

THE SIN OF SILENCE

Some of you may recall that quite a few years ago now, we had a spate of anti-Semitic and anti-Black leafleting in the Rivertowns. Pamphlets espousing white supremacy and other bigotry were left on residents' lawns or doorsteps in the middle of the night. The police had a pretty good idea of who was responsible, but there was little they could actually do, because speech, even hate speech is protected by the First Amendment. So I asked my colleagues in the Clergy Association that we place an ad in the local paper, indicating that people of all faiths were disgusted by the content of the leaflets, and with the cowardly way these views were being voiced.

All of the ministers agreed that what was happening was terrible, but there was some ambivalence about what kind of response would be best. One of my colleagues wondered if it might be better to simply ignore this kind of aberrant behavior, and thought that by running an ad we might actually be encouraging these people by giving them publicity and making them feel important. I replied that I was not concerned how the ad made the perpetrators feel; I wanted the rest of the community to know that the Rivertowns clergy were united, and that this kind of anti-social behavior would not pass without a response. And I used the phrase which I learned from Elie Wiesel, that sunlight is the best disinfectant, and that silence in the face of bigotry is always a mistake. In the end we did run the ad, and the community response was positive. I like to believe that it strengthened some in their own resolve to speak out.

I thought about that entire episode for the first time in a long time, when we heard of what had been happening for many years at Penn State, of Jerry Sandusky and his abuse of children. It was shocking. But it seemed that even more than the crime itself, we were horrified to learn of the silence of so many people who knew what was happening while it was happening, and decided to keep silent. And of those who, having shared the information with a higher-up, felt they had fulfilled their responsibility.

In retrospect, it should not have been surprising that the news quickly focused less on what Sandusky had done and more on what everyone else didn't do. Other than revealing details of his actions, there was not much more to say about Sandusky himself; the crime and the criminal were

universally condemned. But the questions of how he could have done it for so long, of who knew what, when – these were the questions that bothered us, that angered us.

As we discovered more and more about the number of people who suspected and the high-level positions of those who knew, our anger grew correspondingly. There were innumerable op-eds and commentaries expressing outrage at the silence. And the outrage was appropriate, because the silence caused incalculable harm to a number of little boys. All it would have taken was one voice – and it would have been stopped. The need to speak out in that situation seems so obvious and so unavoidable. It might not have been easy, there might have been consequences, but it was clearly required. The silence was outrageous.

The question is, would you or I have done any better?

We tell ourselves we would. We like to believe we would. We hope we would. But human experience tells us that, in the event, we too are likely to be silent in the face of evil. There are thousands of examples from the Holocaust alone of very good people who let very bad things happen without comment. They were silent. They were silent out of fear, or out of indifference, or out of the belief that someone else would surely speak up. Or, they were silent as the result of the very human ability to not see what is really happening, or to convince ourselves that what is happening is not nearly as bad as it seems, so that we can continue with our normal lives. And this silence does not just happen when confronted with earth-shaking events like the Holocaust or serious crimes like Jerry Sandusky's. It applies to everyday life as well. There are many day-to-day examples of people hearing or seeing offensive behavior and doing nothing to intervene. Hearing a racist joke or a sexist remark from a co-worker and letting it pass uncommented upon.

Now some people object to lumping all of these examples together, from the Holocaust to a passing remark at the water-cooler. They say, "When it's something small, it's natural to let it slide. But if it were something serious, then I'd get involved." We like to believe that. But think about this way: if we're unwilling to speak up when the stakes are small and the possible repercussions for us are correspondingly small, if we're unwilling to do it when it's easy, what makes us think that we'll be able to do it when it's

hard, when the stakes are high and the possible impact on our lives is equally large?

Psychologists have done lots studies on this, and they have shown repeatedly that for the overwhelming majority of us, what we say and believe we will do in any of these situations and what we actually do are utterly different. It is a weakness of human nature.

