

LET YOUR VOICE RESOUND

This summer I participated in a rally for immigration rights here in Kenosha, an event that was designed, primarily, to energize the local Hispanic community. It was an effort put together by CUSH, the local faith-based community organizing group of which Beth Hillel is a member. Watching the process unfold was very instructive: From the first tentative meeting with one or two representatives of the Hispanic community to the 600-person strong rally just a couple of weeks later. The experience taught me a great deal about what people will do for a cause that truly affects their lives. In spite of the very real risk of speaking out, especially for the undocumented among them, hundreds of average, every day people, showed up to make their voices heard. They shouted, in a deafening roar, the favorite saying of Cesar Chavez: "Si se puede," "Yes, we can!" It was awe-inspiring to witness this event.

The message of this morning's Haftarah from the prophet Isaiah speaks to this kind of effort. Isaiah declares in the name of God: K'ra v'garon, al tachsoch, kashofar hareim kolecha. "Cry aloud, do not hold back, let your voice resound like a Shofar." (Isaiah 58:1) Isaiah goes on to enumerate the kinds of causes for which we ought to raise this full-throated cry: Unlock the shackles of injustice; undo the fetters of bondage; let the oppressed go free; break every cruel chain; share your bread with the hungry; bring the homeless poor into your home; clothe the naked. (Isaiah 58)

And Isaiah speaks, too, of the challenge of such undertakings. He knows that nay-sayers and outspoken critics will block the way of those who cry out. From Isaiah's perspective, this is no reason to back off. On the contrary, it should only spur us on more. He speaks of having to remove "the menacing hand, the malicious word," and about shining a light in the midst of darkness. (Isaiah 58) This is our charge as well as we go forth from this day of fasting.

Over the past months, in response to efforts to bring about change on a variety of issues, we have witnessed over and over the malicious, the menacing and the dark forces. The level of negativity and incivility, the efforts to scare people away from speaking out for change has become emboldened. We've seen a ratcheting up of the discourse, hyperbole and fear-tactics to a level that we have not seen in decades.

On the health care issue, there have been the shouting mobs at health care forums, the posters showing Obama as Hitler, the outrageous accusation of death panels, and a Congressman shouting "You lie!" at the President of the United States in the chambers of the House of Representatives.

The immigration issue has also brought out virulent negativity and highly-charged criticism. Media coverage of the local immigration rally was followed with a blog of intense anti-immigrant comments. In fact, the anti-immigrant sentiment is so strong here in Kenosha that it caused one of our State Senators, who was previously a champion of this cause, to back off of his leadership on the issue.

We have seen this negativity and fear-mongering on the topic of the homeless shelter that the Shalom Center proposes to build as well. Finally, after years of waiting, the Capital Campaign to build the shelter was kicked off in July. Immediately, a local radio talk show host began to rail about this subject on a regular basis, arguing that a shiny, new permanent shelter will just bring more "scummy" people to Kenosha from Illinois "looking for a handout." Never mind that the facility is only designed to accommodate the same number of people who currently use the INNS program that is hosted by different congregations each night. But, reason and facts rarely get in the way of those who wish to douse good causes with negativity. (By the way, if you are interested in learning more about the homeless shelter and combating the negativity around it, you have the opportunity to come to an afternoon Yom Kippur session today at 1:30 offered by Shelter Campaign Committee member, Dick Selsberg.)

I imagine that most of us have rarely been inside an effort to effect change when the opposition is truly threatening. Politicians and public figures sign up for that when they run for office. And those who were on college campuses in the late 1960s and early 70s may have some stories to tell in this regard. But most of us have not experienced this. When we unexpectedly find ourselves in the middle of it, it can be very scary. When I read the comments in the Kenosha News blog after my picture appeared in the paper speaking at the immigration rally, I have to say I felt a bit unnerved. Momentarily, I even questioned how public I should be about my involvement. But then I recalled another time in American history when speaking out was really dangerous, and I took strength from it.

