

Rabbi Nancy Wechsler
Yom Kippur Morning: I make a Difference

A story worth noting.

A teacher in New York decided to honor all of her high school seniors by telling each of them how much of a difference they made. She called each student to the front of the class, one at a time. First, she told the class that student made a difference to her. Then, she presented each of them with a “Who I am Makes a Difference Blue Ribbon.”

Afterwards the teacher decided to do a class project to see what kind of impact acknowledgement would have on their community. She gave each of the students several more ribbons and instructed them to go out and spread this Blue Ribbon Ceremony. They were to follow up on the results, see who honored whom and report back to the class in about a week.

One of the students went to a junior executive who helped him plan out his post high school life. He honored him for having helped him with his career planning and then gave him a Blue Ribbon to be placed above his heart. Then he gave the junior executive two extra ribbons and said, “We’re doing a class project on acknowledgement and we’d like you to go out and find someone to honor.

Give that person this Blue Ribbon then give them the extra Blue Ribbon so that they can acknowledge another person. Then please report back to me and tell me what happened.”

Later that day the junior executive went in to see his boss, who was known to somewhat of a grouch. He told the boss that he admired him for being a creative genius and for his perseverance in starting the company and growing it. He asked him if he would accept the gift of the Blue Ribbon and gave him the last extra one saying, “Would you do me a favor? Would you take this extra ribbon by honoring someone else? The student who first gave me the ribbon is doing a project in school and we want to find out how it affects people.”

That night the boss finished a typically long day and typically long commute back home to his 14 year-old son. Per usual the son was in his room with his earbuds in, staring into his phone. Once he got his son’s attention he asked him to sit down.

Dad said, “The most incredible thing happened to me today. I was in my office and one of my junior executives came in and told me he admired me and gave me a Blue Ribbon for being a creative genius. Imagine. He thinks I am a creative

genius. Then he put this Blue Ribbon on my jacket above my heart and gave me an extra one to give to someone I wanted to honor.

As I was driving home tonight, I thought about you and wanted to honor you. My days are stressful, and I am tired. Sometimes I yell at you for not getting better grades, or your messy room or those ear buds in your ears. But I don't check in with you and I don't listen.

But somehow tonight I just wanted to sit here and well, just let you know that you do make a difference to me. Besides your mother, you are the most important person in my life. You are a great kid and I love you."

The startled boy started to sob and sob. He could not stop crying. His whole body shook, he looked up at his father and through his tears said, "I was planning on taking my life tomorrow Dad, even wrote a letter of apology to you and Mom. It's upstairs. Now, I don't think I going to need it."

I would bet there is *not one* of us in the sanctuary this morning who can not identify either with the parent and/or the child. The parent in this story is busy, in his or her own life, and doesn't know how to really connect.

The younger person in this story feels worthless, sad, hopeless and perhaps suffers from undiagnosed mental illness.

Those sad, frustrated, blue feelings; we all have them from time to time. We have them, our family members have them, our friends, our teachers, our co-workers, people sitting around us, have them. We are human.

It is great when we gain the perspective that we are not going to drown in the darker feelings and remember that tomorrow is a new day. The skill set that allows us to surf the waves of life cannot be underestimated, but not everyone is there. That is where we, as fellow travelers in life come in.

This afternoon we will read about the prophet Jonah who felt so miserable that he wanted to die. He was a prophet and by definition was supposed to go out and speak the truth knowing that people would ignore them or humiliate them. We know someone is a true prophet when he or she does not want the job. Jonah said to God, "Please God, take my life, for I would rather die than live."

Basing his worth on how people treated him, Jonah felt like a failure. He tried escaping to Tarshish, and he hid in the belly of a whale. He did not understand that the dark feelings would be temporary. Thankfully, God knew Jonah's mindset and helped him through.

What is tragic is how common depression and mental illness are in our culture.

Many who suffer, feel alone and their symptoms remain unnoticed. These individuals may become suicidal because they cannot see that this too will pass and there is a mental illness preventing them from recovery on their own.

Greek mythology teaches of Pandora's box, a magic box given to Pandora with the strict instructions she never open it. Curiosity got the best of Pandora and she opened the box allowing all of life's miseries to fly into the air. Only one positive thing was in Pandora's box that would save humanity and that one thing was hope. Hope is the something we offer when we are willing to listen.

