

Twice a Week – Yom Kippur 5780

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Twice a week, *pa'amayim ba-shavua*. Twice a week is what it takes.

In ancient times, the most dramatic part of Yom Kippur was the service conducted by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies. The other priests were meticulous in their preparations, as they knew that the smallest ritual misstep could result in tragedy. Our liturgy describes how “through the course of the day, the High Priest washed his hands and feet ten times and bathed five times, and upon completion of the service his face shone, *k'tzeit ha-shemesh bigvurah*, like the sun in its zenith.”

Completing this ritual unscathed was cause for celebration. The High Priest would emerge from the Holy of Holies, surrounded by throngs of well-wishers. Recognizing that God was surely listening in this moment, he would offer a prayer: “*Yehi ratzon milfanekha*, May it be Your will, Adonai ... to grant us all a year of abundance, a year of blessing, a year of good fortune” ... it's an alphabetical acrostic of 22 lines. And he would add a final prayer for the people of Sharon: “May it be Your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, that their homes not become their graves, *she-lo ye-asu bateihem k'vureihem*.”

Not become their graves? That's a little strange. And weeks before the first anniversary of Pittsburgh, it's a bit haunting. What is it about the people of Sharon?

The marginal note in our Mahzor indicates that the area of Sharon, the central section of Israel's coastal plain was subject to earthquakes. The Talmud says also that the soil there was not conducive to brickmaking. It produced an inferior product that could disintegrate and cause a house to collapse at any time. The High Priest was apparently concerned that individuals who had come to Jerusalem on pilgrimage might return home to find that their houses had collapsed while they were gone.

Now, the next question is why? If people knew the risk, why would they build homes in Sharon? Why not live someplace else? And the answer seems to be that it was just that beautiful; the location was that desirable. Better to understand the risk and to take appropriate measures to protect yourself than to give up the chance of living in such a beautiful place.

The Talmud says that builders of these houses just understood, *she-mithadshin otan pa-amayim ba-shavua*, that they had to check them out and make updates and repairs twice each week – which probably means twice every seven years, but regularly, constantly. I imagine the people of Sharon hearing the High Priest's prayer as a reminder: prayer in this space is not enough; don't wait until it is too late; don't become complacent; keep up with regular maintenance and my beautiful home will not become my grave. We've heard the same message from our dentists. Have your teeth cleaned, check things out regularly, and you can avoid the most serious problems.

Constant maintenance. Twice every seven years. Twice a year. Twice each week. The principle is the same.

You may have heard about the three elderly women who were sitting around the pool and bragging about their sons. “My Freddie,” the first offered, “Everyone should be so lucky to have a son like my Freddie. Every year he comes to my house for break fast and Passover, and he brings the nicest bouquet of flowers; for my birthday, he sends the nicest cards.”

“That’s nice,” says the second. “But with all due respect, it doesn’t compare to what my Sammy does. Every Sunday, he comes over to my house after dropping his children at Hebrew School and takes me out for brunch.”

“WELL!” Says Barbara “I don’t want to make either of you feel bad, but they’ve got nothing on my Harry. Twice each week, he pays someone hundreds of dollars an hour just so he can lie on their couch and talk. And do you know what he talks about for all that time? All he talks about is *me*. Twice a week.

This is a strange way to introduce a sermon about antisemitism, maybe because I never imagined giving such a sermon. I didn’t grow up with family stories about the Holocaust; my father’s family had long been in America, and my mother’s parents had moved from Baghdad to Lebanon and Palestine by that time. We talked about the importance of Israel, but not so much about the dangers of Nazism. I heard stories about Jews being excluded from certain country clubs, quotas in universities and professional schools; I even had the occasional inappropriate anti-Semitic joke hurled in my direction at my public high school. But antisemitism was never something I particularly worried about.

I worried about the future of the Jewish people, but mostly because of apathy and assimilation. And of course, when violence flares in Israel ...