I have some CDs that I picked up at the Freedom Center in Cincinnati a couple of years ago. These are recordings of live song sessions during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. The sessions were held in churches, on college campuses, and in various public squares. Every time I listen to these song sessions, I get goose bumps. Here were people who were literally putting their lives on the line every day, risking arrest, police brutality, KKK and vigilante attacks, lynchings and murder because they were working toward the cause of integration and civil rights.

One session in particular was during the period of the Selma, Alabama voter registration drive of October, 1963. Already that summer, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham had been bombed and four little girls killed. Selma was a majority black city of which only 2.1 percent were registered to vote. On October 8, which had been declared "Freedom Day," hundreds of non-violent activists stood around the county courthouse, attempting to register blacks to vote. The Sheriff and armed deputies, billy clubs in hand, demanded that the crowd disperse. When they refused, officers waded in and began to swing their clubs. Many people, young and old, were carried away to jail, blood streaming down their faces. As they were dragged away, they called for the registration to continue.

It was in this environment that the song session of which I am about to play a brief excerpt took place. In spite of the risks they were taking, those involved in the struggle sang this old spiritual, applying it to the events of the day, naming Governor Wallace, Sheriff Jim Clark and others who stood in their way in the lyrics.

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Recording of "This Little Light of Mine," (Selma, AL, October 1963, Betty Mae Fikes, songleader) in Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966

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Just as Isaiah exhorts us, "al tachsoch," these activists-- and average people who joined them--did not hold back. Instead, they came together and very publicly sang out, "v'garon," open-throated, insistently and repeatedly, for the just and the right and the good. In the darkness, they sang: "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine...."

Isaiah wants us to cry out, full-throated, not only when the opposition is threatening, but also when important issues are silenced by the powers that be. For example, at the beginning of this month, the United Nations' top peace keeping official in Sudan announced that the war was over in Darfur and that the situation there could no longer be called genocide. Even President Obama's envoy to Sudan agreed with this assessment. These pronouncements have served to push the situation off of the pages of the newspaper.

But the humanitarian organizations that attempt to work in the area (and many of them have been banned in recent months) and those who live there disagree vehemently that the situation is resolved. They say that the reduction in killing in the villages is because there are no more people left living on their land to kill. Four hundred thousand are dead and 2.7 million are refugees. Violence against civilians continues unabated in the refugee camps in Chad where 250,000 of the former villagers now live.

There is only one response to the UN chief's statement, "We can no longer speak of this issue. It is over," and that is: Si se puede, Yes we can. Yes we must speak of it and keep speaking of it until the people of the Darfur region are safe once again. In this morning's Torah portion, we are exhorted to choose life. Let us answer this demand by choosing life not only for ourselves but for those in this far away land who face daily persecution, starvation and, still, the threat of murder. As you leave this morning's service, members of our Social Action Committee will be handing out pamphlets from Jewish World Watch with specific ideas about how to sound your voice like a shofar for the people of Darfur.

Whether speaking out for local, national, or international issues, whether our voices need to be heard to counteract vicious negativity or because of attempts to impose silence, we can accomplish much more when we come together with others to work for a cause. Being part of a group can go a long way to help us rise above fear and intimidation to make the case. The success of the Civil Rights movement is clear proof of that. There is strength in numbers and there is power in community.

More than that, in working together we encourage each other's faith. In a group, it is easier to believe that we really can heal the world's ills. Working as a community may, in fact, be our only hope in rising above the hot-headed critics, the blogs, the shouting, the intimidation and the silence to bring about change. That is why Beth Hillel is a part of the CUSH community in Kenosha. Perhaps after hearing Isaiah's message, more of our temple members will engage in the work of CUSH.

Isaiah's insistence that we cry aloud without holding back is far more effective when many are raising their voices at once. Si se puede is a hopeful sentiment when one person shouts it, but it is a force to be reckoned with when it is chanted in unison by 600. It is a force that, once unleashed, can never be silenced. In this New Year, may our voices resound like a tekiyah gedolah, a long sustained blast for justice, and, in our coming together, may we speak unafraid.