

We live in a world lacking in moral courage!**On October 15, 2018 the following headline appeared in a newspaper in Nagoya, Japan:
The Japanese Man Who Saved 6,000 Jews With His Handwriting**

The article continued with the following Samurai maxim: "Even a hunter cannot kill a bird that flies to him for refuge." This maxim inspired Chiune Sugihara, a gifted and courageous man, to save thousands of people in defiance of his government.

Sugihara showed extraordinary moral courage. At great cost to himself and his family, he dedicated countless weeks, day and night, to singlehandedly helping a people, most people turned away from. He worked in the Japanese consulate in Lithuania in 1939. He knew the Jews in German occupied Poland were desperate to get out. No country would take them. The Japanese government ordered Sugihara: "Do not give visas to Jews." He talked about that order with his wife and children. He decided, despite the inevitable damage to his career and danger for his family, he must follow his conscience and would defy his government. The visas would be signed. He wrote 24/7, issuing in a day, more than would normally be issued in a month. He granted as many visas as possible before being forced to close the consulate and leave Lithuania.

Forty-five years after his display of great moral courage, Sugihara was asked why he did it. He was a religious man and believed in a universal God of all people. "They were human beings and they needed help," he said. "I may have to disobey my government, but if I don't, I would be disobeying God."

Sugihara's values came from his religious faith and belief in God; a source of faith we may share. But moral courage can be inspired in many ways. On the bottom of my Dad's stationery, *z"l*, there was a quote by Ralph Hosea Chaplin, a virtually unknown American writer: "Mourn not the dead...But rather mourn the apathetic throng; The cowed and the meek who see the world's great anguish and its wrong; And dare not speak."¹

¹ Ralph Hosea Chaplin, American writer, artist and labor activist; from his book *Bars and Shadows*

“The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference,” wrote Elie Wiesel. We *cannot* be indifferent, now. Ours is a world that feels fundamentally not the way it should be; not what we want, not what makes us feel safe and secure and not what is morally just and ethically fair. I ask myself consistently: “What *can* we do”? What *must* we do? We *must* speak. **We must challenge America's conscience.**

It might help to recognize that, as unsettling as our situation feels, it is not unique in world history. Some of the finest speeches in the history of film feel strangely prophetic, now. There is Charlie Chaplin's monologue from “The Great Dictator”, made in October 1940: “Greed has poisoned men's souls; has barricaded the world with hate; has goose-stepped us into misery and bloodshed....We think too much and feel too little. ...brutes have risen to power...dictators free *themselves* but enslave the people! Now, let us fight to free the world! To do away with greed, with hate and intolerance!”

You may recall the “Mad as Hell” speech the character Howard Beale gave in the film, “Network” (1976): “I don't have to tell you things are bad. Everybody knows things are bad. Shopkeepers keep a gun under the counter. Punks are running wild in the street and there's nobody anywhere who seems to know what to do, and there's no end to it. We know the air is unfit to breathe and our food is unfit to eat, and we sit watching our TVs while some local newscaster tells us that today we had fifteen homicides and sixty-three violent crimes, as if that's the way it's supposed to be.”

We all *know* this is not the way it is supposed to be. We are failing ourselves and future generations on the holiness scale. With every small act of injustice, with every abuse of our natural world, we destroy harmony and with it the prospect of progress, politically, environmentally and morally. The overall tone in American politics is unhealthy and dangerous. The primary subject is “me” not ‘us’. The primary goal is not to be virtuous and morally courageous- but to win-no matter what the cost.

Rabbi Ed Feinstein describes American political life as always being a tug-a-war between hope and fear. Fear is biological and automatic. It is a natural response of our physical bodies. Fear says: “the world has shrinking possibilities-grab what you can for yourself.” It precludes our body's ability to stand up and respond to the victimization of others. Fear has been the impetus to

mind our own business. It enables us to ignore the cries of others who are victims of hatred and violence, simply because they are not aimed in our direction.

Eve Bunting's book, the Terrible Things, is an allegory of the Holocaust. She tells a story of many species of animals who lived in the clearing of the woods. They lived together contently, everyone had what she needed; Their lives were good- until the day the terrible things came and captured all creatures with feathers. Little Rabbit wondered what was wrong with feathers, but his fellow animals silenced him. "Just mind your own business, Little Rabbit. We don't want them to get mad at us." There were no more birds in the clearing, but life went on almost as before. Until the day the terrible things came back; this time for the bushy tailed creatures. The squirrels were captured and taken away. Little rabbit didn't understand what all the creatures had done to deserve being taken away by the terrible things. "Probably nothing," Big Rabbit said. "But the terrible things don't need a reason." Big Rabbit insisted the remaining animals need not move. "This has always been our home", he said. "The terrible things won't come back. We are the *White* Rabbits. It couldn't happen to us." Finally, the terrible things came for all creatures that were white. The rabbits scampered around and yelled "HELP" but there was nobody left to help. Little Rabbit survived because he was small enough to hide in a pile of rocks and smart enough to stay so still the terrible things thought he was a rock. When everyone was gone, Little Rabbit crept to the middle of the clearing. "I should have tried to help the other rabbits", he said. "If only we creatures had stuck together, it could have been different." He went to another part of the woods to warn the other creatures. He hoped someone would listen.

