

“Like Fire in My Bones”: Why Quietism Fails in the ICE Age

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

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Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik—also known simply as “the Rav”—is my favorite Jewish philosopher. In his magnum opus, the Rav describes a personality he calls “halakhic man,” his ideal image of what a faithful Jew should be.

One feature of halakhic man, says the Rav, is that “He does not understand the ins and outs of politics, nor is he cunning...in worldly matters.”¹ This is because he is concerned with loftier things: ultimate truth, precision in mitzvot, “implement[ing] the Torah without any compromises or concessions...”²

As a former Capitol Hill staffer who saw the rabbinate as a higher calling, this view resonated with me. I bristled at some rabbis’ tendency to make mundane public policy issues into matters of religious concern. I agreed with the Rav that religion and politics were discrete spheres of life—the *kodesh* and the *chol* (the sacred and the mundane)—and, for the most part, had little to do with each other.

What I’ve discovered, though, is that while my quietism felt right to me in ordinary times, it doesn’t right now. This is because politics in the age of Trump has substantively transgressed the boundary into the realm of the morally and existentially urgent.

Rabbi Robert I. Kahn once described the rabbi as a “*ben navi*,” an heir to the prophetic tradition, called to preach both “personal righteousness and...social justice.” Our role, he said, is to “make relevant the truths of Judaism to the marketplace, and to the courthouse, and to the ballot box. The word of God will be like a ‘fire in our bones’³ at times,” he said, “and we will prophesy, whether popular or no.”⁴

This is such a time for me. As I watch the extreme cruelty and barbarism that our government is inflicting on human beings on American streets, I cannot help but feel the teachings of Judaism, the morality my parents instilled in me, and yes, the word of God burning like fire in my bones.

Our parashah this week is about the plagues that God brought on Egypt because Pharaoh wouldn’t let the Israelites go. People often ask: What about the *innocent* Egyptians? Is it right that they had to suffer for Pharaoh’s crimes?

Our sages felt the same discomfort. That’s why we dip our pinky in the wine at the Seder when we read the Ten Plagues and place the drops on our plate: because we shouldn’t take joy in the suffering of others, even our enemies.

At the same time, we should ask, as our minyan participants did this week: Were the ordinary Egyptians really so innocent?

Were ordinary Germans who just went about their lives when the Nazis were beating Jews in the streets, *innocent*? Were ordinary white southerners who just minded their own business when the police were siccing dogs on civil-rights protestors, *innocent*?

From his Birmingham jail cell in 1963, Martin Luther King wrote: “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.”⁵

What about those of us who just keep our heads down and go about our business while masked ICE officers snatch a father in front of his five-year-old son, and spray tear gas into the eyes of protestors at close range, and threaten ordinary citizens that they should “learn” from the tragic killing of Renee Good? Those of us who ignore the abject lack of empathy, compassion, and decency?

My rabbinic colleague in Maine told me ICE has named its manhunt there “Operation Catch of the Day.” Because nothing says upstanding character like making puns about human suffering.

If we keep silent in the face of this immorality, are we innocent?

Quietism just won’t meet the Jewish moral imperative in a time like this.

Our president, Jordana, told me the other day that somebody in one of the Great Neck WhatsApp chat groups mocked our congregation for helping the family of Tomas Orellana, who is still in ICE detention.

But as my friend Rabbi Jill Maderer said, we should wear that mockery as a badge of pride. We’re doing the right thing—and we need to do more. I want to ask you to help me figure out what that should be, and make it happen.

We Reform Jews are zealous about justice and human dignity. That’s a big part of TBE’s legacy. Rav Soloveitchik, who was Modern Orthodox, insisted on this, too.

While halakhic man might be *politically* naïve, he is *morally* sophisticated. Indeed, the Rav declares that “Halakhic man cannot be cowed by anyone. ... He takes up his stand in the midst of the concrete world, his feet planted firmly on the ground of reality, and he...publicly protests against the oppression of the helpless, the defrauding of the poor, [and] the plight of the orphan. ...

"The actualization of the ideals of justice and righteousness," the Rav emphasizes, "is the pillar of fire which halakhic man follows..."⁶

I ask you to please work with me in carrying out this sacred mission.