that the Evangelical Mega Church pastors already had vast and important delivery systems for social services in remote parts of the world unequal to anything that we might ordinarily muster. I left Doha with some of the same feelings that Eric Yoffie experienced at the World Economic Forum in Davos. In the Forward, he reflected on the disconnect between business and faith leaders and the disparity between the hands on work of the Christian community in remote places. He rightly and importantly asked, "And what, it ought to be asked, is the place of American Jews in this coalition?" As a movement and as a Jewish Community we must explore religious, business and policy coalition. The Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Union for Reform Judaism should enter into serious discussion to expand our reach and to ask the college institute to provide us with Judaic material to make this reach a truly Jewish religious conversation and Jewish religious action.

I proposed to the Brookings Institution that next year's Forum treat Abrahamic Faith Leaders with the same academic seriousness with which they approached other issues. There needs to be serious papers by significant scholars to explore the role of religion and peacemaking in societal transformation. Only if we deeply understand the culture and the faith of the other can we move forward in the sacred work of transformation. However, this is not dialogue for dialogue sake. I am now exploring the relationships I have made in Doha in the hope that we collectively can bring Judaism to bear not only on improving the United States relationship to the Islamic world but to create new partnerships to reach out to solve the world's problems. Religious leaders need to be at the center of policy debates prodding government and business leaders, cultural leaders to take bold steps, form new partnerships. We the rabbinate need to take the initiative. Other groups may have greater economic resources. Other religious groups are certainly numerically larger than we, but we have the ethical and spiritual wisdom of a trimillennium tradition that has the power to transform the world.

The need for dialogue among Abrahamic faiths has not abated. The CCAR must renew its efforts to be at the center of the conversations with those with whom we agree but even more importantly with those whose views we find most challenging and most

disagreeable. Only if we engage the Other in her Otherness will we truly connect to each other as brothers and sisters created in the Divine image. Our conversations with the Christian community continue unabated. The CCAR has spoken out on the New Latin prayer for Good Friday issued by the Vatican. We are engaged in conversations with mainstream Protestants on divestment, and now following the advertisements in major newspapers we will have to engage the World Evangelical Alliance that now publicly wishes to convert us. Our own Interreligious Affairs Committee is central to our work.

The mood in Reform Judaism has turned toward spirituality and personal relationships with God. Our worship has become more participatory, our Torah study is more intense and interactive. We have turned from the formal sermon to the *D'var Torah*. Our Judaism has become more about nurturing the individual soul than saving the body politic. These are important and positive developments. However, Prophetic Judaism has always been the hallmark of our movement.

Racism, sexism and homophobia are the leprous and cancerous infections which deny individuals and groups rights and dignity. We are all aware that we need new national and local conversations on racism, sexism and homophobia. This morning we celebrated the 36th anniversary of Sally's ordination and women in the Rabbinate. We celebrate her moral courage and the moral courage of Fred Gottschalk, the President of HUC-JIR, who ordained her. The achievements of our women colleagues have been immense. Their leadership has transformed our movement and our Judaism, but let us be clear: the work of equality for them, for the women of our country and of the world, is not complete. We must address the issue of gender head on. It remains one of the important intractable problems. We may think we've made progress, which we have. But progress does not mean accomplishment.

Almost 40 years ago, actually more than 40 years ago, when I first entered the Hebrew Union College, I remember the older students telling me with pride how they integrated the Busy Bee, a popular restaurant located near the College, what those of us from Cincinnati called "the short corner." We continue today to revel in the rhetoric of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Each year we celebrate and repeat that speech. We look back to the March on Washington with joy and with pride. But the civil rights movement is not over. The dream is not a reality. The gap between the African American community and the White community remains a scandal of the first order. We who were so central to the civil rights movement and we who backed away for many reasons over a long time, now have to become the centerpiece of the revival of a push for racial justice

. Our support for the rights of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered people is also important, but let us not think that because we perform same sex marriages or because we ordain gays and lesbians, that in any way we have yet to accomplish our real goal. which is to teach this country and this world that every person straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered is created in *btzelem elohim* in the image of God, who loves and values each and every one of us.

The War in Iraq is killing and maiming thousands - it angers and alienates the Muslim world and wastes resources which would make for a safer and more secure and just world, is eating the flesh and soul of this country. Let us be clear: It will take moral courage to extract us from this conflict and to repair the damage that we have done to ourselves and to others. We must provide a vision of hope and courage. We must insist

that our country change the way it engages with the rest of the world. We must go beyond simple slogans.

