

Rabbi Fine
Yom Kippur 5772, Daytime

The Courage to Dream, The Courage To Change the World

“The greatest heresy in Judaism is to believe that the world *is* as the world must *be*.” These are the words of the contemporary teacher Rabbi Shai Held, which I shared on Rosh Hashanah.

If we take Rabbi Held’s statement literally, I’m afraid that the vast majority of us here today, including myself, could at times be labeled heretics.

In an age in which we get news about crises taking place around the world instantly via the internet or TV, it’s hard for any of us to not feel overwhelmed. It’s very hard *not* to say, the world is as it is, and there’s not a whole lot that little old me can do about it.

Our economy remains in crisis with nearly 10% of Americans unable to find work, and our politicians seem so deeply mired in ideological fighting to really respond.

The number of people living in poverty continues to rise. In 2010, 15% of our country lives in poverty, and *22% of children*. Think about it, that’s *16.4 million children* in our country not being sure when their next meal will be.

As we watch TV and read the news about crisis after crisis, from the earthquake and nuclear meltdown in Japan to the wildfires in Texas, from the horrific famine in Somalia that the U.N says could claim 750,000 lives in coming months, to the threat of a double dip recession and global economic meltdown, it is hard to not despair.

It’s hard to maintain faith that we can have a significant impact on the world, and at times even the direction of our own lives.

This sense of helplessness can create a vicious cycle. My wife Emily who is a doctoral student in psychology, wrote recently in a paper about a phenomenon psychologists call “learned helplessness.”

In short, research has shown that when people are exposed to uncontrollable circumstances, it can result in a variety of effects on them, including “passivity, reduction in persistence, depression, and negative beliefs about oneself...”

In Emily’s words, “People with learned helplessness often don’t adapt and actively respond even in situations where they do, in fact, have control.” Research has shown that their efforts deteriorate when confronted by difficult tasks and they often give up without even trying.”

While this research may refer largely to people who have grown up in extreme circumstances that accustomed them to such a sense of helplessness, we all are susceptible to a sense of complacency and feelings that any effort we make will have little impact on certain fundamental

aspects of our lives or the world around us.

The good news is I'm not just here to depress you. I did after all go to Oberlin College, where the school motto was "Think one person can change the world? So do we."

(Although years after I graduated they baffled us by changing it to "We are Oberlin: Fearless." My theory is they were trying to attract students who could help change the Oberlin football team's record. Let's just say they won one game during my 4 years, and no one could remember the last time such a miracle had happened.)

As I reflect on global events this year, I have felt affected by something other than a contagious sense of helplessness. I have been inspired by a sense of the possibility for a new future.

We have not only seen despair in the world this year, but we have seen how out of despair can come hope.

This has been a year in which people across the globe have refused to accept the world as it is. We have seen this year how instant media not only has the power to spread a sense of helplessness across national borders, but also has the power to spread a sense of hope and empowerment.

On December 17, in a small town in Tunisia, a policewoman, seeking a bribe, confiscated the illegal vegetable stall of an unemployed man named Mohamad Bouazizi. For years, the police had been routinely confiscating his wheelbarrow of produce, demanding bribes.

On this day, he had already gone into debt to buy the vegetables he needed to sell to feed his family. And now his vegetables, and his street cart, were impounded, and he was harassed and humiliated by a city official and her aides. Bouazizi tried to see the governor to beg for his cart and his weighing scales, but the governor refused.

The inability to live with dignity had pushed Bouazizi to the brink, and in an act of both frightening desperation and radical protest, he set himself on fire.

That day, Tunisians who had been living with similar humiliation and helplessness for decades took to the street in protest. The movement grew and was broadcast on Facebook and Al Jazeera.

Eventually the force of the protests did something no one had thought possible – push President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and his 23 year old corrupt dictatorship out of power.

Before long, we were watching the drama unfold in Egypt, as everyday Egyptians took to the streets and occupied Tahrir square.

As we celebrated Pesach by telling story of our liberation from oppression in Egypt thousands of

years ago, we watched hundreds of thousands of modern day Egyptians putting their lives on the line as they called for the right to free speech, an end to police brutality and corruption, an end to the state of emergency law that the government had put in place more than 40 years earlier, free elections, and a government that would assure their basic human dignity instead of denying it.