But then came Pittsburgh. I am still reliving the moment in my head, when we rounded the corner during the Torah procession and someone whispered that she had heard on the radio on the way to services that there had been a shooting at a synagogue. Hal Ossman pulled me off the *bima* a few minutes later to tell me about the precautions our security personnel had taken to protect B’nai Israel. It was surreal to have to think that way.

That evening, we called an emergency meeting of our security committee; we communicated with the congregation. Thousands attended a community service the next day at Adas Israel. And we held a service here during which the questions were asked:

What is going to happen to us? We’ve been through this before, and we thought those days were over. What are we going to do to curb the rise of antisemitism? How can we protect ourselves?

I wasn’t been paying full attention. The Anti Defamation League reported a 57% rise in antisemitic incidents in 2017 over the previous year; the FBI reported a 37% rise in hate crimes against Jews. We saw what happened in France in 2015, when a gunman attacked a kosher supermarket and killed 4 Jews, while taking 15 others hostage. A 2014 survey revealed that 74 % of French Jews had considered leaving; *aliyah* from France has risen significantly. But now it was happening to us.

About a month ago, I attended a rabbinic event with Yair Rosenberg, a senior writer at Tablet Magazine who has done a lot of work on the recent rise of antisemitism. During the Q&A period, someone asked Mr. Rosenberg which he thought was worse: antisemitism from the right or antisemitism from the left. The questioner left out the third head on what David Harris from AJC

describes as the “three-headed monster of antisemitism,” which comes from the Islamic Jihadists. But he wanted to know which was worse, perhaps so he could feel better about his own camp. And Rosenberg answered: “yes.” For someone on the left to say that antisemitism is only a problem on the right, or for someone on the right to say it is worse on the left is in Rosenberg’s words like “trying to be a bouncer at a party you weren’t invited to.”

There is anti-Semitism from both sides. Maybe it’s more dramatic from the right – threatening chants that “The Jews will not replace us,” shooters entering synagogues, the insinuation that Jews are not fully American, or that Jews are encouraging too much diversity and mixing the races.

Maybe anti-Semitism from the left often comes from intellectual elites or from people with whom we might agree on other issues; but it has the same delegitimizing effects. It posits that Jews can never really be victims because we are white, or that Zionism is racism, or Jews perpetuated the slave trade. It is antisemitic to say that Jewish symbols cannot be displayed at Pride parades or, as a Swedish radio personality suggested on-air to Israel’s ambassador to Sweden in 2015, that “Jews themselves have a responsibility in the growing anti-Semitism that we see now.” There are extremists on both sides. We dare not make excuses. We must be vigilant.

We have to invest in security. We have to call out the hatred. There is no substitute for the common sense rule of “see something, say something.” But that is not enough.

In her masterful little book *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, Bari Weiss, a staff writer and editor at the *New York Times* (and a native of Pittsburgh) writes that it isn’t enough to hire more guards or hold rallies or make proclamations that we are anti-anti-Semites. We have to be for something as well. As she put it, we best “defy anti-Semitism not with Jewish pleas and Jewish hand-wringing but with Jewish learning, Jewish observance, Jewish strength and Jewish achievement.”

Which brings me back to the people of Sharon who protected themselves from the threats they faced by examining and reinforcing their foundations “*pa’amayim ba-shavua*, twice each ‘week.’” Imagine if we could do more than “pick one more *mitzvah*,” more than “pick a week in November to bake challah and invite friends for Shabbat.” More than sign up for Mitzvah Day or enroll in an adult education class or drop my kids off at Hebrew school. All of those things are great, but they are episodic. The key is to do Jewish *regularly*. To be able to look back each Friday and say that this week I did two things - I attended a rally or a service, I read a Jewish book or article, I gave *tzedakah*, I called a relative in Israel or made plans to visit; and next week I will do at least two more things. Reinforcing Jewish identity is an ongoing exercise.