Commenting on this topic, David Brooks wrote: “In centuries past, people built moral systems that acknowledged this weakness. These systems emphasized our sinfulness. They reminded people of the evil within themselves. Life was seen as an inner struggle against the selfish forces inside. These vocabularies made people aware of how their weaknesses manifested themselves and how to exercise discipline over them. These systems gave people categories with which to process savagery and scripts to follow when they confronted it. They helped people make moral judgments and hold people responsible amidst our frailties.

“But we’re not Puritans anymore. We live in a society oriented around our inner wonderfulness. So when something atrocious happens, people look for some artificial, outside force that must have caused it — like the culture of college football, or some other favorite bogey. People look for laws that can be changed so it never happens again.”

I think he’s right – to a point. I would qualify his argument by saying that we have to acknowledge that our personal behavior is often influenced by the society around us. But I also agree that we can’t use that as a blanket excuse, and that we should begin not by looking outward but by looking inward. I think the first question we should ask ourselves when confronted in our own lives with any incident – as serious as Penn State or as seemingly minor as a racist comment – is, “What will I say?” Because like it or not, silence is acquiescence. If you see or hear something but don’t say anything, you have joined the conspiracy of silence. Inaction can be as sinful as wrong action.

And not only that. Silence and inaction can also be dangerous for the world. They lead the perpetrators to believe that they can act with impunity, or worse, that you agree with them. Edmund Burke said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

And of course, taken to the extreme, silence and inaction can ultimately be dangerous for us as well. You are probably familiar with the famous quote from Pastor Martin Niemoller. After initially supporting the Nationalism of the Nazis, he turned against them and was sent to a concentration camp for the duration of the war. Speaking about his experiences later, he said:

First they came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Social Democrats and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Social Democrat. Then they came for the Jews and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak.

The sin of silence. When I first started thinking about this sermon, I was very focused on the idea that it is always wrong to be silent. And then came the London Olympics, and the 40th anniversary of the murder of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics.

There was a suggestion made, as it has been before every Olympics since 1972, that the International Olympic Committee include a moment of silence in the Opening Ceremonies as a gesture of respect and memory. It's a very simple idea, and it reminded me that of course there are times when silence is appropriate, even helpful. There are aphorisms about it: Silence is golden. If you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything. If you keep your mouth shut, you won't be able to put your foot in it. We always offer an opportunity during services for silent meditation. And many times the most appropriate way to show respect for the dead is with a simple moment of silence.

This was what Israel asked – what Jews and non-Jews all over the world asked; that the International Olympic Committee include a moment of silence in the Opening Ceremonies, as a gesture of respect, and as an acknowledgement, still never made, that those athletes were killed not because they were Olympians, but because they were Jews. The attack in Munich was not a random act of violence aimed at the Olympics and what it stands for. It was a targeted assault on Jews. It remains incomprehensible to me that the IOC refuses to allow even a moment of silence, as if

acknowledging the tragedy could somehow tarnish the Games even more, or as if ignoring the massacre would make everyone forget.

And that was when it finally occurred to me that the **moment** of silence was not the issue. The problem was the **ongoing** silence of the International Olympic Committee, their refusal to address or acknowledge this painful moment in Olympic history – in Jewish history. Their silence is acquiescence, if not with the act of terror itself, then with the politicization of the Olympics, with the appeasement of Israel's enemies who threatened to make trouble if the moment of silence happened, with the ongoing attempts to label Israel a pariah state and to isolate her among the family of nations.

But the thing about a conspiracy of silence is that it only takes one voice to break it. It only takes one public act to call attention to what is really going on. And actually this summer there was more than one voice, there were many voices condemning and protesting the IOC's craven decision – commentators, athletes, bloggers, ordinary folks. That was heartening. I wish there had been more. But of course, the moment that stands out for Jews was when the American gymnast Aly Raisman did her floor routine to Hava Nagila, won the gold medal, and dedicated it to the memory of the Munich 11. What a spectacular moment that was. You may have seen the letter of gratitude that was posted on her Facebook page by Dan Yagudin, an officer in the Israel Defense Forces. He wrote:

Dear Aly,

I want to tell you about how you became the hero of a gym full of Israeli soldiers. The same Israeli soldiers who have to deal with Iran's nuclear threat to the Jewish state. The same ones who serve two-to-three years of their lives, because we have to; because there's no one else that would do it besides us, because our neighborhood sucks, and when the leadership next door in Syria massacres their own people, there's no way we would let them lay hands on our kids, as foreign dictators have done for thousands of years.