They did what had been inconceivable not long before – push Hosni Mubarak and his 40 years of dictatorship from power.

In our haftarah portion this morning, God speaks through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah saying, “Cry aloud, hold nothing back; shout as loud as a shofar blast. Tell my people of their transgressions...”

This was what the people in Tunisia and Egypt did in facing their dictatorial rulers, and to our astonishment, their cry for freedom and empowerment not only succeeded in their own countries but went viral.

The domino effect of the Arab Spring spread and continues to do so, with people across the world emboldened to demand a life of dignity.

After so many years of Arab dictatorships using Israel as a scapegoat for the anger resulting from their own suppression of their people, citizens of these countries have woken up to the real sources of their suffering and realized that they do have a voice. In each country the situation has been different but also similar.

In Libya it led to a civil war supported by NATO and the U.S that pushed Gaddafi from his dictatorship of over 40 years.

We’ve seen uprisings in Bahrain, Yemen, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Oman. In Syria protesters continue to put their lives on the line in the face of the brutal crackdown of President Assad.

Inspired by the Arab Spring, a massive protest movement also developed in Israel this summer. It began again with an individual in despair, but has led to a generation with renewed hope.

A 25 year old Israeli woman named Daphne Leef lost a close friend to suicide earlier this year, a poet named Alex.

Alex had written towards the end of his life, that even if you have a heart of gold, you will not manage to change the world. This attitude led him to end his life in despair.

Two months later Daphne Leef responded differently to her own sense of despair about the widespread challenges of living with dignity in modern Israel as a result of the inflated cost of food and housing.

She was the first person to set up her tent on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv in protest. What started with one tent grew to thousands. At the height of the protests thus far, one Saturday night

this summer a staggering 450,000 Israelis came out to protest, the largest protest in Israeli history.

To put this in perspective, 6% of the entire population of Israel was in the streets protesting that night. This would be the equivalent of *19 million* people protesting in the United States.

The protests managed to bring together Jews, Muslims, Arabs, Christians, Druze, the religious, the secular, the left-wing, and the right-wing in common cause.

In Leef's words, **“Summer 2011 is the big summer of the new Israeli hope. This hope was born, like many hopes, out of a feeling of despair, alienation, and inequalities that became impossible for all of us, inequalities that almost became impossible to overcome....We have begun a new discourse, a discourse of hope, of sharing, of solidarity and responsibility.”**

This year of protest has extended beyond the Middle East. We've seen protests in Spain, which has the highest unemployment rate of any developed country.

In India hundreds of thousands of people have come out to protest what they see as a broken political system with widespread corruption.

In Greece protests have been a regular part of the economic turmoil there.

And here in the United States, the “Occupy Wall Street” protests have swelled from hundreds to thousands as the unions have joined in over the past week in New York as well as 10 other cities including Boston.

They are protesting the growing economic inequality in our own country and a political system they view as ineffective in addressing the concerns of the average American.

The widespread protests across the globe that we have seen this year are of course not all the same and are by no means equivalent. Some are peaceful, some are violent.

Some seek to tear down horrible dictatorships, and some seek to reclaim the essence of their democracies.

Some have taken place in an atmosphere of combat that leads to loss of life, as in Syria.

Others, as in Israel and here in the States have been mostly peaceful and have had a joyous and at times festive atmosphere, with stations providing food, medical attention, media and music.

What *is* in common though is that people across the globe, people of different religions and ethnic backgrounds, have decided that instead of remaining complacent in the face of conditions

that deny their basic human dignity, they will engage in efforts to change their situation.

They have asserted that the world does *not* have to be as the world is.

It is true of course that it is not enough to just point out what is wrong. As difficult as it may be to have the courage to protest against what is wrong in the world, it is all the more difficult to rebuild the world in the way we dream it should be.

In most of the countries I mentioned there are huge questions that remain about what will come next.

Some of those questions leave us very uneasy.

