

This past June, as the story about family separation and detention at the border was breaking, I emailed some of my mentors, distraught. I wrote on a Thursday afternoon: "If this isn't the moral crisis that causes all of us to strike, to refuse to carry on our normal tasks, then what is? And how? I am not a lawyer. My congresspeople, governor and state attorney general are all already on the right side of this issue. The nearest ICE facility is a two hour drive away. Should I cancel all my appointments for a day to join a vigil there? How do I think about this well? . . . I think my congregants all feel similarly stymied. We are all outraged; but what are we supposed to do?"

What does Shabbat mean in a moment like this?

By Shabbat, I had received responses from several mentors and friends, including Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, who spoke here three years ago at my installation. He wrote, among other things: "Shabbat is not only a rest, it is, also, supposed to be a taste of the world-to-come (Joanna's third way). In these moments of anguish and despair, it is a window outside. It is to remind us of the cycle of the seasons, that we are part of a larger universe. Shabbat is embedded in the 7 day, 7 year, 49/50 year cycle, that is our cycle of justice and of seasons. We can't keep on keeping on without those moments of Shabbat, giving us a glimpse of what is possible.

"That was all on the intellectual plane, in our hearts, we are all in pain and we all feel inadequate. . . We need to be able to share our pain. . . admit our feelings of inadequacy and doubt. As Joanna Macy teaches, our pain is a measure of our humanity. In creating a community where people can share their pain, you are making a difference.

“Yes, we are probably entering into a time when we need to do things out of the norm. They need to be carefully thought through and strategic, not impulsive or individualistic. You are well connected with very thoughtful and committed folk, you will know when that might become necessary.”

I think of those words this Shabbat for two reasons. One is because our political reality is still horrifying. We need to continue to support each other to feel the pain. We also need to be thoughtful and strategic, not impulsive, reactive, or individualistic. And that brings me to the other reason I think of these words specifically today, during Sukkot.

Our Torah reading tomorrow is set in the moment in Exodus that I spoke about during Kol Nidre - Moshe is on Mt. Sinai, receiving the second set of tablets, and the 13 attributes of mercy, including *chesed* - *lovingkindness*, and *emet* - truth are revealed to him, the sacred words that bring forgiveness.

How powerful are words? Throughout the holiday of Sukkot, I and Jews all over the world have been waving lulav and etrog and reciting *hoshanot*, which are prayers that repeat the word “Hoshana”, literally “Save us”, over and over again. Traditionally, these prayers are referring to agricultural salvation; they’re said right as the rainy season is supposed to start, imploring Hashem to bring the rains.

But there are also contemporary *hoshanot*, poems praying for salvation from current ills, civic and environmental. New *hoshanot* are always being written, including by progressive Jews who wouldn’t call ourselves superstitious, who don’t necessarily believe that the more we pray the more likely God is to respond. And yet we understand somehow that words have power, so we write these *hoshanot*.

We will be reading some of those at our *Hoshanah Rabbah* observance on Sunday morning. *Hoshana Rabbah* is officially the last day of Sukkot, and it means, “great big *Hoshanah*,” “great big ‘save us’.” We observe it with a special service- all of the Talmud Torah students will come in to participate in part of it - in which we parade around the room waving willow branches, which we eventually beat on the ground, simulating the rain.

Willow is a water-loving tree, which is historically probably the reason it was used for this purpose. But it is also one of the 4 plants that are part of the lulav and etrog, and many have noted that the leaves are shaped like lips. Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter, who wrote the famous Chasidic work *the Sefas Emes*, the “language of truth”, writes, “The two lips seem to represent two forms of praise: one that can be uttered by mouth in speech, and the other in silence. Of these the rabbis taught: Silence is more valuable than words.

. . .”This may be the difference between the willow when attached to the the lulav, where it refers to speaking words of Torah, combining with the other three species, each of which stands for some great principle, and the willow alone, representing the power of silence and the value of guarding one’s tongue.”

It’s an odd idea - that the noise of the willow beaten on the ground could represent the importance of silence. In this moment when so many voices that have been silenced are finally being heard, it feels risky to speak in praise of silence. But I think that the Sefas Emes is referring to a very particular kind of silence - the careful hush of listening, of relationship.

The days of chag next week celebrate that hush. Shmini Atzeret, literally, the 8th day of stopping, is the chag following Sukkot. It is famously difficult to

understand, but one contemporary rabbi, Asher Lopatin, teaches: “God says to the Jewish people, ‘Stay an extra day. We’ve had this long progression from Rosh Hashanah and we’ve spent so much time together and now we’re going to part for a long time until the next pilgrimage holiday. So tarry with me an extra day — a day whose only purpose is relationship.’”

Instead of going from Yom Kippur right back into our grind, we’ve had Sukkot - a time to experience, as Rabbi Alan Lew of blessed memory wrote, “the joy of being flush with life, the joy of having nothing between our skin and the wind and the starlight, nothing between us and the world.” And from that place, instead of jumping right back to work, we are invited to the end chag - Shmini Atzeret. The quiet silence of fulfillment. The pause before speech.

It’s easy to complain, especially at this time of year, that there are too many chaggim. But I think in this culture, when nothing is treated as a sacred, we need more of a sense of sacred time. We need those tastes of the world as it should be, the holy silences, the pauses that make our speech more intelligent.

I don’t know how we are going to get through this historical moment. I don’t know, ultimately, how to hold the pain of the world, the pain of our country, any better than you. But I do know that we have a few more days of sitting in the Sukkah, of feeling the breeze and seeing the stars, and experiencing holy vulnerability. And I believe that there is wisdom to be found in that pause, in the silence between the rustlings of the dried willow branch, and in the words of my teacher, who taught that we cannot be impulsive, reactive or individualistic, but that we have each other - and we have our own knowing, if we only make the silent spaces to listen for it.