

Rabbi Dantowitz Yom Kippur 5771

Responsibility—*L'taken olam b'malchut shadai*

A man was walking on the beach on a beautiful Summer day. There were many children on the beach, building sand castles, jumping waves and playing ball. He decided to take a walk to feel the ocean breeze and get a break from the hot sun. While walking, he noticed a young boy not too far ahead of him. The boy seemed to be picking up sand and throwing it into the water. When the man got closer to the boy he realized that the boy was actually picking up a starfish and throwing it into the water. Upon reaching the boy the man asked him why he was doing this----The boy said he was saving the starfish. The man said but there are so many starfish on the beach. Do you really think what you're doing is going to make a difference? The boy picked up another starfish and after throwing it into the water replied, it makes a difference to this one.

We are each capable of making a difference in someone's life. When we do things, large or small, to improve the environment, promote peace, work for civil rights, raise money for a worthy cause---how much of an impact one person can make. But it's also easy to take the view of the man on the beach and wonder if our actions even matter.

Two prophets. Two approaches.

This morning we read from the Book of Isaiah. He urged the Israelites to be moved by ritual to action.

He asked: "Is such the fast I desire, A day for men to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, A day when the Lord is favorable? No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, And untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin." [Isaiah 58:5-7]

Isaiah's message is the obligation to reach out to others. Ritual is lovely. But it is not enough. If I fast today, but do nothing to help anyone, then what is the point of my fast. Don't misunderstand me because I love ritual. Prayer is important as is ritual and their ability to move us spiritually draw us closer to God.

For the mitzvah of fasting on Yom Kippur---it is powerful to think of the connection between the rumblings in our stomachs and the gift of sustenance we provide through our food donations today. We can turn our hunger into positive change. This is the fast Isaiah demands of us. The disquiet in our bellies is a call not only to feed the hungry, but to also be active participants in effecting change for good in our world.

We are not only believers; we are doers.

Then there was Jonah.

A different kind of prophet from Isaiah. Jonah did not deliver long speeches to the people. He would have been happy to have been left alone and not picked on by God. But, he learned, though he could run, he could not hide from God.

Jonah tried to escape and ignore a responsibility thrust upon him.

Actually, we too may behave like Jonah. When we learn about a new cause; find out that our help is desperately needed, but choose to remain uninvolved.

God found Jonah and again told him to go to Ninevah. This time he complied yet Jonah did not appreciate the success of his mission because he was not interested in helping. Instead of marveling at the amazing *teshuva* achieved by the Ninevites, Jonah was irritated. He complained to God that his trip was unnecessary because the people did *teshuva* and weren't going to be destroyed in 40 days as God's decree had warned.

Why did he feel his work was in vain? When we think we know the outcome of our actions in advance, are we less motivated or still eager to see what will happen? Or if the outcome is different than we expect do we feel like we've wasted our effort. Does it mean we shouldn't even try if we can't be assured of the results?

TBA has a wonderful tradition of reaching out to those in need. The bags of food we brought today (or will bring) are but one example.

As we sit here in the sanctuary, we know that this is not a place to hide.

Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: A person should not pray *elah b'vayit she'yesh sham chalonot*, except for in a room which has windows (Berakhot 34b). The law code, Shulchan Aruch(O.H. 90:4) expands upon this Talmudic text, explaining that these windows should open toward Jerusalem, the direction toward which Jews traditionally pray, thereby orienting us such that our gaze will be directed out those windows, especially while we pray.

Mordechai Kaplan, founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, teaches that “prayer in itself is a worthy thing, but can somehow never be in the right spirit, unless it impels one to the service of humanity.” [as cited in a sermon by Rabbi Stephanie Kolin]

When we look out our sanctuary windows, what do we see? In addition to noticing the beautiful trees and sacred in the Divine, we can also look further and notice the challenges. Will we see our neighbor in need of work; will we notice our friend struggling to care for aging parents and young children; will we take action to stand in support of Israel; will we raise our voices for civil rights; will we see our own lives reflected in the mirror of the glass too? As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said: “Our immediate concern must be with justice and compassion in life here and now, with human dignity, welfare and security.”

Isaiah's call to us is to get involved. Practice ritual and take action.

Jonah wanted to stay at home.

How about us? We too may prefer the quiet of home and should of course take care of our needs. Hillel teaches us "*Im ein ani li mi li uchshe'ani l'atzmi mah ani vi'm lo achshav eimatai.*" If I am not for myself, who will be for me. If I am only for myself, what am I? And, if not now, when?

If we decide to sit at home and enjoy the shade under our own trees, do we need to worry about anyone else? The Mishna [Bava Batra 1] encourages us to take responsibility for others even in the privacy of our own home. In the case of a neighbor's existing well, we should not plant a tree too close to another's property to avoid damaging their well with tree roots.

Rab Yosi tells us that to own something gives me the right of useage and entitles me to pleasure. In other words, our responsibility to others does not extend beyond our private domain. But, if it turns out I would damage you by shooting arrows from my property to yours, then I must stop. So if our initial building project won't cause a problem for others----fine. But if the long term results are deleterious, we must reconsider. Even at home, we can not ignore those around us.

