**Right is Wrong**
**Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – Temple Judea**
**January 6, 2012**

*A video of this sermon as delivered is available here: https://vimeo.com/34726042*

Shabbat Shalom, I want to talk with you tonight about the terrible scenes we have seen and been reading about in Israel this past week – indeed these past years. If you are unfamiliar with what I am referring to, I am talking about the horrifying scenes of violence, of extremism, of *Chilul HaShem* of the profaning of God's name and a tarnishing of Judaism for all of us. It's a clash of Jewish cultures that began more than a decade ago, but has come to the front pages this past week when an 8 year old modern orthodox girl, Naamah was accosted and spit on by Ultra-Orthodox Jews as she walked to her modern orthodox day school in the northern Israeli city of Beit Shemesh, a suburb of Haifa.

I want to address the nauseating sight of grown men, extremists, wrapped in tallit and kippah, black hats and beards shouting, hitting, spitting at and chasing school girls because they wear skirts that do not cover their ankles, because they wear shirtsleeves that do not cover their wrists, because they dare to walk with their mothers on the same sidewalk as men.

I want to respond to the reports of these same 'religious men', a small, but not minute and not insignificant percentage of the ultra-orthodox (or Haredi) community who are physically forcing women to the back of Israeli buses, engaging in vandalism against Israel Army bases, calling female soldier 'prostitutes' and all of it in the name of 'true' Judaism. All of it because as *Haredi* or Ultra-Orthodox Jews (and I want to make clear not all ultra-orthodox Jews behave like this or believe like this, but a vocal and powerful minority certainly do). This vocal minority and their rabbis have so disfigured Judaism that they believe their religion demands that they exclude women from public and religious life. That anyone who does not observe Judaism just like they do is wrong. A group that believes that to even look at a picture of a woman on a billboard, or to hear a woman sing, let alone read Torah or sit beside them in synagogue is a sin greater than the violence and hatred they perpetrate in God's name.

I say **their** religion, and not **ours** because the Judaism they promote is not my Judaism, more over its not any kind of Judaism that I would ever associate with, defend, teach or support. And yet the majority of Jews in America and Israel, the majority of us sitting here tonight have remained silent in the face of the fundamentalist wave that is sweep through Judaism today. We are silent I think for a variety of reasons articulated so succinctly by Jay Michaelson, writing in the national Jewish newspaper, The Forward.

1. There is a sense that we Jews should stick together and not attack one another.

2. There's a reluctance even to name Jewish fundamentalism as such, and recognize it for what it is.
3. There's the false nostalgia of, "Fiddler on the Roof," which depicts Haredim as cuddly and quaint rather than, as they often are, deliberately ignorant of modernity, misogynist, complicit in violence and actively desirous of taking over Israeli civic institutions and foreign policy.
4. And worst of all, I think, is the sneaking suspicion many Jews have that Haredim are the "real Jews." (Think of how Haredim are often depicted that way in popular culture.) They're the most religious, the most committed, the most traditional. All the rest of us, and certainly those of us in this room, Reform Jews, have compromised with modernity, with our desires. They're the stalwart ones, and while we might not want to live that way ourselves, we think they are guaranteeing the Jewish future.

They are not guaranteeing the Jewish future. They are undermining it. Sure, by having very large families, they are producing more Jews. But the Jewish future they would create looks more like Islamist Iran than any Jewish culture that I or you I'm pretty sure would want to be part of. If this is the Jewish future, count me out. Rather we have to come to a place where we can say proudly and emphatically, that we will not be defined by fundamentalism, that we will not cower in the face of extremism, even if it wears a black hat and beard and proclaims itself as the only true Judaism.

