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It was a frigid Monday in February, and after some effort I found my friends from Chicago. They had come for the day to see for themselves what exactly was going on in Madison. We exchanged news with each other about the latest events at the Capitol as we joined a surprisingly large number of protesters marching around the Square. I was relieved when they suggested that we go inside the Capitol, mostly because I had forgotten my gloves. When I stepped foot into the usually austere marble building, I was totally unprepared for what I saw. The rotunda was packed. The hallways were packed. Everywhere people were chanting, "Kill the Bill!" and "This is what democracy looks like!" The usually sparse walls had been plastered with thousands of homemade signs calling for justice, democracy, and an end to the bill that would strip public sector workers of their right to collective bargaining. "United We Bargain, Divided We Beg" "Tax the rich!" "Librarians for Worker Rights" and on and on.

As we made our way to the second floor, we were stopped by a long line of firefighters. Although exempted from the bill, they too were marching against it. As I looked at the walls, it seemed as if a full-fledged, utopian community had emerged in the Capitol. There was a designated sleeping area, food stations, and space reserved for children. Drums beat in the rotunda and citizens testified in the legislature. Teachers, police officers, nurses, childcare workers, and students joined together as one, filling and surrounding the building. It certainly seemed as if the people had revealed an insurmountable communal strength.

Suddenly I ran into a teenager from Shaarei Shamayim. My immediate thought was, "Shouldn't you be in school?" But of course not, for there was no school, or rather, the students' learning was taking place at the Capitol. The teenager I saw was busy working at the protesters' new information center, confidently giving directions and telling people the rules of this holy place. I thought back to when I was in high school. I couldn't remember ever attending a demonstration, much less finding my way to the heart of a political struggle. Then I thought back to college, but I still didn't come up with much. Later when I talked to some of the teenagers in the congregation about their involvement in these protests, I realized what a transformative experience this had been for them. I felt a little jealous. What an extraordinary moment to learn about social change and to work with other people on a political issue exploding throughout the state.

Some of us were not part of the protests this past winter, and some of us did not particularly believe that what the protesters were doing was right. But we can all think of an issue that we do believe in, an issue that would be inspiring or important enough to draw us in, to cause us to feel that we are part of building a movement that is exciting and meaningful. What happened in Madison this past winter was extraordinary, but it is only one example of people joining together to voice their beliefs and their sincere hope for change.

For many of us, these Madison protests filled us with the hope and possibility of change. We believed that if there were that many people who cared that passionately and who were that well organized, then we could stop the effort to end collective bargaining and the severe cuts to education, health care, and so many other issues at the heart of our society. Hundreds of thousands of people marched outside the Capitol for weeks. Our message was clear, our voices were loud, but the bills passed nonetheless. By now, the signs in the Capitol have all been taken down, the crowds have dispersed, and the media has moved on. It is unclear what next winter will bring.

So we are left asking what is the fruit of our efforts, what is the result of the outpouring of our voices. As the vivid stories – a prank call from a fake Koch brother, thousands of free pizza slices for protesters, farmers driving their tractors on the Square, and activists camping out in Walkerville – have faded into memory, and as the Supreme Court election and the summer recalls have moved off the front pages of the newspaper, we too have moved on. Even if we still are involved, the intensity is no longer there, and the realities of the new legislation have settled in.

It is hard not to feel a sense of powerlessness, and we did not have to be involved with these protests to understand this. How many times have we called our senators, written letters to the editor, attended rallies, and worked persistently on campaigns and not seen any change? We wonder whether anyone is really listening or whether anyone really cares. We begin to wonder if our actions matter and we even begin to wonder if we matter. We start to feel invisible.

We despair because we feel that we are alone and that we are ineffectual. We burn out, we become alienated from the people with whom we were working, and we lose sight of our goals. We tell ourselves that we have done our part and we cannot do anything else. We numb ourselves to the injustices around us by turning our attention to our Facebook accounts, by immersing ourselves in narratives of other people's lives on television, by masking our emotions with food or alcohol, or by filling our schedules until they are overflowing. We distract ourselves because we are overwhelmed by the suffering around us, we are discouraged by our sense of powerlessness, and we know that the real work of social change is so hard.

Working for something we believe in can be risky, because we become hopeful that life can be different and that change is around the corner. But change is not always around the corner. Sometimes change is very long in coming. The bill passes. Our candidate loses. Or our candidate wins but does not really govern very differently. We try and try and do not succeed.

On Yom Kippur communities traditionally read the story of Jonah, a story which mirrors these feelings of invisibility and disempowerment. Jonah is the prophet who resists God's call to go to the city of Nineveh to tell the wicked people that they must change their ways. Jonah runs the other way and boards a ship to Tarshish. He goes to sleep at the bottom of the ship and remains asleep as a huge storm erupts. While the other people on the ship are trying to save it

from sinking in the storm, Jonah continues to sleep. Sometimes, it is easier to go to sleep than to speak up for change.

