

**Rabbi David M. Frank, Temple Solel, Cardiff, CA Rosh Hashanah 5777**

**“Women In the Wilderness”**

If you're like me, a new word entered your vocabulary this year. And that word is, Burkini – a combination of Burka and bikini, which by the way, looks like neither.

You may remember the huge controversy that broke out in France this summer over the appearance of Muslim women wearing their modest swimwear on public beaches. First, burkinis were banned as a violation of the French nationalist spirit, and then the ban was overturned and pronounced unconstitutional.

So, the debate goes on. But, if you ask me, I think what really needs to be banned in Europe, are those unsightly men wearing tiny speedos!

Still, as foreign as this debate may sound to us, it is actually quite similar to another controversy that broke out in Williamsburg, Brooklyn this summer, where, in deference to the Chassidic Jews in the neighborhood, the public swimming pool posted women only swim hours. All of New York City erupted over the question of whether this is even constitutional. So far, the Chassidim have prevailed.

Finally, in Israel, as well, women's modesty hit the headlines this summer. In an outdoor concert at the beach near Tel Aviv, a female performer was removed from the stage, because she was dressed in a bikini top and shorts. And now, the Ministry of Culture, which funded the “Celebrate August Festival” where this all happened, says it will be issuing new modesty rules for women performing at all government sponsored events. Israel is experiencing its own culture wars.

So, if I could summarize, it seems that it is offensive for women to cover up. But then again, it is equally offensive for women not to cover up!

Which, for me, raises the question, why is this only about women and who is making all these rules? Would I be wrong if I answered that it is mainly men?

This year, America has our first-ever female nominee for president, and, whatever our specific opinions may be about Hillary Clinton herself, the fact that we actually have a female nominee, has to be acknowledged as quite a milestone. And it certainly presents an occasion us to ask, how far have women really come, and what challenges remain to achieve true gender equality?

I will talk more about that in a moment. But first, I want to tell you a story.

It's actually the story that is read from the Torah on this Rosh Hashanah Morning in Conservative and Orthodox synagogues. It's the story of what happened before the Binding of Isaac, which in traditional synagogues will be read tomorrow.

Abraham, had a son before Isaac. At the time, Sara was infertile, so he bore a son with Sara's maidservant, Hagar, so he could have progeny. His name was Ishmael. By the time Isaac was born, Ishmael was a young boy. But, there was bad blood between the two sides of the family, and Abraham was forced to send Hagar and Ishmael away. So, Abraham got up early one morning, placed some bread and a canteen of water on Hagar's shoulders, handed her the boy, and sent them off.

The two of them wandered into the Be'er Sheva desert and, before long, the water ran out. There they were, mother and son, in the middle of the wilderness, lost and helpless, and totally desperate. Hagar set her son down beneath a little bush. She then walked a short distance away, because she couldn't bear to watch the death of her child. And she cried out, weeping.

What makes this story so hard is the powerlessness of Hagar – a role we know women have occupied in society from biblical times. Since ancient days, women have had to dependent on men – either their father or their husband – for survival, because men were the property owners, the patriarchs, and holders of the family birthright and estate. Without a male attachment, a woman was adrift, with no physical or financial security.

Hagar had no choice but to follow Abraham's command. And, once she was exiled, she was without a home, a people, a future.

Ironically, the Torah tells us that God heard the cry of the boy, and would make Ishmael the father of a mighty nation. Why is this ironic? Because it was not the boy who was crying. It was Hagar! Yet, her cry is not the one that is answered. Even in utter desperation, her cry is overlooked.

Our tradition says, that the wailing Shofar evokes that cry of Hagar, and of all the other mothers mentioned in the Torah and Haftarah readings for Rosh Hashanah: Chana, Rachel, even Sara.

Speaking for myself, having grown up and attended college in the midst of Women's Liberation in the 1960's and 70's, I witnessed first-hand women finding their voices, asserting their rights, reclaiming their bodies, and breaking through these social, political, and economic barriers that were thousands of years old. I was sure that, by now, women would in every way be the equal of men. I thought

that there would be no more resonance with the story of Hagar, that it would be a vestige of an issue we no longer have to confront.

I was wrong. That boy still sits beneath the bush, and Hagar still weeps for her vulnerable state. Hagar weeps when college girls are drugged and sexually assaulted by frat boys, who somehow convince themselves that it's consensual and OK. Hagar weeps when politicians suggest that thousands of rape cases were to be expected when women entered the military, because, well I guess it is only natural that men would attack women?

Hagar weeps when amazing female athletes at the summer Olympic games are slighted as their male coaches and husbands are credited for their successes, and as a TV commentator suggested that they looked like they "might as well be standing at the mall" – except they weren't. They were the US Gymnastics team standing on the sidelines as fierce athletes and competitors.

And Hagar weeps when Reform and Conservative Women of the Wall try to pray and read Torah at the Kotel, the Western Wall in Jerusalem, and are handcuffed, arrested by police, and spit on by ultra-Orthodox protesters who don't think women should be allowed to pray out loud or publicly read the Torah.

Yes, Hagar still weeps, and her voice, like a shofar's wail, calls to us. Despite a female nominee for president, we have work left to do.

