

On January 13, 2021, Liz Cheney, a Republican representative from Wyoming, voted to impeach President Donald J. Trump for high crimes and misdemeanors, relating to his role in the January 6 insurrection. This decision, and her continuing role on the January 6 committee, led to her defeat in the Republican primary by 37 percentage points.

If President John F. Kennedy were alive today to write an appendix to his 1955 book, *Profiles in Courage*, he would include Ms. Cheney. Ms. Cheney is a living example of Kennedy's definition of political courage: placing national interest above party and constituents. History need not prove one's position correct. When one risks electoral defeat by going against one's congregants and defies one's party, all in service of the national interest, rather than private or political gain, that is courageous.

The Israeli version of *Profiles in Courage* discusses prime ministers, not United States senators.¹ Let's consider Menachem Begin. Back in the 1940s, Begin was the commander of the Irgun, the Jewish underground that used violence to convince the British to leave Palestine. The Irgun carried out the bombing of the King David Hotel. Known for extreme positions and being uncompromising, in 1952, as a member of the Knesset, he vehemently opposed accepting reparations from West Germany, saying, "How will we look when our disgrace is exposed, as we turn to our father's murderers to receive money for their spilled blood?"² By the way, those reparations saved Israel's nascent economy.

When it came to the land of Israel, Begin actually opposed the 1947 UN Partition Plan, the very plan that created the State of Israel. He subscribed to Greater Israel, "the ideology of recovering the entire land of [biblical] Israel,"³ from the Jordan to the Mediterranean. After the 1967 war, he referred to the West Bank not as occupied, but liberated, territory. And, in 1973 Menachem Begin founded the Likud, initially a bloc of right-wing parties.

When peace negotiations with Egypt began in 1977, Begin, now prime minister, did not believe that the Sinai was part of biblical Israel. Nevertheless he knew that uprooting settlements in the Sinai would set a precedent for Israeli settlements in the West Bank. As negotiations advanced, many members of his own Likud party opposed yielding the Sinai. Negotiations also required concessions regarding

¹ Makovsky, David., Ross, Dennis. *Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny*. United States: PublicAffairs, 2019.

² *Ibid*, 99.

³ *Ibid*, 128. In Hebrew, *Eretz Yisrael Hashlema*.

Palestinian rights in the West Bank. He was attacked on the right for “[H]aving offered concessions to the Arabs before they had fully recognized Jewish national rights.”⁴ Furthermore, influential leaders of the settler movement and his own party, “believed that in agreeing to Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank, Begin had betrayed his foundational principles and sealed the fate of the territory as a Palestinian land,”⁵ forsaking Israeli sovereignty over Jewish biblical inheritance.

Despite his own history and his party, Menachem Begin had the courage to pursue and achieve the historic peace with Egypt at Camp David in 1978. When he led the opposition, he could be an ideologue. He didn’t have to govern. However, as prime minister he “declared that every ideology has to be subordinate to a focus on the national interest. ... At Camp David, he weighed the risks, and he decided [that] Israel’s national interests mattered more than the attitudes or the anger of those in his own political camp.”⁶ On September 28, 1978, the Israeli Knesset approved the Camp David Accords by a more than 4-to-1 margin. Menachem Begin led with courage.

Shirat Hayam was founded on courage. Many years ago, visionary leaders at Temple Israel and Temple Beth El began to call for a merger. It would have been challenging enough just to merge the two temples and continue traditional Conservative Judaism. However, these leaders took the radical step of not merging the congregations, but creating a new entity, Shirat Hayam, founded with a bold, new vision for Jewish life, community, and practice.

Now, as we look toward our third decade, I believe that a thriving congregation requires three core components. I visualize these components as three concentric circles. In the center, and most importantly, is the self, our inner life, the place of individual spiritual fulfillment. Next is the congregation, the unique commitments we make to one another: the acts of love and kindness, the work of Shir Chesed. Last is the broader community, the work we do to improve the lives of Jews and Gentiles beyond the walls of our synagogue: the work to combat antisemitism and of Tzedek LaKol (our social justice committee). Self – congregation – broader community.

⁴ Ibid, 153.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 155.

Within this last category, support for fellow Jews is not controversial. But, to pursue social justice invites controversy. Today, I challenge us to have the courage to make justice work a robust congregational practice.

The Jewish holidays powerfully teach the value of social justice. On Yom Kippur we hear the cry of Isaiah to build a society of righteousness and dignity.

Unlock the fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of lawlessness.
Let the oppressed go free.
Share your bread with the hungry,
Take the wretched poor into your home.
When you see the naked, clothe him,
And do not ignore your own kin. (Isaiah 57:6-7)

And every Passover we tell of our own journey from slavery to freedom. Some Haggadot even include the verse “Having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt, you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger” (Exodus 23:9).

Generally, acts of *tzedakah* (charity) or *hesed* (kindness), like raising money for My Brother’s Table (the largest soup kitchen on the North Shore), are not controversial. However, the “who” and the “how” of pursuing justice can become controversial.

Inequities in the housing market are a social justice issue today and probably always have been. Consider the words of Micah, the late 8th century BCE Judean prophet.

Woe, who plot crime
And work evil on their couches.
When morning dawns, they do it,
For they have the power.
They covet fields, and seize them;
Houses, and take them away.
They defraud men of their homes,
And people of their land. (Micah 2:1-2)

Yair Hoffman elucidates Micah’s words.

[Micah's] rage is against rich estate owners and not necessarily state office holders. The picture is of extreme self-assuredness of the property owners who are gradually increasing their wealth at the expense of the weaker sections of society, mainly by exploiting the weak and dispossessing them from their lands. This is the beginning of a continuous process of social disintegration in which the gap between classes has deepened.⁷

Suppose we lived in Micah's time and heard him preach in the town square. And suppose we all agreed that poor farmers were suffering some injustice. Would we agree with Micah's analysis, holding the wealthy landowners accountable? Even if we did, would we agree on the solution? Would we pursue *tzedek*, justice, systemic change, or would we raise *tzedakah*, providing on-going food or rental assistance for the newly landless poor, but not addressing underlying issues? Would we advocate for changing the system going forward or would we as a congregation fight for compensating victims of past injustice?

In an era of political polarization and culture wars, some might feel it's foolish to strive to make justice a congregational practice. On the other hand, others may argue pragmatically that in the fight against antisemitism, we need allies. By showing up for others, they will show up for us. And still others may look at the Jewish landscape and argue that to attract the next generation we must have a robust *tikkun olam* practice. For me, it's primarily the fact that justice is a central Jewish value, and Shirat Hayam stands for multiple pathways into Jewish life. Without pursuit of justice, our spiritual core and robust care for fellow congregants comes up short.

At the same time, we must act in the best interest of the congregation, not out of personal ideologies. One of the great strengths of this congregation is the diversity of viewpoints. Pursuing justice that is both impactful and, at the same time, achieves broad congregational support, will require courage.

I believe we will find a solution. Shirat Hayam was founded on the courage to consolidate Temple Israel and Temple Beth El into a new entity. Shirat Hayam had the courage to abandon the models of its predecessors and redefine the American synagogue for the 21st century. And we can look to Israel's prime minister, Menachem Begin, who had the courage to subordinate personal ideology to the

⁷ Yair Hoffman, *Micah*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2017, 95.

interests of the whole country in pursuing peace with Egypt. May we, in our limited sphere, have the courage to build a congregation with broad support for justice work to complement our existing pillars of spiritual fulfillment and caring for others.

L'shana tova – I wish all of you a happy and healthy new year!