



RABBI GERRY SEROTTA

“Anyone who had the capability to effectively protest the sinful conduct of the members of his household and did not protest, he himself is apprehended for the sins of the members of his household and punished. If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the people of his town, and he fails to do so, he is apprehended for the sins of the people of his town. If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the whole world, and he fails to do so, he is apprehended for the sins of the whole world.” (TALMUD SHABBAT 54B)

In the early days of Rabbis for Human Rights-North America, from our organizing

efforts begun in 1999 through incorporation in early 2002, our primary focus was supporting the courageous efforts of our colleagues in Shomrei Mishpat (Rabbis for Human Rights) in Israel.

But after the attacks on our country on 9/11 and the subsequent “war on terror,” a series of human rights abuses began to emerge that demanded that RHR-NA turn our attention to issues under the authority

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LOOKING BACK ON THE 20 YEARS SINCE 9/11, WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT HUMAN RIGHTS LESSON YOU DRAW FROM THE AMERICAN RESPONSE TO THOSE ATTACKS?



BECKY JAYE

“(11) Because God has disarmed and humbled me, they have thrown off restraint in my presence. (12) Mere striplings assail me at my right hand; they put me to flight; they build their roads for my ruin.

(13) They tear up my path; they promote my fall, although it does them no good. (14) They come as through a wide breach; they roll in like raging billows. (15) Terror tumbles upon me; it sweeps away my honor like the wind; my dignity vanishes like a cloud.” (JOB 30:11-15)

On September 11, 2001, I was with my seventh-grade gym class in a Coney Island public school.

It is an understatement to say that the world-entire changed that day. Witnessing my friends suddenly become orphans was a stark reminder of the ephemeral nature of life, making me feel small in the vast universe.

This feeling of smallness reverberates strikingly in the Book of Job. As readers watching Job’s mounting tragedy, we also face our own powerlessness.

Not two months after 9/11, the Patriot Act was passed, limiting individual Americans’ right to privacy in an endeavor to fight the “War on Terror.” Among its goals, the Patriot Act allowed law enforcement to widen its surveillance to monitor suspected terrorism.

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RABBI RACHEL KAHN-TROSTER

“God has told you, O person, what is good, and what the ETERNAL requires of you: Only to do justice and to love chesed, and to walk humbly with your God.” (MICAH 6:8)

About ten years ago, when T’ruah started fighting to end solitary confinement, I asked a friend who was an attorney at the ACLU Prison Project why it mattered that rabbis were speaking out to end this form of torture; it seemed like the ACLU’s strategy of lawsuits and legislation would be much more effective. She replied, “We have a mercy deficit as a country, and rabbis can talk about mercy in a way that other activists cannot.” She was right: Those who speak from a moral voice can amplify the cries of those affected by abuses until they become a rallying cry for change, a demand that as a society we be motivated by *chesed* on an systemic level.

The rallying cry of the Jewish social movement, which emerged with such strength after 9/11—*Tzedek, tdedek tirdof*—occurs in Deuteronomy to elevate the significance of an impartial judiciary. But it is also a commitment to law over revenge, order over chaos. Since 9/11, the United States seems like it has mistaken one for the other. Or rather, we exact vengeance under the guise of law and justice, but in so doing achieve neither. We tortured. We substituted drone strikes for trials. We went to war to stop terror,

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of the US government within and beyond our borders. Parallel to the work of our sister human rights organization, PCATI (Public Committee Against Torture in Israel,) which worked with RHR to oppose torture in Israel, RHR-NA led an effort to establish the National Religious Campaign Against Torture.



Hundreds of rabbis and cantors signed our strong statement against the use of torture. An RHR-NA delegation then met with

Senator John McCain in late 2005 to publicly support his efforts to outlaw the use of torture. His strong statement to us felt to me like a version of this text from Shabbat 54b: "This is not who we are as a country." Interestingly, on our way out of his office, McCain actually chided us, saying, if you really are rabbis for human rights then you should be working on the horrendous conditions for migrants who are seeking to enter this country.

As the Talmudic text admonishes us, we have a responsibility to recognize abuse of our fellow human being at every level, from family to community to nation to world. This is, in fact, the Torah's preamble to loving your fellow human being as yourself: "You must not withhold your reproof or you will bear responsibility." (Leviticus 19: 17-18) It is, in other words, the basic mission we fulfill collectively as T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights.

Rabbi Serotta was the founding board chair of T'ruah, then called Rabbis for Human Rights-North America. He served in that capacity until 2008 and continued as a board member until 2013.

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As a twelve-year old, I remember the distinct feeling of safety, knowing that there was at least some way—any way—that would prevent another attack.

Looking at the last twenty years, I cannot help but feel how Job's cry has an eerie resonance today. As a summer intern for the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, I have learned of the precise intensity with which government law enforcement agencies such as ICE disproportionately surveill communities of color. Our history is littered with examples of how systems to surveill communities of color—like the FBI and Dr. King—have been "roads that have led to their ruin," humbling whole communities by stripping them of their constitutional protections. 9/11 just allowed these age-old systems to assume new forms, and our growing reliance on technology has only accelerated the trend.

As Job continues his lament with "terror," I realize that perhaps the most important human rights lesson is how the terror we feel impacts us. In my most formative years, I didn't speak up against xenophobic policies because I was prioritizing my own safety. In the comfort of my complacency and my submission to fear, I not only aided in the diminishing of others' human dignity, but I damaged my own dignity as well.

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and in so doing, decimated the countries that we believed were at fault. We killed Osama bin Laden rather than adjudicating his crimes in a court of law. Each of these and so many other steps were exercises in might, acts that made us *feel* safe but did not in fact make us safer, in the process destroying the safety and rights of so many. It takes real humility to understand that what might *feel* like the right solution is actually unjust and ineffective.

That's why I love this verse. How do we ensure that we are governed by a commitment to justice grounded in chesed? Micah orbits those commitments around a sacred path of humility. Hubris says we move forward without reckoning with the consequences of our actions. Humility requires truth and reconciliation.

Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster is the Executive Vice President of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility. From 2007-2021, she worked at T'ruah, most recently as Deputy Director, and directed "Honor the Image of God: A Jewish Campaign to Stop US-Sponsored Torture."



Hosea 14:9 states, *"One who is wise will consider these words, One who is prudent will take note of them. For the paths of the ETERNAL are smooth; the righteous can walk on them, while sinners stumble on them."*

Too long have we traveled roads that ensure only the racially and economically privileged reach the most desired destinations. Most times, we have been unaware that we even do so. On this anniversary, I wish to return to the day before, to begin again, to smooth those roads that may honor the righteousness of each human able to travel them.

Becky Jaye will be ordained a rabbi by HUC-JIR in New York in 2022. Her internship at S.T.O.P. is part of her participation in T'ruah's Rabbinical/Cantorial Student Summer Fellowship in Human Rights Leadership.