

## A Call to Care

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One of my favorite psukim in the Torah is from the Book of *Beresbit*, chapter 28: “*Achen, yesh Adonai bamakom haze, va-anochi lo yedati?*” (Genesis 28:16) - “Surely, *Adonai* is present in this place, and I did not know it”. Jacob who just had a dream about angels going up and down on a stairway that reaches heaven, wakes up from his dream with a new awareness.

The sweetness and the power of that moment are conveyed in those few words “*achen, yesh adonai bamakon haze, va-ani lo yedati?*” -- “Surely, *Adonai* is present in this place, and I did not know it”. It is surely an **Aha** moment for Jacob. It is his moment of recognition that God is there. It is the moment when everything changed for him, when he became aware that God is present in his life and in the world around him.

**Such** moments can be very powerful. In his “Varieties of Religious Experience” William James called them “Conversion moments”. Something happens that changes us. Someone we meet, something we see, a new connection, or even a moment of silence or prayer. The trigger can be very small, and still change us profoundly. What makes that **aha** moment so striking is that just a second ago- *lo yadati*, I didn’t know - but now I know.

In the *Mishna*, Yom Kippur is not referred to as a day of sorrow and supplication. On the contrary the *Mishna* says that along with the fifteenth of Av, it was one of the most joyous days of the Jewish year. Today, on Yom

Kippur we celebrate the possibility of change and our capacity to grow. Today we celebrate our potential to live life in the presence of the Divine. Today we celebrate the fact that we live in a world that can be transformed by us. Today we are reminded that our lives can be transformed, and that we can begin anew. We are reminded that we can and must transform our relationships, our local communities and the world we inhabit.

Our tradition teaches us that Yom Kippur marks the receiving of the second tablets by Moses and the Israelite people at Mount Sinai. The first tablets engraved with the Ten Commandments were given on Shavuot, the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Sivan. Forty days later the people of Israel created and worshiped a golden calf, which led to Moshe breaking the first tablets on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz, a day we mark with a fast. On Rosh Hodesh Elul- the first day of the month of Elul, Moshe went up the mountain for another forty days to ask for a second chance. A second chance for himself, for the people of Israel, and really, a second chance for God as well.

In the words of our teacher Rabbi Art Green: “By the time of the second tablets, God had learned a lesson about dealing with humans. ‘Carve yourself two tablets of Stone,’ God said to Moses, ‘and I shall write upon them’ (Exod. 34:1). **This time the tablets were to be a joint divine-human project**”(Foreword to “Days of Awe” by S.Y. Agnon).

This is a powerful story about the necessity of human involvement in creating a covenantal partnership between God and ourselves.

Every time we read Torah as we did just now, we lift the Torah scroll and say the words “*zot hatorah asher sam moshe lifnei benei Israel al pi Adonai beyad Moshe*” – “This is the Torah Moshe set before the people of Israel; the Torah given by God through Moshe” or literary, “through Moshe’s hands”. *Beyad Moshe* - It is in Moshe’s hands, it is in our hands- God gave us Torah so that we could become God’s partners. We become partners by realizing the Divine presence in the world, and it is only through our awareness, that we move from *lo yadati*- I didn’t know to *yoda’at*- Now, I know.

The Haphtarah we just read from the book of Isaiah is one of the most radical texts and teachings our tradition has regarding this day of Yom Kippur. On this day, when we focus our energy on powerful ritual, which includes, fast, prayer and self-reflection, the Prophet Isaiah cries out, loud and clear that religious ritual without moral action does not achieve the goals of Yom Kippur. He criticizes the people saying:

“Is this the fast that I desire? For you to starve your bodies?... NO! This is the fast that I desire: To separate yourself from wrongdoing... To share your bread with the hungry, and to take the poor and desperate into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore his suffering...”(Isaiah 58:5-7).

Isaiah urges us to understand that no fast or *Teshuva* comes without our understanding that we are partners with the Divine and that this entails a responsibility to care for the world.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah I shared a teaching from the late Lubavitch rebbe. He said: If you see something that needs to be repaired and how to repair it, then you have found a piece of the world that God has left for you to complete. But if you only see what is wrong and what is ugly in the world, then it is you yourself that needs repair.

Isaiah calls on us to care and to look for those pieces of the world that God has left for us to complete.

Isaiah calls for empathy rather than apathy.

Apathy is a state of indifference, or the suppression of emotions. At times we can enter this state as a defensive reaction to the overwhelming magnitude of suffering and pain around us. Empathy on the other hand is the capacity to recognize and, to some extent, share feelings with another human being. This can be very hard as it means making ourselves vulnerable.

