

Won't You Be My Neighbor?: Our Responsibility To One Another

Last week, the Wall Street Journal ran an article entitled, “Goat Yoga, Mosh Pits, and Glow-sticks: Younger Jews Reinvent Yom Kippur.” The first paragraph read, “For 2000 years, Jews have spent Yom Kippur in a synagogue, abstaining from food and drink, fervently praying and beseeching God to forgive their sins. This year, some rabbis, eager to woo younger people to High Holy Day services, are holding programs in beer gardens, replacing deep reverential bows with goat yoga, and celebrating the end of the season with glow-sticks in a mosh pit.”¹

Now, being that this is my tenth year with you, I assume that many of you know me well enough to know that I would absolutely and excitedly jump at the opportunity to try “goat yoga” (and would also find some roundabout way to rope Cantor Hochman into trying it with me...since when I brought it up to Cantor Harrison, she looked at me like I was crazy and let me know she was definitely not interested); and those of you who have been to Purim celebrations here recently also know of my love for glow-sticks. The mosh pit I could do without, but to each her own.

And yet, on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, after the difficult and tumultuous year we have lived through in our country and in the world, I have to believe that Judaism and our Jewish tradition (that Yom Kippur *itself*), has more to offer us than glow-sticks and goats. And I have to believe that we all not only *need* more, but *deserve* more too.

It has, in many respects, been a whirlwind year, and an exhausting one. We sit together this morning after a year of fighting for adequate health care, equal educational and employment opportunities, and for gun control regulations that would allow students and teachers to go to school in the morning without fear of not coming home safely to their families in the afternoon.

We come together this morning after a year of demanding to live in a society in which women and men will never again have to say “me too.” We are here, together, in this year of fighting for the rights of the dreamers, the strangers, and the immigrant families whose stories are not so different than many of our own.

We are here in a year in which it takes real courage to stand up, to speak out, and to continue to draw the circle of humanity wider, in the face of so many efforts to find ways to keep the “other” out; and at a time when anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiments are on the rise — those times when we are reminded that we, too, are still sometimes seen as “the other.”

And we are here at a time when it takes strength and conviction to not give in to hopelessness, fear, or complacency; and to not turn away from others in pain.

In the Haftarah portion for Yom Kippur afternoon, we read of the prophet Jonah. Called by God to go to Nineveh to proclaim that the city will be destroyed if those living there do not cease their evil ways and repent, Jonah, instead, runs away from the responsibility, buys a ticket on a boat sailing in the opposite direction, and precedes to fall asleep in the bowels of the ship while rain and wind threaten the safety of those on board.

Every year when we read this story, I marvel at the lengths that Jonah goes to in order to evade, ignore, and even escape the call to help. And how, with a little distance from those in

¹ Shayndi Raice. The Wall Street Journal. “Goat Yoga, Mosh Pits, and Glow-sticks: Younger Jews Reinvent Yom Kippur.” September 5, 2018.

need and in danger, he is able to sleep so soundly that he is not bothered by the storm raging around him.

And yet, each year, this story also forces *me* to recognize the times when I have done the same — times when I have shirked responsibility; times when I could have done more to help but didn't; and the times when I slept all too soundly while others were suffering because I was far enough away as to not feel *personally* affected.

Yom Kippur is that time when we, as a community, admit to the times over this past year when we have tried to flee from the callings of the hour; when we have seen suffering in the world and convinced ourselves that there was little we could really do about it; when we have seen people in need and have silently asked ourselves “What concern is it of mine?;” when we knew we could have done something, but instead comforted ourselves with the thought that the person famously known as “somebody else” would help instead.

When we, like Jonah, declare ourselves helpless, run the other way, or dive back under the safety blanket of our lives, Yom Kippur pulls us out from hiding, calling on us to take our responsibility to others seriously, and warning us against the danger of indifference, silence, and inaction. As we know, there are no four words in the English language that are easier to say than “it's not my problem.”

And yet, Jewish tradition teaches quite the opposite — that we are all in this together and that our combined efforts can bring healing to a world in desperate need of it. Judaism assures us that “we don't have to tackle every issue, but if we avoid them all, if we remain silent in the face of cruelty, injustice, and oppression, we sacrifice part of our soul. When we act based on our conscience, however, we affirm our humanity.”²

At the very beginning of Torah, God asks Cain where his brother Abel is after Cain kills him in a fit of jealous anger. Cain's famous question and its implied negative response, “Am I my brother's keeper?,”³ is the epitome of indifference. The real answer is, “yes, in fact, I am.”

When Judaism teaches us “You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor,”⁴ it is not a recommendation but an imperative. We must create a culture of concern, where, if a problem finds us, it becomes ours to help solve.

It's easier said than done, particularly when I know I am not the only one sitting here today who desperately *wants* to go out and effect change, but am constantly overwhelmed by how many causes, how many communities, how many people need our attention. At times, I find it a powerful challenge and am energized by the potential and the possibilities. At other times, I have to fight against becoming paralyzed by the enormity of the task at hand.

