

## YK 5779 – Social Action

The haftarah that we read tomorrow from Isaiah is one of my favorite moments of the High Holidays. It will be midday – our stomachs will be rumbling and we feel a little smug. Look at me – I have been fasting for 17 hours now! I am in the homestretch! Aren't I something?

Suddenly, Isaiah thunders down on us, shattering our complacency: "Is this the fast I want, 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... No, this is the fast I desire... 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 calls us to account. You think you know hunger today, says Isaiah. I'll show you hunger. No, our fast is not enough. Our prayers are not enough. Our rituals and Shabboses – not enough. None of it is meaningful, says Isaiah, unless you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for others less fortunate than yourself.

I don't think Isaiah is saying give up on fasting, give up on ritual, give up on Jewish practice. He is just saying it's not enough. It's not enough unless it changes our behavior.

I want to share with you some learning I did this summer from the Zohar, Judaism's premier mystical text. The custom of inviting mystical guests, ushpizin, into the sukkah originates in the Zohar. The Zohar imagines a most humble sukkah in the most spiritual way you could think of – Shechina, the feminine aspect of God, hovers above the sukkah, spreading out her wings – she is literally the schach – the roofing of the sukkah. Then Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and David come dwell in the sukkah as special guests, each representing a different sefira or aspect of God's manifold energies. All seven visit every night but on each of the nights of Sukkot one of them is the special honored guests, the special energy as it were for that night. Rav Hamuna Saba would stand at his sukkah entrance, and joyfully invite his supernal guests: tivu ushpizin eloyinim, tivu – sit, sublime guests, sit!

We still practice this custom. Perhaps you have seen beautiful illustrated charts of the ushpizin and, of course, we have added ushpizot, female guests, to them as well. In our sukkah at home, we use the occasion of ushpizin to invite in other mystical guests – deceased, far-flung, or estranged friends and family who we imagine might like to be with us. You could also use the quality of each night – Abraham is hesed, lovingkindness, Issac is strength or heroism or law, etc – to imaginatively invite people you know who possess those qualities.

One can hardly imagine a holier sukkah. There we are under the stars with our delicious food and our supernal guests, under the wings of the Shechina, basking in the radiant

light of the Godhead, experiencing ourselves drawing closer to various aspects of the divine. What could be more holy!

But then the Zohar text pivots. It tells us that we are obligated to feed the poor. Specifically, since our divine guests do not eat, we have to give the portion they would eat to the poor. And wait, there's more! If we don't feed the poor, the supernal guests stand back from the table and say, "Do not eat the bread of this stingy person. Their table is not God's — it is their own." Worse yet — father Abraham, known throughout the Torah and rabbinic literature for his extraordinary hospitality as he stood at the crossroads inviting weary travelers to his tent — — comes in and if he sees that the poor have not been fed, he overturns the table and tells all the supernal guests to leave immediately because the hosts are wicked people who have not shared their bread.

The Zohar's message couldn't be clearer. It is identical to Isaiah's. You cannot sit in your sukkah and do spirituality as escapism. You cannot sit here on Yom Kippur and imagine you are so holy with your stomach rumbling unless you feed the poor. Self-indulgent spirituality will close down the sukkah — its life force will be cut off. Our fast, in Isaiah's words, will be rejected by God. The poor, according to the Zohar, are the living embodiment of Shechina, God. They are sitting at your table. Not to feed them is the equivalent of eating a feast while a beggar sits at your table looking on and you ignore him. You can't be spiritual without attending to the physical needs of the needy — feed Abraham your imaginary food and you will feed your soul. Neglect the poor and your soul won't eat either.

A later Hasidic text, Tomer Devorah, makes it clear why this is so. To be created in God's image means literally to be God's children, to be of God's flesh. Not feeding the hungry is literally starving God, because they are God's flesh. And, by the same token, we are, all of us of one flesh. We are related to one another, we are one another's guarantors, we each hold one another's collateral ערב as it were within us. So to wrong another is not only to wrong your own soul but to wrong the portion of your soul which is in every other person. כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה

In other words, the sense that we are actually separate from one another is, on the spiritual level, an illusion. On a practical level, I am an embodied being and I can't simply merge with everything else. I can't live my life that way— don't try this on the highway. But on a spiritual level we are one flesh and one being. The illusion that I can sit at my own table and enjoy a feast while my neighbor goes hungry is just that — an illusion. We know it is an illusion on a global-political level because faraway problems become our problems when we don't attend to them. Climate change in Africa sends refugees pouring into Europe leading to the rise of ultranationalist politicians, upsetting chances for global cooperation, portending war and chaos. Pretending we aren't interconnected leads to huge political problems, and it is also a spiritual problem. Happiness is an experience of the world's fulness. We can't be happy by pretending that parts of the world do not exist. To close to the fulness of the world is to close off the channel of happiness. The truth of our lives is that we are not separate at all. We are deeply and intimately connected. If, as Alice Walker writes, I cut a tree, my arm would bleed.