But Isaiah calls out and begs us not to stop caring. “Please, do not ignore your own people”(Isaiah 58:7) he says, and God will be with you.

What does caring and living with empathy really mean? One approach to that question is expressed in our liturgy as the often repeated trio - *Teshuva*-repentance, *Tefilah* - prayer and *Tzedakah* – charity

My teacher Professor Alice Shalvi, writes: “*Teshuva* demands honest self-scrutiny and reflection. It is a process between me and my own self. *Tefila* embodies my relationship with God. *Tzedaka* regulates my relationship with my

fellow human beings. Together these three elements- the individual, the divine, the societal- constitute our entire existence as believing beings.

None of these prescribed activities can alone bring redemption and renewal. It is precisely the combination of all of them and, most particularly, the practice of *tzedaka*, that the Yom Kippur *Haftara* presents as a model of human behavior” (“Beginning Anew” edited by Twersky and Kates).

Our rabbis teach us that one should pray only in a house with windows (Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 34B). This teaching recognizes that when we come together as a community, we must beware of disassociating our inner experience from what is going on outside the synagogue walls.

The word for synagogue in Hebrew is Beit Haknesset, the house of assembly. Interestingly, it is not called Beit Tfilah - the house of prayer or worship. Throughout history synagogues have primarily been places for people to assemble, to get together, to share their lifecycle events, to share their pains and their celebrations, a place to become a community. This is what we are trying to create here at TBZ, not just an institution or a building called a temple but a *Kehila kedosha*- a sacred community. A place where we can say together, *yesh Adonai bamakom hazeh*. A place where we can experience the **aha** moments that challenge us to look out the windows to engage with the world. Through working for change in our communities and lives we ourselves are transformed and changed in a deep way, for that is how we encounter God’s presence. When we truly care for each other, we become partners in relationships that change us, change the other person and change our community.

As you might know this summer Israeli society witnessed one of the largest demonstrations in its history. Many, especially young people went out to the streets to demand social justice. This summer I was privileged to sit with a close friend and colleague, Rabbi Idit Lev, who works for Rabbis for Human Rights in Israel. Rabbi Lev, who is the mother of three children who were on vacation told me how she went every night to the tents and demonstrations in Haifa where she lives. ‘I have not slept much’, she said ‘but I haven't felt this alive and excited in a long time. I haven't felt that, I, we, can really make a change in Israeli society’. Rabbi Lev's words, enthusiasm and hope, reminded me that we actually do have the power to change the world. It is easy to forget that, easier to ignore and avoid the suffering and injustice. It is easier to feel apathy than empathy. It is easier not to hear the scream of the needy than it is to care. When we truly care for the other, we change ourselves and we change the world.

I remember the first few times I participated as a teenager in social protests. Growing up Chile under Pinochet, this was a big deal. I recall feeling a combination of fear and excitement. Fear because we were raised not to say out loud what we thought and believed and excitement, because something was changing.

This past year has been a year of many people going out to the streets. It is happening all over the world, from Egypt to Wall Street and even right here in Boston. People caring and standing together for what they believe is right. People hoping that their voice and feet will bring change to their lives, to their country and to the world. It has been a year of moving from complacency to speaking out.

It is true; change can be scary and traumatic. In some situations, change might bring instability – but also incredible surprises.

Rabbi Sharon Brous writes: “Rather than dwell in cynicism or despair, the Jewish covenant requires instead that the reality of suffering evokes within us an acute sense of responsibility to radically restructure our world. This, our tradition tells us, is what it means to be a religious person in the world” (Yom Kippure sermon 5767).

The prophet Isaiah tells us that no *Teshuva*- comes without our understanding that we must care for the other. Our capacity to care is what allows us to change ourselves and the world. Caring for those who are sitting next to us at shul, caring even for those we don’t like much. Caring for those in need here at TBZ. Caring for those in need in our local communities and neighborhoods, and caring for those in need all over this country. Caring for our fellow Jews everywhere. Caring for Israel. Caring for the world.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, was interviewed by Carl Stern for NBC news, shortly before his death. In response to the question what message he has for the young, Rabbi Heschel said:

“Let them remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power, and that we do, everyone, our share to redeem the world, in spite of all absurdities, and all the frustrations, and all the disappointment. And

above all, remember that the meaning of life is to live life as if it were a work of art” (Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, page 412).

Today, let us remember that every little deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can do our share to redeem this world. That we can be partners with God in carving the tablets that we will carry with us this year. Let us remember, that we can live a life with awareness of God’s presence- *Yesh Adonai Bamakom Hazeh*. When we live a life of true caring for each other, when we become empathetic, we become partners in relationships that have the capacity to change us, change the other person, change our community and the whole world.