

Bearing True Witness

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Different moments in Jewish life demand different rabbinic voices.

Sometimes my role is pastoral—to be comforting and gentle. Sometimes my role is pluralistic—to hold disagreement with humility. And sometimes my role is prophetic—to speak boldly and with moral clarity.

I know: You're not used to me speaking in a prophetic voice. Honestly, I'm not used to it either.

Pluralism is my comfort zone. I just published a book all about it.

But pluralism alone can't bear the weight of this moment in American life, when democracy, human dignity, and pluralism itself are at risk. My rabbinic duty requires me to speak with moral clarity—not because it's comfortable, but because it's right.

This week's parashah, Yitro, brings us to the Ten Commandments.

The ninth one on the list is "You shall not bear false witness." On the surface, this means "don't lie under oath."

But it also points to something much deeper.

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God declares: "You are My witnesses."¹ Meaning: Our role as Jews is to testify to God's moral truth when others around us can't or don't want to see it.

In the legal realm, bearing false witness means lying about the facts. In the moral realm, bearing false witness means lying about God.

We bear false witness when—either by our endorsement or by our silence—we say to the world that God is indifferent to cruelty and to the plight of the vulnerable.

When state power is used to terrorize immigrant families, even if they are here illegally; when American citizens exercising their right to protest are shot in the face, and the officers who did it are told they have "absolute immunity"; when ICE raids are carried out with public humiliation and perverse delight; when people are terrified that their lives could be shattered just by leaving the house; when the president of the United States builds an unaccountable police force, dehumanizes people with his rhetoric, and teaches his supporters to confuse loyalty with truth—we have moved well beyond political disagreement.

We are in a moral crisis—and it's forcing a religious question we cannot avoid: What will we bear witness to?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that the prophet is not someone who predicts the future, but rather someone who sees the present and refuses to accept it. Prophetic speech does not aim to soothe; it aims to disturb the moral conscience when the conscience has fallen asleep. It calls us to account when our silence has become a lie.

As the author Derek Penwell puts it, "The part nobody says out loud is this: 'If I admit what I saw, I might have to change.'"

We tend to resist the prophetic critique not because the truth is unclear, but because it is costly.

Because once we truly see, neutrality is no longer neutral, silence is no longer innocent, and complacency becomes complicity.

I know that some would prefer a gentler, more pluralistic voice from the bimah right now. But there are moments, such as this one, when the most Jewish thing I can do as your rabbi is to say plainly: What's happening in our country right now is wrong.

Part of what drew me to Great Neck is its extraordinary diversity. I thought a quiet, pluralistic disposition—which I have carried for 18 years—would be welcome and needed here.

And yet, here I am—feeling in this moment what Jeremiah described as a raging fire in my bones—unable to hold it in.

Why me—one of the only Reform rabbis who ever identified proudly as a Republican, and endured ridicule and contempt from colleagues for it?

Life unfolds in mysterious ways, but I'm convinced of this much: It is not accidental that I am standing here, at this moment in history, compelled to speak this way.

Not because I'm a prophet, God forbid, but because sometimes the prophetic voice passes through ordinary people who find themselves unable to stay silent.

Maybe I'm here in Great Neck right now because our community needs to hear this voice. Maybe that's why you're here, too.

"You shall not bear false witness" is a command to every one of us to speak and live moral truth—not only where it's easy, but, even more importantly, where it's hard.

That's why I want to invite you to join our community organizing effort to resist ICE brutality and support immigrant families who are living in fear. Our next meeting is this Sunday, February 8, at 11:30 a.m. I am asking you to come not as a political gesture, but as a religious one.

I'm asking you to refute the claim that being religious means minding your own business.

I'm asking you to resist the lie that silence is neutrality.

I'm asking that we never let it be said that Temple Beth-El of Great Neck bore false witness against the God who hears the cry of the vulnerable.

I close with a poem from our prayer book:

Disturb us, Adonai, ruffle us from our complacency...

Disturb us, O God, and vex us;

let not Your Shabbat be a day of torpor and slumber;

let it be a time to be stirred and spurred to action.

Barukh atah, Adonai, m'kadeish ha-Shabbat

Blessed are You, Adonai, who sanctifies this holy day.²

¹ Isaiah 43:10.

² Mishkan T'filah, 173