It is no different than the beggar at the feast in our sukkah. Can we really eat and enjoy our meal while they are sitting there ragged and hungry? And, the Zohar is teaching us, whether or not we see them, they are there. And when we turn them away, we close our hearts to the present moment. We diminish our own wholeness. We diminish our joy because we are no longer fully alive to the moment and all life is in the moment.

On Rosh Hashana, I said that we are not a country club. I said that we need to fill our Judaism with content and take part in the Jewish conversation. Tonight I want to add that that conversation begets action and participation and our knowledge of our interconnectedness. We cannot sit in shul and enjoy our holiday when others are hungry. We have to respond.

This year our social action committee has revived itself after a quiescent stretch. There are five ongoing projects that we are taking on this year. I am going to tell you about them and then invite you, on your way out, to put dots on the chart next to your name telling us which projects you will get involved in. Once you do that, the committee chair will be in touch about details.

I am positing that all of us can commit to doing one more thing this year. If you are already doing one thing, do two. If you are giving an hour a month, give an hour a week. You get the idea. Whatever any of us is doing, we can do more. Yes, the world is overwhelming, yes our country is divided, yes we lead busy lives. But we are interconnected, and the message of this most holy of days is that we need to act on our interconnectedness. Some of the more profound experiences I had in Cleveland when my children were young were bringing them to food pantries and shelters with us. They were amazed that a family was spending the night in a church basement and the children in the family thought it was the Taj Mahal — because it was so much better than sleeping out of doors. My children were amazed when we packed backpacks for kids for food for the weekend and they saw how little a family was given to eat for the weekend. They were amazed when they saw hungry people returning again and again

to the window for a day old donut or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, hardly delectables. But they were also crystal clear that these were people – adults and children – very much like them, who laughed and played and yearned, just as they did. It was important to us that they understand how privileged our lives are and that we are responsible for helping others. We can't fix all the problems — but as it says in Pirke Avot, we are not free to desist from the work. We have to do our part. So, without further ado, here are the 5 programs. Some are things we have done for a long time although we have kind of let them slide of late; some are new projects. I will invite each of the chairs to stand so you know who they are.

1. **Abraham's Tent** -- This year we will be partnering with United Church on the Green in New Haven. Our week will be the week of March 4. During that time we will need volunteers to make and serve meals and to sleep over at the shelter. Our religious school students will also raise money for giftcards for the men and provide lunch bags for them with gift cards, fruit, water and a loving note. We have learned over the years that more than food, the men appreciate a gift card to Subway or Dunkin Donuts so that they can go inside and get a bite to eat and some shelter from the cold. Kate Ezra, Deb Fried and Gary Leibowitz are our chairs for this project.
2. **Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen** or DESK serves meals to anyone who walks in their doors, 365 days a year. Our congregation volunteers on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of the month. DESK provides 300 meals a day and has been doing so for over 25 years. As always, DESK's resources are seriously taxed: more people need food and state budgets have been cut. This is easy to do and makes such a difference. Do you want to consider doing this monthly? If more of us take this on, we could add a second monthly slot. It is also a great thing to take on as a mitzvah project if you have an upcoming bnai mitzvah. Kal Watsky and Deb Fried are our chairs.
3. **Martha's Place** -- Martha's Place is a shelter for women in New Haven. We have been asked to deliver and serve meals once a month this winter and spring. We will need people who will cook a meal in their homes and others who will deliver and or serve the meal at the shelter. Stacy Dworkin is chairing.
4. **Food for Kids** — Once a week volunteers gather at the JFS Food Pantry to pack backpacks of food for kids. These backpacks go to New Haven schools for kids who receive free breakfast and lunch at school. We have found that on the weekends, when these children are not getting their school lunches, they often go hungry. So that is why we started packing up backpacks to give them all food for the weekend. We pack backpacks for 340 kids on Monday mornings and deliver them on Thursday mornings. If weekday mornings are good for you, could you do this once or twice a month? Volunteers are needed for packing and delivery. Abby Silbert and Mara Ginsberg are our co-chairs.
5. **Hesed** — Our synagogue has a longstanding hesed committee that sends meals to congregants who have suffered a loss or illness. Usually, we send a catered meal but this year we would like to expand our reach and hamishness.

