

This is one of the first of my lasts. My last Kol Nidre sermon as your rabbi.

When Moses spoke his final words to the Israelites, he already knew this was the last of his lasts. The rabbis imagined this moment in *Midrash P'tirat Moshe*, a depiction of his emotion and struggle in facing the limits of his life and leadership. It's normal to second-guess whether to accept limitations on what you can do for your nation. But Moses was also afraid a time would come when people would yearn for a king—someone powerful, glamorous, commanding. He'd previously warned them of such a yearning, stating that if they'd determine to accept a king, the King must know our Torah and abide by its principles. If you glorify a leader as monarch, they'd better have earned such glory through demonstrations of fairness, judiciousness, restraint and ethical virtues.

In our Yom Kippur morning Torah reading, Moses insists that their inheritance is not a ruler, but rules. "Choose life," he says—life over death, blessing over curse. And if ever they forgot, he instructed them to set up boulders on Mount Ebal, coat them with plaster, and inscribe Torah's teachings in plain words. Emblazon your noblest virtues, he said. Make them permanent and prominent. Do not forget who you are.

Kol Nidre similarly demands we remember who we are. Yom Kippur strips us bare. It is raw, unsettling, and clarifying. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught about *pachad*—the trembling fear one feels as Yom Kippur approaches. It is not paralyzing fear, but one that pierces excuses and forces honesty. He recalled: "What really changed my life, and shaped my character, were the few hours before Yom Kippur. Great fear and trembling, great *pachad*." To Heschel, the hours of Kol Nidre were "decisive moments" when "you are standing before the Holy One."

I, too, feel such *pachad*. Not fear weakness, but as readiness. The moment that shreds me on this holiday is not at its beginning. It occurs at the end, when the last Tekiah G'dolah is blasted late tomorrow afternoon. No doubt, by this time in the High Holy Days we know the shofar is not meant as sweet background music. Medieval commentator Maimonides wrote the shofar was meant to pierce, rouse, and shake us from indifference and turn us toward compassion. That is hard work. Think about how many of us have witnessed rage and provocation, and regretted staying silent when we should have spoken? But silence in the face of cruelty enters harsher terrain. At such times, silence feels like complicity. Yet the T'kiah G'dolah demands of us: resist. Be a human shofar. Remember who you are and for what you stand.

Let me tell you about a human shofar, one whom I first learned about three weeks ago. I was in Athens outside the Metropolis Cathedral where there is a statue of Archbishop Damaskinos. During the Nazi occupation, when Jews were being targeted for hate and deported most leaders stayed silent. Damaskinos did not. When my son, my wife and I were standing before his statue, we learned that in the face of authoritarian Nazi rulers, he declared: “The holy religion of Christianity does not recognize superior or inferior races or religions. Before God, there is only one category: free people and those who are not free.”

He then ordered priests to issue false baptismal certificates to save Jews—not to convert or manipulate them. Rather he saved thousands of our people this way, by aligning his courageous words with his defiant actions. When the SS commander threatened the Archbishop at gunpoint, Damaskinos replied: “According to our tradition, clergy are not shot.” To overrule me, “you will have to hang me in accordance with our tradition.” That is not just conscience. That is resistance. He pierced the silence when anything other than silence or acquiescence was scarce.

Judaism has always taught resistance. In every generation we are taught to see ourselves as escaping oppression. In Hebrew, we have many words for resistance:

- Lehitnaged—to oppose, as Damaskinos opposed the Nazis.
- Lehit’afek—to restrain our impulses, as we do during these Ten Days of Awe. But in this respect, lehit’afek meant resisting acts of vengeance in response to dire threats to people’s lives.
- La’amod bifnei—to stand firm under pressure, enduring beyond bullets and threats, showing one’s enemies that their cause is larger than defeating a man.

We know what this looks like from universal examples that go far beyond the borders of Judaism. Rosa Parks refusing to move and allow segregation on buses to degrade her is a powerful example. So is Senator John McCain, first withstanding torture as a prisoner of war in Vietnam and later pushing back against political pressure to abandon health care for millions of people. I think of Malala Yousafzai defying the Taliban for girls’ education, and she is just one of many young leaders of resistance to admire.

Tonight, who is really on my mind is Daniel Pearl, the American Jewish journalist murdered in 2002. His final words to his Al-Qaeda captors: “I am Jewish. My father’s Jewish. My mother’s Jewish. I’m Jewish.” He resisted their cruelty not with a weapon, but with his own moral clarity—defiance his killers could not erase. I was privileged to

meet his parents, Ruth and Judah Pearl, who shared with me how Daniel's identity nourished him: proud to be Jewish, proud to be American, proud to be connected to Israel. As far as I'm concerned, he was a human shofar. He was saying: my Judaism will outlive and outmaneuver your insidious hatred and terror. My Judaism will stand up to bring compassion and hope to all in need.