The Talmud deals with this by reminding us that while it is not our responsibility to *complete* the work, we are not free to desist from it.⁵ We don't have to do *everything*....but we *must* do *something*.

In management and personal development lingo, it's known as identifying and setting SMART goals. “SMART” being an acronym that stands for a goal that is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Results-focused, and Time-bound.

Choose an organization, a community, a person, a cause you want to help, and then consider what are one or two *specific* things you can do tomorrow, or next week, or throughout the coming year that you believe will make a difference (big or small). Focusing our efforts on

² Paul Rogat Loeb. The Impossible Will Take A Little While. Main Introduction.

³ Genesis 4:9

⁴ Leviticus 19:16

⁵ Pirkei Avot 2:21

doing something specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused, and time-bound, allows us to engage in the work of *tikkun olam*, helping to repair the world, without the pain of the world becoming so overwhelming or all-encompassing that we give up before we even start.

In this morning's Haftarah portion, God attempts to explain to the Israelites why He has not been moved by their fasting. God says, "Do you truly believe that this is the fast I desire, a day for you to starve your bodies and bow your heads? Do you call that a fast day acceptable to God? Isn't this, rather, the fast I desire, a day on which you break the bonds of injustice and let the oppressed go free; a day on which you share your bread with the hungry and take care of the poor in your midst; when you see the naked, to clothe them, and to not to turn away from your brother?"⁶

The promises we are making to ourselves about the kind of people we want to be, go into effect today. And our tradition is clear that praying and fasting and being here is not a substitute for what we must do out there. In fact, we're taught that those who rise from their prayers as better people, it is they whose prayers are answered. After sitting here this morning, how will you go through the rest of your day differently? How will you treat the people you encounter?

Perhaps a way to start is by simply turning *towards* each other in this new year...turning to face one another (neighbor and stranger alike). And taking the time, and having the courage, to look deeply enough to see the humanness that we all have in common.

The Zohar, Judaism's mystical text, teaches that at the beginning of Elul, the month leading up to the High Holy Days, each of us is standing "*achor el achor*" — we are, in relation to one another, "back-to-back." But, the Zohar continues, by the time we reach Rosh Hashanah, we have turned, and we find ourselves "*panim el panim*," face-to-face.

It is, as my colleague, Rabbi Stephanie Kolin, writes, "a clear and powerful message — we shift our posture from not even knowing the other is there, to looking into one another's eyes. *Achor el achor*, back-to-back, we cannot possibly know the struggles our neighbor is facing. While our society may try to turn us away from one another, our tradition draws us toward each other with an almost irresistible gravitational pull, until we are standing *panim el panim*, face-to-face.

In the eyes of the other, we recognize how much pain, joy, and courage we share in common. *Panim el panim*, face-to-face, we confess the number of times we feel helpless in the midst of the brokenness in our world, but we also start to notice the resolve in each other's eyes, and the realization that maybe we aren't so helpless or at least that we don't have to feel so alone.

Jewish philosopher Emanuel Levinas, teaches that once we look into the eyes of another person, we become obligated to that person. Seeing their pain, their reality, their humanity demands something from us. It means that I can't just say to you — "hey, sorry to hear that. Tough luck." Or, "yeah, it sure is a mess out there," and then go on with my day. But rather, *seeing* your face — or a face on the street, in line at the supermarket, or on the train, means that I become responsible to you in some real way. Back-to-back, we can pretend not to see another's suffering; but face-to-face, we can no longer ignore the pain in someone's eyes nor the need that exists for us to help.⁷

Recently, I went to see the movie "Won't You Be My Neighbor," a documentary about the life and legacy of the iconic children's television host, Mr. Rogers. Having grown up watching his show, the movie transported me back in time, and I was fascinated by how simple

⁶ Isaiah 58:6

⁷ Rabbi Stephanie Kolin. "All Hands on Deck: A Journey Toward the World as it Ought To Be." September 2017.

and accessible his messages were to his audience of children (and their parents), even when dealing with incredibly challenging subjects. But perhaps what struck me most was one particular idea that Mr. Rogers suggested to those listening. He said, “If only you could sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet; how important you can be to people you may never have even dreamt of. There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.”

What an incredible opportunity and what an awesome responsibility. In every encounter, including those you have already had this morning, including those you will have as soon as the service concludes, you leave something of yourself that then has an impact on someone else’s life — and you never know how big or small that impact will be.

And yet, so often, “We look out at the size of the mess in the world and think, ‘I am so small. It’s not possible that what I do matters.’” Yet all of Judaism hinges on the idea that what you do *does* matter. Our entire mitzvah system is based on the idea that your actions make all the difference in the world, and that the whole world depends on your actions.”⁸

It is easy forget that change doesn’t only come from grand acts of heroism, and that the world can be transformed when more and more people make a commitment to perform even the most modest of acts with kindness, compassion, and love. And because of that, we must not, even on the most difficult, exhausting, and overwhelming of days, lose faith in our capacity to act in a way that will make a difference.

⁸ As taught by Rabbi Rachel Timoner. September 2018.