



12 Adar 5777 / March 10, 2017

Dear Shir Tikvah:

Given the state of the world these days, I've been thinking a great deal about the role of the rabbi.

As a rabbi, I am called to sit with those who are in pain and who are suffering. Sometimes, this pastoral work takes place in seemingly "usual places": counseling sessions in my office, at a hospital bedside, under the chuppah or before the open ark. Sometimes, it takes place graveside and in a shivah home. It is a remarkably holy privilege to be present with you in these moments; indeed, it is one of the reasons I became a rabbi.

Sometimes, this pastoral work takes place in other places, places we don't think of right away as being particularly "pastoral." But this is, in fact, pastoral work. Addressing people's pain and suffering can occur in organizing meetings, advocating at the legislature, raising a rabbinic voice at protests, and engaging in civil disobedience. The task of a rabbi is to teach Torah, to be present with those who are suffering, and to do what is humanly possible to change the circumstances that cause those in our beloved community to suffer.

There is a powerful story told in our tradition: One day, two people are standing at a river when they see a child floating in the river, struggling to make their way to shore. The first person jumps into the water and rescues the child.

No sooner do they have that precious child calm and breathing do they see yet another child in the water, gasping for air. The second person jumps into the river and again, rescues the child.

But a few moments later, a third child comes down the river and again, they jump into the water and rescue them. This time, one of the people starts to leave and begins walking up stream.

"Where are you going?" asked the companion.

"I'm going to see who keeps throwing children into the river to tell them to stop!"

I've come to learn a powerful truth during my 17 years in the rabbinate, one that has surprised me a great deal: Justice work is pastoral work. It is joining with those who are suffering, to amplify their voices, to live the words the Psalmist cried many centuries ago—those who sow in tears will one day, reap in joy. It is being present with those whose souls ache, no matter the cause, and to strive to be like the Divine, Mighty Source of Love and Compassion. Being a rabbi today means not only jumping into rivers of joy and rivers of agonizing pain with people as we reach for the shore together; being a rabbi also means heading up the river to discern the cause of the pain and to seek ways to ameliorate it.

Justice work is pastoral work. It is one of the most surprising—and holy—lessons I've learned as a rabbi.

I wish you a Shabbat Shalom & a Freylich (Joyous) Purim,

Michael