We know that women have entered the workforce in large numbers. But we also know that the glass elevator for women does not rise easily to the top floor. What percentage of companies in the S&P 500 would you guess have female CEOs? 10%? Maybe 15%? The number is actually 4.6%! Only 104 members of our United States House and Senate combined are women – that's just 19%.

Personally, I think our country would be a lot better off with more women in office – at least we could give them the chance, considering the job men have done running things so far!

But, not only are women underrepresented, they are also significantly underpaid. In the United States, women on average are paid only 79% of what men earn. Even in my own noble profession this is true. Accord to the latest survey, female senior rabbis serving Reform congregations the size of Temple Solel earn just 81% of what their male colleagues do.

We have lots of great terms now – the glass ceiling, the glass elevator, the sticky floor. But they all amount to one thing. Hagar's cry.

Yet, all this being said, perhaps the most painful struggle women have faced in modern America is reproductive choice. There has been a religiously motivated unrelenting drive to make illegal, defund, and deny access to birth control, fertility support services, and safe abortion. Yet, the fact is, that by age 45, up to 1 out of every 3 women in this country have had an abortion. But we would never know it. Why? Because the shame and stigma imposed on these women has drawn a curtain of silence.

There has to be pushback against this fundamentalist voice of religion in American politics. And that is why I and Reverend Madison Shockley of Pilgrim United Church of Christ, have co-founded “Faith Leaders for Reproductive Justice.” In the last several months, we have gathered faith leaders from throughout San Diego who believe, as we do, that moderate religious voices must also be heard in this national conversation.

I met recently with a pastor from El Centro who is totally alone and isolated – surrounded by fundamentalist churches and a persona non grata among clergy groups. He was both grateful and surprised at my simple reassurance that there are other mainstream clergy like him, who share the religious view that abortion is permissible under certain circumstances. In this process, I’ve come to learn that so many clergy are afraid to speak out about women’s reproductive choice – from invitro-fertilization, to surrogacy, to birth control and abortion. They fear their jobs could be on the line, that their congregations could break apart, that they could be targeted by pro-life groups. This is certainly not acceptable to Rev. Shockley and me. That’s why we’re offering a safe space for moderate clergy to find their voice on this critical issue.

But I believe there’s a lot more that needs to be done.

The first thing we need to do is talk to our children. This is what we do here at Temple Solel all the time. And this is why you should put your teens in Confirmation and youth group and our Rosh Chodesh program for girls. Because we talk openly and often with them about these important topics. We talk to boys about how to view and treat young women with respect. We talk to girls about self-respect and how to avoid vulnerable situations.

We realize that kids are more sexually active now than ever, and we talk to them about responsibility, dealing with pressure, and making positive choices. As parents, you can and must do the same thing. I say that as one who, having raised three kids, knows how hard it is. But the only way we’re going to change our culture is to start with our youth – not just telling our girls that they can be anything they want to be, as I hear parents say so often on the Bima, but giving them the actual tools to navigate. And the same with boys – we must give them

a better tool kit. Of course, we're here to help – Craig, Ellen, and our clergy team. We're all here to work with you and our teens.

Also, when it comes to our workplaces, we can ask whether women are on a level playing field with men. Are they receiving equal pay for the jobs they do? Are they rising up to the same leadership positions as men? Of course it's hard and potentially risky to be the one who speaks up. But, the status quo needs to be challenged, and I know for a fact that there are people here in this sanctuary who *can* challenge it and make a difference.

Then there's Israel, where the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism is on the front lines of the battle for equal rights for women. We can help in that fight. I have personally formed a strong partnership with Rabbi Gilad Kariv, the head of our Israeli Reform Movement, and he and I are working together to make that partnership even stronger. The senior rabbis of Congregation Beth Israel, Temple Emanuel, and I have each volunteered to raise \$5000 to support Rabbi Yael Karrie, a rising female star in Sha'ar HaNegev. If you're interested in having an impact, I could really use your help on this.

Finally, as American citizens, there's also a lot we can do, too. Most of us are not single issue voters, but we do need to pay close attention to preserving *Roe v. Wade*, and protecting funding for women's health care. These are critical issues in American politics.

There's also a lengthy list of national organizations out there that promote women's empowerment. Google will give you pages of them and, whichever one aligns with your priorities, I hope you'll think to include it in your yearly tzedakah, and maybe even get involved.

There's an old commercial that used to say, "you've come a long way baby." But as we survey the landscape of this New Year and appreciate the progress represented by a female nominee for president, it's clear we still haven't come far enough. And I fear we've grown too complacent.

It will not be far enough until women are no longer treated as objects to be covered up, or made to uncover. It won't be far enough until women are safe from predators in college, in the military, and even in the boardroom. It won't be nearly far enough until women cease to be stigmatized for their reproductive choices, or handcuffed for chanting Torah at the Kotel, or prevented from rising up the corporate ladder and pay scale. Only when women are lifted up rather than kept down, will it be far enough.

And that is why, in just a little while, we will blow the shofar. Because its sound echoes thru the centuries with the biblical cry of women who were cast out, without a vote, unredeemed.

For redemption is what this day is all about. And the Bal Shem Tov has taught us that the *secret* of redemption is a broken heart. The shofar's cry is meant to break open our hearts, because there is so much more to do. Each of us can change something.

God heard the cry of Ishmael beneath that desert bush. It's up to us to hear the cry of Hagar, and answer the Shofar's call.