Many of us have our own stories. I do as well. Some of us in the Jewish community knew one of the best caregivers of the elderly, a young bright-eyed man named Nathan from Ethiopia. Nathan appeared to be the most upbeat, generous, compassionate and intuitive person you'd ever meet. His smile and laughter lit up the room. And yet, at the age of 25, he made a decision that left a deep sorrow in our lives. I remember struggling with the information delivered to me right before a Simchat Torah service. I remember struggling with knowing how to explain this information to my children and my mother who loved him. We still miss him and wish we had known of his sadness.

For several years after his passing, I could not bear to look at the video clip he made for me. Finally, I did and watched this beautiful young man with his sweet voice telling each one in my family, including the dogs, he was sorry and how much he loved us. And though everyone who knew him, loved him, and thought they told him what he meant to them, we did not see what was in his heart. We could not have believed it. We never knew.

We are living in a time of mind-blowing technology and mind-blowing isolation. There can be six teens in a room, and all six are on their own devices. Restaurants frequently seat diners at their table, each on his or her own device. Despite how 'in touch' we are by screen, we are isolated, and we are lonely. And especially for our teens, the damage, slander, bullying, that happens on these devices can lead to profound holes in our life fabric. Accepting this as the price we pay for living in the 21st century is not an acceptable response.

Joanne Harpel, world renown expert on suicide bereavement writes: Suicide is the second leading cause of death for people ages 10-24. More teens and young adults die from taking their own lives than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza and chronic lung disease combined.

And not only do we live in a culture that seems to glamorize young people taking their life, but it is also the rich and prosperous. Each time we read or hear of the suicide of a seemingly successful and beautiful famous person, we ask the same question, “Why?” And not only the teens, or successful professionals, the brilliant, the funny, the creative, but the issue of the elderly making these choices from hopelessness is on the rise.

Taking one’s life violates a fundamental belief we hold as human beings that we were created for a reason and are meant to be here and as Jews, we believe that life is sacred. Yet, suicide is a decision some make, profoundly influenced by hopelessness, distorted thinking resulting from mental illness, a mental illness that can be healed through medication and therapy.

Ours is a culture where a broken arm receives a cast and everyone wants to sign it. Ours is a culture where illness of the brain receives shame, alienation, and a judgement of laziness.

The Mi Sh’beirach, our prayer for healing, prays for the renewal of emotional health and physical health. While it is reflexive to think of those battling cancer or recovering from a stroke or accident, it is equally important to remember those among us who are suffering from illnesses of the brain.

The brain is an organ as is any other organ in the body. When the heart is ailing, we fix it, when our eyes are ailing, we wear glasses, we pray more of our world will view the brain in the same way.

The Talmud teaches that to save one life is to save the entire world. To the best of our ability looking from this moment into the future, we are needed, to check in with one another, to see how things are going. We may worry that we don't know what to say. We are not all counselors, yet we can make room and listen. By listening we create connection. By listening, we demonstrate that the person is not alone.

The story is told of a Rabbi, the head of the yeshiva, Jewish boarding academy who stopped his student Jacob as he was rushing to his next class. "Hey Jacob" said the rabbi. "How is Ari doing? I haven't seen him in class."

"I don't know Rabbi" said Jacob, "I haven't seen Ari in a while."

"What do you mean?" pressed the rabbi, "you go to classes, you pray, you eat meals with Ari, and you are telling me you don't know how he is doing? If he is happy or if he is miserable?"

“A community,” summarized the rabbi “is not comprised of me, myself and I... A community exists when we care enough to ask and to know how the other is doing. We are only as strong as our caring.”

Friends, our service as human beings, is not to make diagnoses, but rather to wake up and pay attention to those around us. Ask how people are doing, check in and stand around, to wait for their answers. And make it your New Year’s commitment, to tell people that who they are, makes a difference.

Coming around now are blue ribbons that say, “Who I am makes a difference.”

These come from the Blue Ribbon Foundation. I would like for you to take two of them. Like the father who received this ribbon and gave it to his child, you have your own ribbon. Stick it on above your heart. Show acknowledgement to another person outside of our sanctuary, to express respect, appreciation and love for others.

Over the years, this heartfelt ceremony has impacted over 40 million people worldwide and translated in 12 languages, saving lives, eradicating bullying and bringing peace in the home, school and workplace. Why?

Because we need to know that we matter, that we make a difference and frequently we are not going to know unless we are told. The world would not be the same without us.

We are all affected by this issue whether it has touched us personally or through media

. And if there is any good news, it is that each of us can be agents of change. We can start by challenging the secret voices of alienation and isolation as we see it. We can check in more. We can listen more. We can let someone know that they make a difference.

In this way, we bring more healing and hope into our world. For indeed, we are loved now and always, just the way we are

May all of us be inscribed for many, many years in the Book of Life.

Amen