

**Rabbi Hannah L. Goldstein**  
**“Day of Imagination”**  
**Yom Kippur 5780**

Author David Foster Wallace delivered the commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005. He opened with a story about two young fish. They were swimming around when they met an older fish, swimming the other way. The older fish greeted them, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” The two young fish kept swimming. They swam for a while in silence, and then one of the young fish tentatively looked over at the other and asked, “What is water?”<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to be oblivious to the waters in which we swim- steeped as we are in the world as it is. And, it is so difficult for us to see the truth, for something to break through and reveal that which surrounds us.

The Biblical prophets are our Jewish role models for truth telling- for illuminating the almost invisible substance in which we are immersed. The prophets served as God’s messengers, they challenged the status quo, they threatened divine punishment, and they foresaw a better world, one of Divine loyalty, of equity, and of justice. The prophetic job description was best captured when God explained to Jeremiah:

See, I have set you this day over nations and kingdoms,  
To pluck up and to break down,  
To destroy and to overthrow,  
To build and to plant.<sup>2</sup>

The Prophets had the unenviable job of critiquing Kings and elites, the leaders of the Temple and average members of society. The Prophets called attention to corruption, oppression and hypocrisy. They stepped outside normative culture and shared a snapshot of the world as it was. The prophets has a hard and painful job and they did not suffer their task lightly. “Cursed be the day on which I was born!” cried Jeremiah.<sup>3</sup> Said Amos, “They hate him who reproves them in the gate, They abhor him who speaks the truth.”<sup>4</sup> Jonah, whose story we will read this afternoon, tried to run from God as soon as he received his prophetic orders.

The task of the Prophet is so difficult, because people are highly adaptable. We adjust to our norms and our circumstances. We find ways to insulate ourselves from the suffering of others, to inure ourselves to the hypocrisy of our society. Margaret Atwood wrote about this in her chilling dystopia, *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The protagonist recalls the way things were before the rise of a totalitarian regime, “We lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time. Whatever is going on is as usual...We lived as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, “This is Water,” Kenyon College Commencement Speech, May 21, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 1:10

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 20:14

<sup>4</sup> Amos 5:10

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

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Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg says that for a successful marriage, “it helps sometimes to be a little deaf.”<sup>6</sup> And, to be a well adjusted person in the world, you need to do a little bit of ignoring. But this doesn’t mean that we should be entirely blind to pain and suffering. Surely, here at Temple Sinai, where we dedicate so much of our time and resources to *tikkun olam*, to repairing the world, we do not turn away from the world’s pain. We see the cruelty in our public discourse, the rise of hate, the harmful policies impacting people’s lives everyday- Yes, we certainly are aware of the imperfections in our society. And at the same time, we have learned to coexist with the world as it is because we are deeply, almost invisibly, a part of the central assumptions that animate our culture.

In 1978, Walter Brueggemann, a protestant theologian and scholar of the Hebrew Bible wrote the book, “The Prophetic Imagination.”<sup>7</sup> It remains remarkably relevant in our time. He writes about the world of the Biblical Prophets, and their capacity to tell the truth and to see the world as it is. He wrote of the modern church, that it is “so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act.” In essence, the church, and I would argue all of us as well, are inside of a nearly inescapable way of being. Our culture and our norms and communal values are an invisible water in which we all swim.

Bruggeman suggests that we swim in the water of consumerism- which he sees not just as an economic orientation, but as urgency around consumption, as self-centeredness, as ceaseless competition, as a communal amnesia to the values that are meant to guide us. He argues that just as in the time of the prophets, we need people and moral communities that help us to see the truths that we have ignored.

So how do you disturb the numbing waters that surround us? The prophets were poets, they told their stories in a different way. They did not just prescribe the problem, or warn of punishment- these bards painted vivid pictures with words. They unsettled. They haunted. With their poems, they pierced apathy.

This summer, the New York Times magazine section published the 1619 project, commemorating the 400th anniversary of American slavery.<sup>8</sup> It was originally pitched last January by magazine writer Nikole Hannah-Jones. Perhaps you saw that issue, or listened to the accompanying podcasts. With the help of 18 scholars and historians, it revisits American history through the lens of slavery. It tells an alternative story that challenges the founding myth of America, that all men are created equal. Beyond the articles and the podcast, the project produced art and poetry, curriculum for children and other resources. When the issue went to print, it promptly sold out. A free distribution of the issue at New York Times headquarters in New York saw lines around the block. Each week, I’ve listened to the new episode of the

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<sup>6</sup> Learned this quotation from Cara Baldari, in advance of Cara’s wedding this past summer.

<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1978.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>

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podcast while running. I have found myself running faster at times, so enraged by the stories of systemic oppression.