Fear is biological. Hope, on the other hand, is a matter of the spirit. It is not automatic. It requires cultivation. But even a single individual is enough for hope to exist. That individual can be 'me' and then 'you'. And then, there will be another 'you,' and another 'you,' and it evolves into 'us.' Hope can be restored. Possibility can be envisioned. America's moral conscience *can* be challenged, by 'us'.

In his book Witness, Lessons from Elie Wiesel's classroom, Ariel Burger wrote with his own voice and through the teaching of Elie Wiesel, a teacher, a holocaust survivor and a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. Until his death in 2016, Wiesel challenged the moral conscience of the world. "Despite his experience of total humiliation and of the utter contempt for humanity shown

in Hitler's death camps...."² [Wiesel] emerged, in the words of his son, Elisha, as a "gentle and devout man who was always interested in others, and whose quiet voice moved them to better themselves."³

One day a student asked Wiesel: "What about those whose beliefs are not just different, but fundamentally *opposed* to ours?" "What about truly evil, [inhumane] people?" Wiesel responded "To excuse the perpetrator of evil as "not human" is to excuse him too easily...[that] person is as human as we are but has chosen to *betray his humanity*...[he] inhabits a different moral universe"⁴. Most often, we encounter simply the "other", whose values and beliefs differ from ours. We can engage with him. Be curious rather than judgmental; be open to others and listen. We may disagree, but we must try to understand.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, who served as Britain's Chief Rabbi,⁵ teaches, morality is Judaism's oldest and most powerful resource for turning disconnected 'I's' into a collective 'we'. "It's the alchemy that turns selfish genes into selfless people, egoists into altruists and self-interested striving into empathy, sympathy and compassion for others."⁶ [close quote] God does not cloth the naked, feed the hungry or protect the vulnerable. We do! As Jews and human beings that is our privilege and our responsibility.

Recently, I have participated in early morning services at my rabbinical school. That's a place where possibility, faith and trust abound. Last week I had a conversation with a friend who is a psychologist. He's about my age; smart and wise. He reminded me that the 1960s were a time of upheaval in virtually every part of American life. President Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were all killed within 5 months of each other. Under the banner of humanitarianism, we got enmeshed in a brutal war in Vietnam. Discrimination against people of color, constraints and violence against women were rampant. We felt suffocated by a sense that things could fall apart at any time. Using terminology from that time, my friend said psychologists are talking now, about the advantage of a "psychedelic perspective". Looking through a kaleidoscope, he said, in which colors and shapes move and change, rather than a

² Norwegian Nobel committee, 1986

³ Elisha Wiesel on the death of his father, Elie Wiesel

⁴ Ibid pp. 532-53

⁵ British Orthodox rabbi, philosopher, theologian, author and politician; who served as the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 to 2013.

⁶ Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks-"Morality matters more than ever in a world divided by fear and faithlessness"

telescope, through which we see one thing up close, in detail, but nothing that surrounds it. With a psychedelic perspective we can see “possibility”-not only what is but also what can be.

We’ve spoken about hope, a feeling of anticipation and desire for a certain good thing to happen. It can result in a positive outlook. I like both the idea and the actuality of “hope”. It has served me well. But “possibility” feels even better to me, now. “Possibility” is something that *can* be done or achieved, or that can exist. Possibility feels more active than hope. Including “possibility” in our perspective feels constructive, positive and even exciting.

My friends, when I started writing this sermon, its title was “We live in a world gone mad!” I was angry, frustrated and sacred. I knew I was not the only one and I wanted to create a conversation that would minimize all our pain. Three iterations ago I changed the title to “We live in a world lacking in moral courage.” I like that better. It is more descriptive, less angry and easier to hear than my first title. We *do* live in a world that lacks moral courage, at best. But this is not the first time during our lives. Even those of us who would not describe ourselves as people of faith, are neither passive nor indifferent. The possibilities of “us” are impressive. I know and love who and what we are, now. When we stick together, we can contribute to shaping, what will be. We will come together for nourishment, love and energy and to realize possibility.

These high holy days present an opportunity for each of us and our community to reach inward and turn outward. We can identify and share the source of our Divine inner light. The power of “we” rests within and among us. We *can* be better people. We can create deeper, more empathic relationships. We can respond to assaults on our moral values. We can nourish our hearts and souls and protect them from the hatred and cruelty that surrounds us. We are upstanders, not bystanders. By sharing hope, looking forward toward possibility with determination, we *can* challenge the moral conscience that seems to permeate our world. As Jews and as Americans, our sacred responsibility is to “advance liberty and justice for all.” To approach that task as “me” is overwhelming. But as “us”, who knows what the possibilities are?

Amen, may it be so.