Many of us have concerns about what the Arab Spring will mean for Israel in the future. The validity of these fears was borne out when the Israeli embassy in Cairo was attacked recently and the ambassador forced to flee.

There is a tremendous amount that is still unknown about what will come of the changes in Egypt and elsewhere, and whether the few peace treaties Israel has with its neighbors will be endangered.

We also know from history that many revolutions haven't succeeded in bringing real liberation and democracy as new oppressive regimes have filled the vacuum of power.

But we should not confuse our valid concerns about what the future holds with disdain for the restoration of freedom and basic dignity that has taken place.

We should not wish for the good old days of Mubarak or any of the other dictators that have fallen or will soon. Fearing the change is not going to help us. What is going to help us is to figure out the best ways to respond to the new reality and help shape a better future.

In Israel, it also remains to be seen what the full impact of the protests will be. In this case they aren't seeking to tear down a government but to make it more responsive to the needs of its citizens.

The protesters succeeded in bringing a range of issues into the national discourse that had been neglected for years.

In response, Prime Minister Netanyahu appointed a special committee headed by Professor Manual Trajtemberg, which met with representatives of the protesters, civil society organizations, and with various sectors of the public.

The committee just last week presented its thick report with recommendations to the governments socio-economic committee, and we await to see what the extent of the political change will be.

But equally significant to political change that may come, is the change that has taken place in the hearts and mind of the average Israeli, and it this change that I believe we can all learn from here on Yom Kippur.

In Daphne Leef's words, **"A discourse on life has been created. It's the most important awakening there has been here. We are not here just to survive, we are here in order to live....we want to live in society as a society – not as a collection of lonely individuals who each sit in front of one box, the TV, and once every four years put a slip in another box – the polling box."**

"This summer we learned that all of us have a place. That tomorrow will be what we make of it...after this summer we know that it's okay to dream.

More than that. We understand that we must dream! To dream is to be."

We may not agree with the demands or aims or approaches of all of these protests.

But what we can all take inspiration from is that people who felt helpless have had a transformation. They have realized that they count, and will not be resigned to the world being as it is. This is the transformation that each of us is called to have on Yom Kippur.

We're called upon to dream again, to dream of what our lives could be and how the world could be, to stand up to the forces in our inner lives and in the world around us that deny the dignity inherent in every human being.

At the heart of the high holidays stands the idea of *teshuva* - a belief in the possibility of real change, whether it be in our personal lives, the life of our community, nation, or world.

The roots of protest in our tradition go back to our prophets, who were always the ones to step outside the normal power structure and call for justice and compassion when corruption was present.

In our haftarah this morning, Isaiah cries out to us, "don't just give lip service to the idea of *teshuva*. Don't just say prayers outwardly but remain inwardly complacent about what is wrong in your life or in the world." *Unlearn* your helplessness. *Relearn* empowerment.

As you look at your personal life, what are the things that hold you down in a fundamental way that you haven't had the courage or hope to consider trying to change?

What in your personal life makes you feel helpless, but seems inevitable?

And as you look at our country or the world, what weighs on your heart and makes you feel powerless?

What action might allow you to find your voice?

Where might you find comradarie with others who feel similarly, and how might you create a new discourse of hope with them?

What protesters in the streets of Tel Aviv and around the world have come to realize is that the future of our world doesn't belong to only people in political office, or people in positions of great power.

The future belongs to and depends on all of us, and we must claim it.

They have come to realize that one person, plus one person, plus one person, plus one person, can indeed change the world.

I will leave us with the words of our prophet Isaiah, which we read earlier:

“If you remove from your midst the yoke of oppression, the finger of scorn and the tongue of malice, if you put yourself out for the hungry and relieve the wretched, then shall your light shine in the darkness, and your gloom shall be as noontide. And the Lord will guide you continually. God will refresh you in dry places, renewing your strength. And you shall be like a watered garden, like a never failing spring. You shall rebuild ancient ruins, restoring old foundations....I will set you safely upon the heights of the earth, and I will let you enjoy the heritage of Jacob your father. This is the promise of the Lord.”

Ken yehi ratzon, may it be so. May all of Israel and the whole world be sealed for a year of good.

Amen.