If you've been watching the protests occurring fairly regularly in the modern State of Israel, you'll see the same tone expressed by thousands of people in the streets of Israeli cities and in hostage square. They are crying out that their faith demands as one of its highest obligations the redemption of captives. They are saying: of course we want Hamas to not be in power. But they are also looking to have faith in the clarity of Israel's war strategy. They have every right to want the most humane choices to be made to end suffering, hunger, squalor and a growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza. And our children have every right to be impressed by seeing Israeli resistance. They may not realize that Israel is the only place in the Middle East that allows such resistance. But they have every right to hear and see these protests and identify with it as very Jewish.

I've been working with teens for forty years. The ones I teach and meet today in our community, few of them know of Daniel Pearl. Not one of them knows Archbishop Damaskinos. But they do know Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. They do know Tarana Burke, founder of the #MeToo movement. They do know Volodomir Zelensky, standing with the Ukrainian people to resist the encroachment of an authoritarian Putin in Russia. The kids I meet as a rabbi today want a future more free of brutality. As your rabbi, I'm here to tell you, Judaism demands that we not shut them down. Rather we should join them in resistance to a growing unsafe culture that makes excuses for brutality and sides with strongmen rather than strong moral values.

The Talmud teaches us 613 morally valued commandments. Theologian and survivor Emil Fackenheim added a 614th commandment: do not give Hitler a posthumous victory by abandoning your Judaism. Tonight, I suggest a 615th: when cruelty reigns, when people turn to kings instead of conscience, when anything but silence & acquiescence is cause for suspicion leading to arrest, resist! Lehitnaged, Lehit'afek, La'amod bifnei.

The truth is that Daniel Pearl didn't begin and end his comments by stating his Jewish lineage. He continued. He said: I'm Jewish. I'm from Encino, California...And I come from, on my father's side our family is Zionist. My father's Jewish, my mother's Jewish, I'm Jewish. My family follows Judaism. We've made visits to Israel. We have loved ones in B'nei Brak." When I had some time alone with them, Daniel's parents told me that his last words were not ones of despair, they were a call to resistance. He was proclaiming his identity, his hope, and his connection to Israel. He was saying to his captors: kill a

person, but you will not kill his faith or the people that will survive him. The more I learned after his death about Daniel's life, the more I realize he could have been a friend of mine at Jewish summer camp. Like me, his Judaism was built not precisely on religion and ritual, but on community, peoplehood, song, hope and Israel.

I want that to be part of what we know in this new congregation. At Mishkan Or I want us to hear in each year's final Tekiah G'dolah, a soaring sound meant for us personally. Let it proclaim: I am Jewish! I am part of a Jewish family! I am part of a community determined to make its own destiny. I am part of a people who resist cruelty and oppression. Truly I wish the same for every pulpit I've ever le. The college campuses and student pulpits, previous congregations in Maryland and Virginia, in each of the history-making communities I've served in Cleveland, I hope we realize that:

- Tekiah — the world needs our moral clarity, our ability and willingness as Jews to name hatred and systems of injustice and...
- Shevarim —when we witness brokenness, we take it personally. We know what it is to feel broken and embittered and nevertheless...
- Teruah — There is urgency. We live in an age when it has never been more critical to resist what is immoral and wrong from do what is right and just.

Look around. Look around. See the blessings of being alive. We can be students of history and novices to Judaism. But let us all be drawn to the examples of extraordinary human beings. Resisters such as Archbishop Damaskinos and Daniel Pearl, Rosa Parks, Tarana Burke and Malala Yousefzai. When we resist, what we know to be cruel, our words will echo those of Congressman John Lewis, Senator John McCain, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Ukrainian leader Volodimir Zelensky, and Nelson Mandela, who taught that freedom is not just throwing shackles off ourselves, it is living in a way that respects and defends the freedom of others.

This is not a popular cause. Fear (*pachad*) will tempt us to run and hide. They'll say this is partisan and I'll say what I believe: that the idea that Judaism at its core is not about fighting authoritarianism or infringements on freedoms and oppression of human beings is a lie. On this evening of Kol Nidre, whatever fearful names we are called, pachad just comes with the territory. But it should not stop us from making the year to come the one when we resisted the instinct to abide by cruelty, and instead the year we stood up for compassion for all human beings. May silence, fear and complicity be no more, and

may our resistance do the talking for us. Then we'll do what Judaism is based on: transforming the world as it is to the world that has yet to be.

Keyn Y'hi ratzon. Let's do this. With God's help, let's do this. Amen.