



“NO MAGIC WALKING STICK”

There was a man, who lived alone, set a ways off from his small city. He rarely interacted with others. This man liked to tell himself stories of the Prophet Elijah. He filled his dreams and his days with the hope to meet Elijah someday. One late, dreamy evening, there was a knock on his door. No one ever knocked on his door. The man opened his door to discover a simply though memorably dressed traveler, holding a walking stick. “My journey turned out to be longer than I thought and night has fallen. Can I spend the night in your house?” the traveler asked. Nervously, the man welcomed the stranger into his home. They shared a meal and talked for a long time. As they got even sleepier, the traveler said: “Your hospitality has been so wonderful. I would like to leave you my walking stick as a gift of appreciation.” The man refused the gift, but the traveler insisted and said that maybe the stick would be returned someday. When the man awoke the next morning, he discovered that the traveler was gone. The walking stick was leaning on the table.

Inspired by the traveler’s journey and his newly acquired walking stick, the man went out and walked into the city. He seemed to walk with a new spring in his step, with this new walking stick. After a while, he saw a blind woman stuck at the corner, upset that her own cane had broken and she was scared to cross the street. The man felt sorry for her, but thought: “Someone else will help that lady.” Suddenly, his walking stick dragged him in the direction of the woman. The man took the woman’s hand and his walking stick dragged him across the street, gently leading the woman in need. After she thanked him, he continued on his way. Throughout the day, several similar instances occurred. A situation unfolded. The man was tempted to ignore it and the stick dragged him into action. In one case, the stick even thrust him in the midst of a robbery and he chased the criminal away.

He returned home, exhausted, confused, and content with his life. Later that week, there was a knock at the door. Nervously, the man opened his door to discover a finely dressed guest. The clearly well-off visitor explained: “It was my parents that you rescued in that robbery. We are quite wealthy and I am here to reward you with a trip to the Land of Israel.” The man humbly wanted to refuse, but he had always dreamed of travelling to Israel, Elijah’s land. Upon arriving in Israel, the man walked off the boat with his walking stick. He wandered the land, eventually coming to Mt. Carmel, Elijah’s territory. As the man fell asleep, that first traveler seemed to appear to him, reclaiming the walking stick. (“Elijah’s Stick”, Capturing the Moon, Rabbi Edward Feinstein, Berhman House, New Jersey, 2008, adapted)

Ah, if only it was so easy in life. If only others would pay our travels, even to Israel. Though our younger people should know that BHC has scholarships to help defray trips to Israel and 18 to 26 year-olds can go on Birthright as well.

Actually, Yom Kippur arrives each year to remind us that this story’s magic isn’t how our world works. There is no wondrous stick that will draw our attention to just the right issue with perfect timing. Additionally, the real ills of the world are never solved in one speedy interaction. The story is too simple. Yom Kippur

teaches us that our own self-reflection and repentance is an ongoing task. All the more so, larger challenges take long-term attention and action. We know this to be true, and yet it is human, maybe especially American, to dream of quick fixes.

This week, America is opening its door to discover a ‘simply though memorably dressed traveler.’ Pope Francis is spending Yom Kippur down the road in Washington, D.C. An interviewer asked me what I thought of the Pope. I replied that I have been impressed with Francis’ chutzpah. He speaks his mind and his fresh outlook is accompanied by deep values and intentions. I am moved by his *menschlichkeit*. However, I must also admit that I don’t always agree with the Pope. Actually, it would be a bit surprising if a Reform Rabbi and the Catholic Pontiff agreed on everything. I appreciate his speaking out about the refugee and migrant situation in Europe, as I did on Rosh Hashanah. As an aside, I will note that I am glad that the United States government appears to be taking positive steps to assist in the situation. We could and should do more. I find his actions regarding Israel more dissonant; however I must say that I don’t find them surprising. Attention to issues, be it the Pope’s or ours, is not dictated by a magic stick. Our attention should not be directed only by the current crisis or political battles either.

Among Pope Francis’ most intriguing initiatives is his offering of absolution during this coming year to women who have had abortions. Here I don’t agree with him, but that wouldn’t even surprise the Pope. Judaism doesn’t speak of absolution and our faith doesn’t have an absolute position on reproductive rights. My attention to reproductive rights this evening is not dictated by the current budget impasse in Washington. It is far deeper and more long-standing. Despite the diversity of views, many Americans assume that religious people are opposed to access to abortion. The Central Conference of American Rabbis, Union for Reform Judaism, and Women of Reform Judaism have a long history of resolutions and actions in support of women’s reproductive rights. Many of us have marched and lobbied to protect overall access and rights on this important set of issues. I am aware that some Reform Jews, some of you I assume, and even most traditional Jews disagree with these stances.