While it is important to care for ourselves, *im ein ani li mi li*, Judaism teaches us the importance of caring for others---whether it's feeding the hungry; advocating for the poor or being *shomrei adamah*---guardians of our earth and caring for our environment.

TBA is part of the Greenfaith Certification program which shows our congregation is strongly committed to environmental concerns. The three core values of Greenfaith are environmental justice, stewardship and spirit. I'm sure we'll all be learning more about this from the Social Action Committee.

Just as we must look beyond the windows of our sanctuary to see the work to be done near and far, we also need to balance our individual needs with those of our community.

It's been over 5 months since the BP Oil disaster in the Gulf. The Mishna taught us we need to be aware of the impact we have on others and the environment in addition to our own personal interest.

When we move in and build mines and things to get oil—we know there is an instant change in the ecology. What is the immediate damage we have begun? What happens to the ecology of a region the moment that crews of people, ships, drilling materials—move in? The change/damage is immediate.

With regard to the Gulf oil crisis, Rabbi Sharon Brous suggests:

Contrast President John F. Kennedy's bold "ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country" with today's prevailing ethos of

“feed me, serve me, don’t tell me what to do.”

After this year’s environmental disaster in the Gulf Coast, there’s no denying that a culture of unrestrained consumption has made us all complicit in the earth’s destruction. Yes, British Petroleum [may have] acted with ... negligence. But it can’t shoulder the blame alone. BP’s ... business practices were driven by our unrelenting thirst for oil.

Our collective act of atonement this year should be personal sacrifice with real, practical effect. What will ...[each of us] give up to reverse the course of human-generated environmental destruction? As long as each of us is not willing to be even slightly inconvenienced, we can be sure that no amount of censure or regulation will save us. [9/7/10 *Forward* online]

On this day of atonement, we ask God’s forgiveness for our transgressions.

For the transgression of caring for myself with no regard for the other.

For the transgression of avoiding responsibility.

For the transgression of leaving the work of tikun olam for others.

For the transgression of accepting compassion fatigue and not finding a way to reenergize ourselves.

For the transgression of not having actions follow our words.

For the transgression of acquiescing with the lack of religious freedom and equality in Israel and America.

For the transgression of caring for our environment only when it’s convenient for us.

How can we respond when lots are cast and it falls on us, even though we are not ready, not willing, to take action.

But we know that among us there are many who were tapped like Jonah. Not ready for the task ahead. Unwilling but forced to make a difficult journey. We were presented an opportunity to be transformed and be transformers.

Faced with illness, some turn to advocacy and fundraising.

Recovering from addiction, some become teachers and inspire others.

We have so many stories; so many examples of taking action----pursuing a path of justice and tikun olam.

But what do we do when we feel complacent? Compassion fatigue is real. How do we heed the call of Isaiah and not run away like Jonah? One suggestion is to share your passion with another. As you ignite their passion, you will be reenergized. And as Hillel teaches, *Im ein ani li mi li*, we need to also take care of ourselves. In doing so, we are renewed and able to reach out more to others.

Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor vlo ata ben chorin l'hibateyl mimena.

It is not up to you to finish the work but neither are you free to avoid it.

Jonah was a reluctant prophet, but he was successful. He shared God's message with the people of Ninevah and they repented.

He acknowledged who he was to the men on his boat—an Ivri---a Jew--- declaring his faith.

He complained to God about the task---but God was used to complaints---

Many of our ancestors complained---remember the Israelites who wandered in the desert for 40 years? They had to unlearn slavery; learn about freedom and the additional burden of responsibility.

But Jonah was not particularly compassionate---showing more concern for a plant than for innocent children.

Jonah's first boat ride was tumultuous. Yet, he slept through the storm.

We are Jonah---touched by God.

We are Jonah---overwhelmed by the tasks before us. Not eager to go on a long journey. And uncertain that our deeds will have the desired impact. So why waste energy trying?

But this is our world and we need to accept responsibility for the work we can do and make whatever efforts we can. Individually and collectively, we do make a difference.

Isaiah preached God's message of pursuing justice for all.

His ideals are high---and we want to uphold them and share our values and teachings of our faith in the world---

At home; in our community;

If "A butterfly stirring the air today in Beijing can transform storm systems next month in New York." [James Gleick, in *Mishkan Tefila*]

then the sky is our limit.

There is much work for us to do.

The challenges of our world are pressing up on us.

It is getting late in the day on Yom Kippur.

Our stomachs are rumbling---will we remember this feeling tomorrow?

Y'hi ratzon milfanecha sheanachnu oskim bdvarim Itaken olam.

May it be your will Adonai our God that we engage in matters to improve the world.

Give us the strength to continue the work of ma'sim tovim—good deeds and your mitzvoth----

When we are overwhelmed, we hope we'll find inspiration from others who will gently guide us towards positive acts of change.

Help us to accept responsibility for what we can do and to know our limitations as well.

Amen.