We are celebrating the 60th anniversary of the State of Israel. Her birth and survival is a glorious achievement, and I hope that next year when I look out at the convention service I will see all of you in Jerusalem. The failure of moral courage on the part of so many to bring an end to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict is heart breaking for all of us. The resolution of this conflict is more urgent than ever. Many believe it is now or never. This morning is not the time to engage in debate about the right course to be taken, but we in the rabbinate must engage vigorously and openly without demonizing each other in the kind of hard conversation which is necessary. I believe in *Elu vElu* when we truly make each one of our controversies into a *machlpchet lesheim shamayim*. I want to congratulate Eric Yoffie on his strong statement in Jerusalem of support for compromise in the peace process. I fully support his moral courage. He put us squarely and unequivocally among those who will stand up to the Jewish Establishment, who cannot see that road to peace and security is paved with compromise, courage, and danger. We must be the disciples of Aaron seeking peace and pursuing it. Peace making is hard.

In the midst of celebration we note the increasing strength of our movement in Israel but we also acknowledge our failure to provide them with adequate resources. The eroding dollar threatens to sap the strength and vitality of a cadre of young and creative rabbinic and lay leaders. The growing disconnect between North American Jews and Israel is a virus. If not checked it will continue to weaken our sense of peoplehood. Zionism is a waning set of ideologies which were once understood as a cure for a dying people. We need a new narrative which is compelling and energizing. We need to create a new dream, a new vision for the Jewish people. The paradigm has shifted but our language remains rooted in a bygone past. Our Israel Committee, ARZA and its Institute for Reform Zionism, must work together to change the rhetoric. We the Reform Rabbinate, however, must provide the scholarship, the creativity and the leadership.

There remain a myriad of issues that we must address at this time. Eric already spoke forthrightly about the need for Universal Health care and rightly asked the question: How can we cure the ills of society if we cannot provide a decent standard of health care for all the members of society? We must also be advocates for each other and for all who work in our institutions so that they are provided with adequate health care. Let me give you a laundry list: poverty, climate change, housing, job training, and immigration reform. The list does not begin to exhaust the number of infections, afflictions, viruses and cancers which threaten our world and our society. We are partners in the Religious Action Center, we are partners on the Joint Commission on Social Action but it is to our own committee on Justice and Peace that we must look to lead, energize, and galvanize us. We must utilize all of the resources available to make our voices heard in our communities, but more importantly in the halls of power. We are called upon to do nothing less than change the world.

Each year on Yom Kippur we read Isaiah 58:

Is such the fast I desire,  
A day for men to starve their bodies?  
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush

And lying in sackcloth and ashes?  
Do you call that a fast,  
A day when Adonis is favorable?  
No, this is the fast I desire:  
To unlock fetters of wickedness,  
And untie the cords of *a*-the yoke-*a*  
To let the oppressed go free;  
To break off every yoke.  
It is to share your bread with the hungry,  
And to take the wretched poor into your  
home;  
When you see the naked, to clothe him,  
And not to ignore your own kin.

If we do this Isaiah says this:

Then shall your light burst through like the  
dawn  
And your healing spring up quickly;

We can bring healing to our people, our nation, and the world. Today we are the priests, guardians of the holy, who must risk contact with the diseases that threaten the body of our society and the world. We cannot provide care a long distance away. We are the spokespeople for the prophets. “Let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24). We are the teachers, the rabbis, the disciples of the sages whose careful analysis and reasoned argument brought the wisdom of our tradition to bear on problems large and small. “Turn it and Turn it for everything is in it.”

*Kol Rav*, the voice of the rabbi, the voice of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, must rise above the din of the demagogic rhetoric of divisiveness, hatred and self-righteous certainty composed of ill-conceived truths, and the timidity born of a false sense of security. When God no longer speaks *bakol*, when God no longer speaks out loud, we must interpret the Divine will by outrageous acts of compassion, and justice, and moral courage. We must and shall be heard because we are summoned to the sanctuary and we are called to stand at the altar and draw down into our midst the healing presence of God’s light for us, our people, our nation, for Israel and all of humankind.

*Kein yehi ratzon.*