Stacey Perkins and Melissa Lawson, who chair this committee, need a list of committed folks on hand. Then, when they have a need, they will call on you to cook and or deliver a meal. With enough volunteers, the committee will also be able to expand its reach, perhaps offering rides to seniors or visits to sick congregants. A congregant reaching out and letting someone know that they are not forgotten, that in their time of trouble, they are still part of us, means so much.

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Finally, I want to mention four more special projects

**Isaiah's Fast:** On Rosh Hashana we gave out grocery bags. We asked you to fill them with the amount of food your family would eat in one day and to return them to the synagogue today. We will deliver those bags to the JFS food bank this week. If you have not brought your bag back, you can still do so in the coming week and we will get it delivered.

**Sukkah on the Green** — In the spirit of the Zohar text we just learned, we will be feeding the homeless on the green at Trinity Church on September 30 at 2pm. We will build a small sukkah there, make food, and serve it after a brief interfaith service. Emails and sign up lists have gone out, but we still need more help — please look at the online signup list and fill in the spots. We still need salad, pasta with sauce and meatballs. Thanks!

**HIAS Shabbat** — As part of a national effort, we will hold HIAS Shabbat on October 19. HIAS stands for Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Over a hundred years ago HIAS was founded to help new Jewish immigrants. Now they help other refugees in need. We will learn more about their efforts and our local partnership with JCARR. Sarah Nuland is in charge.

**Second Seder** — As we did two years ago, we will hold a second seder at the synagogue. When we sit down to seder we say, kol dichfin yeitei ve yeichol... Let all who are hungry come and eat. Just as the Zohar taught for Sukkot, we are obligated on Pesach to feed those who are hungry — those who are physically hungry and those who might not otherwise have a seder for whatever reason. In order to keep the price reasonable — \$18 per person — we will need your financial generosity. You can send earmarked funds to the synagogue. You can also volunteer to help set tables, prepare seder plates, etc.

There are also other ongoing projects. Look for them in the new Social Action Corner of the Bulletin. They include Ken's Closet, a project started by Ros Sperling to collect business attire for people going on job interviews, Jewish Coalition for Literacy in which you can get involved with reading with a child at a local school, Habitat for Humanity, our own mitzvah garden in which we grew and gave away over 200 lbs of produce this year, props to L Faith Miller, and other things as they come down the pike.

If there is a project that you are involved in, that you are passionate about, that is connected with tikkun olam, please let me or Kate Ezra know about it, so we can feature it in the bulletin — all of this work is so much more meaningful and fulfilling when are able to hold together the challenges and pain of seeing the work that needs to be done — and to celebrate our successes.

When you leave this room, go to the boards outside on the easels. Put up your dots. Let's see a sea of dots! It will be a visual reminder of the truth of our existence, that we live together in a beautiful sea of humanity, each of us connected to and dependent on the other.

Earlier this evening, before Kol Nidre, we gave ourselves permission to pray with the sinners, the avaryonim. We decided to let them in. Maybe we thought it was such a holy moment that their presence would somehow impede our prayers. But now we understand — there are only avaryonim — imperfect, broken vessels like ourselves. Without avarayonim, sinners, — none of us would be in the room.. And we understand that although each of us is broken, together we are whole. Together, with the poor, with the hungry, with the needy —- we are a whole community. They are part of us as much as we are part of them. There is a piece of me in you and a piece of you in me.

Your needs are my need. When we are hungry, we eat. When we are tired, we sleep. When someone else is hungry, we feed them. When someone else is homeless, we find shelter for them. That simple.

If we try to ignore the needy, we only darken our own world. Better to pick up the broken shards and acknowledge our own brokenness too. Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai says in the Zohar that on the holidays God visits his broken vessels. Maybe you thought that meant someone else — the homeless, the hungry, the naked. No. It means us too. We are all broken. Some by water, and some by fire. Some by sickness, and some by the death of loved ones. Some by loss, some by loneliness, some by family members to whom we no longer speak, some by divorce or marriages gone cold, some by children grown distant or astray. We are all broken. “Sometimes we’re fractured by the choices we make; sometimes we’re shattered by things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing. Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurtures and sustains our capacity for compassion.” (Merton)

The Psalmist says that God is close to the brokenhearted. Because in the cracks, things grow; in the cracks the light shines in. When we experience our own depths, when we open to our own broken hearts, we begin our journey toward wholeness — ours and the world's.

In the immortal words of Leonard Cohen:  
“Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in.”

We are all broken vessels yearning for the light. Let's shine more light this year!