However, I believe that Rabbi Mark Washofsky, the head of the CCAR’s Halakha-Jewish Law Committee, succinctly explains the position held by most Jews who support access:

“Abortion is... both a morally serious and a morally justifiable procedure. It is morally serious in that it should not be undertaken without good and sufficient cause...We insist...that the determination of the rightness of an abortion can be made only by the woman herself, in the context of her own life and religious commitment. The government, police, courts, lawyers, and politicians should not deny to women the right to choose for themselves a morally justifiable course of action.” (Jewish Living, UAHC Press, New York, 2001, p.244-5, author’s italics)

Women’s reproductive rights involve more than just access to

safe, legal abortions, but it most certainly includes these rights. Over the years, we have seen a consistent and intentional effort to erode women's rights on these issues. Maryland, despite our Catholic heritage, is not one of the hot spots of the reproductive rights dispute. The Guttmacher Institute, founded actually by the son of BHC's late 19th Century Rabbi Adolph Guttmacher, draws our attention on such threats to states like Louisiana, Texas, North Dakota, and Ohio. In the last decade alone, there have been limits placed on such rights in over 20 states and legislative efforts in over 38 states.

I am impressed by the consistent and intentional work of those who have brought forth these pro-life efforts. They have understood that there is no magic to moving attention and policy. Rather, such efforts take long-term work and continued attention even after individual victories have been achieved. They continue to be impressive. The efforts of those in favor of such rights have been less consistent. Maybe it is because of the laws where we might live or the legal access that some possess. However, I suggest that we should pay more attention to the struggle across the whole country. Judith Rosenbaum, the incoming director of the Jewish Women's Archive, explains the historic and current outlooks as follows:

"...Jews have understood that reproductive rights form a central nexus of economic power, medical power, and women's self-determination....The "choice" discourse has further obscured the key... issues at the core of reproductive rights, lending the issue an air of frivolity rather than stressing the foundational role of these rights in any discussion of poverty, health, and self-determination."

("The Brownsville Legacy," Righteous Indignation, edited by Rabbi Or Rose, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, and Margie Klein, Jewish Lights, Vermont, 2008, pages 121-2)

Are these women's health issues tied up with political discourse? Without a doubt. However, health screening, birth control, and access to safe, legal abortions are part of women's lives and the political debate is secondary. Are there religious, political, and medical issues intertwined regarding reproductive rights? Without a doubt.

Let the words of the prophetic Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel ring out in response:

"We affirm the principle of separation of church and state. We reject the separation of religion and the human situation."
("No Religion is an Island", Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, edited by Susannah Heschel, Noonday Press, New York, 1996, page 298)

We cannot step away from the discussion about such critical issues; neither can we assume that these issues were already settled. We may complain that struggles take a long time, but our tradition acknowledges that important tasks are time-consuming. The next prayer we will recite is the Aleinu. Our new prayerbook has included beloved words from the old Union Prayer Book, "May the Time not be distant..." (Mishkan HaNefesh Yom Kippur, page 119) When we read these words, let us not be lulled in a sense of false complacency. Our prayerbook is not suggesting that a more perfect time is right around the corner. Rather, this vision of the future is intended to motivate us towards the work that will bring solutions to society's challenges and comfort to the world's ills.

In Jewish lore, Elijah is the harbinger of the messianic age

described in the Aleinu prayer. However, Elijah is not our tradition's normative role model. He is the magical wandering prophet of concern and of hope. We are merely human; finding our way to issues that matter and figuring out how to confront such issues over time. We possess no magic walking sticks and no quick fixes. The range of important challenges stretches from Iran to Refugees to women's rights, and does not end there. Jewish tradition, as illuminated by Reform Jewish teachings, focuses our commitment to social change. We are reminded to protect the rights of others, as surely as we should protect our own. May this New Year focus our attention on such ongoing challenges. May it inspire us to continue working on critical issues. One day, we may be blessed with the rewards of success, but let's not assume that day has yet arrived. Ken Yehi Ratzon.