You picked a song for your floor routine in the Olympics that every Jewish kid knows, whether their families came from the shtetls of Eastern Europe, the Asian steppes of Azerbaijan, the mountains of Morocco or the Kibbutzim of northern Israel. It's that song that drew almost everyone at the Israeli army base gym to the TV as soon as the report about you came on the news this morning. After showing your floor exercise to Hava Nagila, the

announcer told about your gold medal with unmasked pride, and of your decision to dedicate it to the Israeli athletes who were killed in the Munich Olympics in 1972.

There were some tough people at that gym, Aly. Men and Women, Battalion Commanders from Intelligence, Captains from the Navy, Lieutenants from the Armored Corps and more. You probably understand that words like 'bravery' and 'heroism' carry a lot of weight coming from them, as does a standing ovation (even from the people doing ab exercises.) There was nothing apologetic about what you did. For so long we've had to apologize for who we are: for how we dress, for our beliefs, for the way we look. It seems like the International Olympic Committee wanted to keep that tradition. Quiet, Jews. Keep your tragedy on the sidelines. Don't disturb our party.

They didn't count on an 18 year-old girl in a leotard.

There wasn't one person at the gym who didn't know what it was like to give back to our people, not one who didn't know what happened to the good people who died in 1972, not one who didn't feel personally insulted by their complete neglect in the London Olympics, the 40 year anniversary of their deaths, and not one who didn't connect with your graceful tribute in their honor.

Thank you for standing up against an injustice that was done to our people. As I was walking back to my machine at the gym, I caught one of the officers give a long salute to your image on television. I think that says it all.

Sincerely,

Dan Yagudin

Officer, Israeli Defense Force

I love feel-good stories. It's nice to feel good on Yom Kippur, to realize that even when confronted by institutional stonewalling, even on the biggest stage, there is something that an individual can do. Aly Raisman's action was inspiring, and Dan Yagudin's letter was heartwarming. And they are just two people, the ones we happened to see or hear about. In fact, despite the pessimistic tone of my words this morning, I know that there are people who speak out. There are whistleblowers who risk their livelihoods to

expose corporate malfeasance. There are people who rail against oppression or injustice. There are sparks of light and blessing in this broken world.

It is wonderful and affirming to know this on any day, but somehow it feels particularly good on the Day of Atonement, when we spend so much time focused on what is wrong. But being heartened by the fact that others have not remained silent is not enough. What of us? What will we take away from all of this? What will we learn from the silence that enabled Jerry Sandusky? And from the craven silence of the International Olympic Committee? And from the clarion call of Aly Raisman?

I ask you to consider: In this past year, when have you been silent when words were called for? What are the times when you should have spoken up but did not want to make waves? What racist joke did you ignore? What questionable practice did you overlook at work? What action by a friend or loved one caused you to think, “I should say something, but I really don’t want the hassle?” What issue did you see and think to yourself, “that’s not my problem?” And finally, will you do it differently this year?

We are a people of words. We love to talk, we love to write and we love to read. The majority of the sins listed in the *machzor*, the High Holyday prayerbook, relate to the misuse of words. Rabbis, myself included, are constantly reminding us that words have power, words can hurt, so watch your words, be careful how you speak. Perhaps we have spent too much time counseling caution in speech, and not enough time reminding us that the prophetic voice – speaking truth even when it is difficult – is also part of our tradition. So this year I ask you to consider both – because words **do** have power they can be hurtful, but they can also change the world: they can stop a child from being abused, they can open a closed or bigoted mind. This year I ask you to watch what you say, and also to watch for those moments when you don’t speak, but ought to. Silence can be golden. Silence can be a sin. Knowing the difference can change the world.