The story of Jonah and the holiday of Yom Kippur remind us both of our powerlessness and of our capacity to act powerfully. We may feel that change really is not possible, but again and again we are reminded that this is not true. We spend the entire day examining how we have behaved in the past year and acknowledging our wrongdoings so that we can act differently in the coming year. If what we did was irrelevant, inconsequential, or unimportant, then there would be no reason to set aside a day with great ritual to review our actions.

Our liturgy speaks of a God who tracks all of our behavior and judges it. The Unetaneh Tokef prayer reads in part:

True it is that you are our judge,
you alone can reprove, you alone can know,
you alone are witness to all deeds.

It is you who shall write,
you who shall seal what is written,
you who shall read,
and you who shall number all souls.

You alone can remember what we have forgotten;
it is you who shall open the Book of Remembrance,
but its contents shall speak for themselves,
for it bears the imprint of us all,
which our deeds and our lives have inscribed.

And when the great shofar is sounded,
a small, quiet voice can be heard. (Unetaneh Tokef Prayer, Kol Hanesamah)

This may not be an image of God that we ascribe to, but figuratively the message is clear: our actions matter and we matter. We are not invisible. Our small, quiet voices can be heard.

The protests that erupted in Madison, and the protests that have erupted around the world, matter. From the Arab Spring to the massive housing protests in Israel, to the Occupy Wall Street movement spreading throughout this country now, people are joining together to demand justice, accountability, and democracy. It is still not clear what will emerge from these enormous protests and uprisings, but they teach us that another world is possible, that there are always unseen opportunities, that change can happen when we least expect it. They teach us that solidarity and communal responsibility are not relics of the past but are essential in our own time for how we are to live as a society.

These protests for social change may not change the world, at least not in the near future, but they can change us. That is the lesson that many of our congregation's teenagers taught me. It was a transformative experience for so many of them and for so many of us. When we experience a power of something larger than ourselves, the intensity of being part of something important, we have the potential to overcome apathy, powerlessness, and cynicism.

The captain of the ship arouses Jonah from his sleep. "What's with you that you sleep?! Rise up, and call upon your God!" he commands him. Jonah suggests that he be thrown overboard to save the ship and everyone on it. He is swallowed by a large fish, and after three days of reflection in its belly he is spit up onto the land and finally changes his ways. He promises to go to Nineveh, acting courageously to do his part to create change. Yet, change does not come easily to Jonah. He struggles just as we struggle with apathy, powerlessness, and cynicism. Jonah flees from responsibility, and he is conflicted about his role in creating change.

But there is another message of the story, one that is even more important. It is strange that the people of Nineveh seem to change so quickly. We are told that they are truly wicked people, so how could Jonah have come in, prophesied to them, and caused them to turn abruptly from their evil ways? Perhaps because there had been people in Nineveh who had been working for years on creating social change, who had already been building a different society, one that respects all people, protects the most vulnerable, and is rooted in a vision of democracy, solidarity, and communal responsibility. Jonah might have been the final catalyst for change, but the change had really come from within the society as a result of years of hard work. The Book of Jonah teaches us that a society can transform itself, even when it stands on the edge of disaster.

We can gain insight into how such transformation occurs by looking at two principles that the ancient rabbis developed in constructing Jewish prayer. The first is keva, or fixed prayer. This is the structured liturgy and the rules necessary to create a regular, ongoing relationship to prayer. Keva teaches us about limits, about discipline, and about perseverance. It offers a fixed approach to our prayer and creates expectations of what will happen. The second is kavanah, or intention. Kavanah is the spontaneity and creativity that helps keep prayer meaningful. The rabbis recognized that all keva with no kavanah would lead to dry, uninspired, meaningless prayer and that all kavanah with no keva would prevent the establishment of a regular, lasting practice that would transcend the daily whims of our lives.

We can apply the principles of kavanah and keva to our work for a better world. We need kavanah, the inspiring protests, the moments of connection between strangers, the singing in solidarity. However, lasting social change does not happen in the streets. It happens in meeting rooms, around kitchen tables, and in legislative offices. Social change work depends on keva – the disciplined, everyday work of creating a sustainable movement, the work of phone banks, data entry, research, and analysis.

Hundreds of thousands of people came to Madison to voice their discontent last winter. Most have returned to their normal routines and have drifted away from the intense work of social

change. The protests are a treasured memory, a glimmer of hope in an increasingly difficult economy and political landscape. It is hard to maintain a commitment to change and to continue to work tirelessly for our ideals.

On Yom Kippur we make commitments to begin anew. The real challenge for us is not how we act today, but how we act tomorrow, the day after Yom Kippur, when we return to our everyday lives and confront the endless challenges and responsibilities we face each day. Yom Kippur is a communal protest against stagnation. We are moved by the liturgy, the music, and the community that gathers together. We look beyond our apathy and imagine living committed, passionate, principled lives. These High Holy Days are the kavanah of our Jewish year. But real sustainable change does not happen a few days a year or with kavanah alone. We need keva, disciplined practice and hard work, to help us live out our ideals.

On this Yom Kippur, let us remember the hard work of the people of Nineveh, and let us remember that social transformation is possible. May the final blast of the shofar keep us awake to these possibilities as we move into the new year before us.

Ken yehi ratzon.