It is not enough to say as most leaders of the Orthodox community have said that these people are radicals, a tiny bunch of fanatics who represent no one. It is not enough to simply distance and dissociate from them, because they are not a small group, and they do have supports. Read any of the online comments to the articles in the Forward, Haaretz or the New York Times and you will see that many defend the actions of these extremists, blaming the young girls for dressing like prostitutes (which they are not) or blaming American Jews, Reform Jews for making Judaism into a version of Christianity (that this what we are doing here tonight on Shabbat they are calling Christianity)

[The fact is that] "according to a recent study by CBS, the *Haredi* population of Israel is set to grow 580% in the next half-century. Modern Orthodox, secular and other Israeli Jews are expected to become a minority in Israel, squeezed between growing ultra-Orthodox and Arab populations. Even in America, *Haredi* Jews represent the fastest-growing sector of the Jewish population, threatening not only secular Jewish culture but non-fundamentalist religious Judaism as well."[1]

As Michaelson writes, "Ignoring this demographic threat would bring costs as severe as ignoring assimilation or anti-Semitism: the shrinking of the Jewish culture and

[1] Jay Michaelson, The Daily Forward January 6, 2012

people, and a powerful fundamentalist bloc that, as in much of the Islamic world, will eventually define Judaism, both internally and externally."[2]

Jewish life in America and Israel is undergoing a tragic disfigurement – more extreme, more strict. All sense of moderation, of tradition, is being pushed out. And I must add that one cannot hear this and not also think of the political extremism and intolerance that is sweeping through American politics as well. The middle, and the left have abdicated the field. Dumbfounded at what we see and hear on TV and in the media - we have simply gone silent rather than confront the extremists in our midst.

**We must not be silent in the face of this rising extremism, now is the time to speak up. As Reform Jews, as modern Jews, as authentic Jews.** Indeed our tradition demands it of us, the Talmud, that great code of Jewish law that has also become a tarnished victim of these religious extremists commands us, "When a person has the ability to protest and remains silent, his silence is similar to verbal consent. When you do not say something to disagree, it is as if you agree with what was said or done."[3] We must speak out against fundamentalism and extremism everywhere, and particularly in our own Jewish community.

But condemnation is not enough – this moment also demands leadership and action, we must go to Beit Shemesh, we must go to Jerusalem, and if we can't go physically then we must send our money ahead of us and support progressive Jewish institutions in Israel. We must support institutions like the Israel Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and The Women at The Wall. The leader of which, Namah Kelman will be holding a brunch and fundraiser here on February 5th. You want to do tzedakkah in this New Year, you want to do something proactive to address this cultural crisis – join Rabbi Goor at this event, come see us after the service for details.

And, we must demand with the purse strings of the American Jewish community that our federations and organizations stop supporting and subsidizing these extremist groups that have turned a beautiful religious tradition into a group of ugly angry men, cloaked in religious garb who spit on women, attack Israeli soldiers and policemen and would just as soon send all of us here to the back of the bus if not under it.

But most of all we must my message tonight is not to the Ultra-Orthodox or even the Jewish establishment, my message is to all of us here. We must stop thinking of ourselves, Reform Jews, Progressive Jews; **as inauthentic Jews**. Our Judaism is real, it is vibrant, it is authentic, it is inclussive and it is the future.

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[2] ibid

[3] Sforno on Nedarim

We must not be seduced by the black hats, beards and *shtetl* mentality of the ultra-orthodox, Tevye was fiction, the real story is why our great grandparents left the old country and its traditions behind and came to America. The Chabad telethon is not a fundraiser for a Judaism that reflects your values, your beliefs, your practices – its truly just the opposite.

What we are doing here, what we are building here, the community we have created here, this is real Judaism, this is Torah based, values based Judaism. We don't need to apologize for being modern Jews and we should give no license, no support to extremists of any ilk Jewish or other that demand we conform to their fundamentalist world view.

If your interpretation of Judaism means that you don't want to sit on a bus with a women, then get off and walk. But if your Judaism teaches just the opposite, and proudly Reform Judaism does, that men and women are equally holy and respected in the eyes of God then we must get on that bus and steer our community and our people toward a bright and promising future and away from the dark ignorance of the *shtetls* of our past. We have nothing to apologize for, nothing except our silence up till now, nothing unless we do nothing.