Like the prophets of old, the project incited anger. In peering into this part of our national story, we are called to confront truths that many would rather not see. It exposes the fault line upon which our country was founded, a land of the free that tolerated slavery. It illuminates how this central tension has haunted us for 400 years. But this art, this poetry, the sounds and the sights of an alternative American story shows us who we are- calls our attention to the almost invisible water in which we swim.

Bruggeman warned that the prophets were not just focused on “issues,” worrying themselves with what he calls “social action.” He was critical of people of faith who cherry pick a prophetic text to support the social action agenda of the day. The Prophets divinely inspired vision was grander than that. They were radical in the scope of the change they advocated, not suggesting social bandaids, rather open heart surgery to address what really ails us.

Bruggemann uses Moses, the first prophet, as an example. When Moses went to Pharaoh, Moses was not advocating for small social changes- he was proposing a fundamentally different society. Not only to overturn the existing economic structure of Egypt, but to subvert the very source of Pharaoh’s political hegemony, with the words and power of Adonai- the Israelite God. This wasn’t a food drive, or a protest- this was deep and transformative work. I say this not to denigrate food drives or protests. Hungry people need to eat...now. When a policy does harm, we must register our disapproval. But the prophets went deeper, they sought to overturn the systems that allowed injustice to thrive.

On June 30th at 6pm, this past summer, 200 Jewish activists shut down the ICE Elizabeth Detention Center. The group, which would become “Never Again Action,” continues to work to close the immigrant detention centers on the border, and to defund ICE and CBP.<sup>9</sup> The protest in New Jersey set off a summer long string of actions, across the country, which were generally led and organized by young Jews. They used the language and imagery of “Never Again” to galvanize the Jewish community to stand up against our country’s immigration policies.

These young people stepped into the void left by legacy Jewish organizations who were cautious in their approach to polarizing political issues. These actions were more than protests, but a calling of the Jewish community to account. They were vocal in using the language of our Jewish history to stand up for others. Their signs read “Never Again is Now,” challenging the Jewish community to live up to the message that was baked into the challah they were served at Sunday school snack. And yet, this was roundly criticized in many parts of the Jewish world. We are squamish about comparisons to our own traumatic history. We do not want to tell a story in which the Jewish community is complacent while others suffer at the hands of our government.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.neveragainaction.com/>

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The protests around the country forced us to confront our place as Jews in a system that allows family separation, that puts people in cages, that allows private prisons to profit off of human suffering. These young Jews walked in the footsteps of the modern Jewish prophets before them, like those Rabbi Roos spoke about in his sermon on Rosh Hashanah. Our founding rabbis, Balfour Brickner and Eugene Lippman who went down to St. Augustine to answer Dr. Martin Luther King’s call. They wrote, “In the battle against racism, we have participated here in only a skirmish. But the total effect of all such demonstrations has created a Revolution; and the conscience of the nation has been aroused as never before.”<sup>10</sup> They aroused the national conscience, they showed that what many thought was living “as usual,” was in fact wrong, and required change.

The prophets were not only divine diaganstitions, they were imbued with imagination. They described a world different than the one in which we currently inhabit. We live in a “wearied culture”- and it’s quite hard for us to imagine real change. But the prophets greatest strength was their capacity to imagine the world as it might be. Bruggeman wrote, “The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined.”

Today is a day of imagination- when we are released from the constraints of the world as it is. We have the gift of time to imagine how we might truly turn, not in small, insignificant ways, but in grand, magnificent, life-altering ways. What would our country look like if we told the truth, if we saw what needed to change, and how might it look if we brought that change about?

In a moment we will turn to the haftarah. We will read the words of the Prophet Isaiah, one of the most stirring texts in our Yom Kippur observance. But I want to leave you with these verses from earlier in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is describing the Exodus from Egypt, reminding the people of a God who made “a road through the sea” and then destroyed the Egyptian chariots that were pursuing them. But then Isaiah says this:

Do not recall what happened of old,  
Or ponder what happened of yore!  
I am about to do something new;  
Even now it shall come to pass,  
Suddenly you shall perceive it.<sup>11</sup>

So after reminding the people about the Exodus, Isaiah says, “you ain’t seen nothing yet.” Forget about what happened before, there are miracles yet to come. I don’t believe in a God who can solve the world’s problems in the blink of an eye- but I believe in a world where miracles are possible. Where walls come down, and people rise up, where hearts and minds change, and in

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<sup>10</sup> "Why We Went: A Joint Letter from the Rabbis Arrested in St. Augustine," June 19, 1964.

<sup>11</sup> Isaiah 43:18-19

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places of strife, peace becomes possible. I believe in our power to see the truth in our society and to cleanse the waters in which we swim.