We best meet the challenges of assimilation the same way. We know how the Jewish community used to respond to intermarriage; we turned people away. And it didn’t work because we can’t just be against. We have to be *for* – *for* Jewish life, *for* Jewish connections, *for* Jewish rituals and family celebrations.

We also have to be *for respect*. Our tradition wasn’t created yesterday; Jewish law makes distinctions between Jews and gentiles, and these distinctions matter.

But the approach that pins all our expectations for the future on one decision about love or one moment or one episode is not effective. We know couples where both partners are Jews, and Judaism is hardly practiced in the home; and other partners who profess differently, but Shabbat and Jewish education are a priority.

There's even a joke about it, about a man who spent his whole life telling his son not to marry someone who wasn't Jewish. But love is love, and eventually the son does marry a non-Jew, and she takes classes and learns about Judaism and decides to convert. Years later, the father calls up his son before the baseball playoffs and asks if they can make plan to attend a game on a Friday night, something they've done several times before. But the son declines – "I'd love to, Dad, but my wife has people coming over for Shabbos dinner, and the kids are really excited." And the father responds, "See, I told you not to marry someone who wasn't Jewish."

Except it isn't a joke.

Robert Mnookin, a distinguished law professor at Harvard, begins his book *The Jewish American Paradox* with a vignette from his time on a sabbatical semester in Oxford. When his 11-year-old daughter came home after the first day of school and reported that she was the only Jewish student in her class, Mnookin and his wife asked how it made her feel. And they were stunned by the response. "She looked at us and asked, 'When are we actually going to become Jewish?'"

Mnookin describes his shock. He and his wife always "knew" they were Jewish; but they had never joined a synagogue, sent their kids to religious school, or even attended services for Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. They took Jewish identity for granted and were surprised to learn that their children did not automatically feel the same way. He discovered that with Judaism, you can't just "set it and forget it."

His daughter wanted a Jewish education and a *bat mitzvah*, and so the family joined a synagogue. They began in their own way to observe holidays; they joined Jewish organizations and even a couple boards. And years later, Mnookin wrote his book to explain what he had done to ensure that his grandchildren would never ask the same question his daughter had asked.

It's a great book, especially the last chapter, for people who aren't sure where to begin or for grandparents who want to help children and grandchildren navigate the challenges of living with multiple identities. The book is in our library; I have copies of the last chapter that I will email to anyone who asks; or you can just remember the main idea: *do Jewish regularly*. Jewish isn't something you just *are*, but rather something you must constantly *become*.

A man who once approached the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, complaining that his child did not want to uphold an observant lifestyle as an adult. "What should I do?" he asked And the Ba'al Shem answered simply: "Love him more!"

As parents, as grandparents, as a community, we need to heed that advice. We dare not push away. The only thing we can do is love. Embrace. Welcome. Encourage. Make it easy for the people we love to choose *pa'amayyim ba-shavu'a*, the proactive, "twice-a-week" Jewish wellness plan.

In a moment, we will recite Yizkor, a service of remembering. For some, the memories of pain (and also joy) are fresh; for others, some details are fading. I point out to people at the beginning of that journey that there is a difference between “mourning” and “remembering.” Mourning is constant. Individuals in mourning can recite *kaddish* multiple times each day; there are restrictions that remind the mourner at seemingly every moment of the sacred responsibility to honor the deceased.

But remembering is different. Remembering is episodic. Memory is ritualized on the *yahrtzeit* and at Yizkor; but beyond that, it is different for each person. We don't really know what activities or experiences will trigger the feelings over time.

Memories are most effective when translated into actions. Our Yizkor prayer includes a pledge to give *tzedakah*, but imagine if we could follow that up with a more regular commitment, to observe particular *mitzvot* to honor loved one's legacies. We change and memories change, but what if we could look back at the end of each week and reflect on two things we did, two people we helped, two memories we invoked?

Life is dangerous, and Jewish life in America today feels especially fraught. More than 200 years ago, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav famously compared our place in the world to a narrow bridge. *V'haikar lo l'hitpached k'lal*, but the main thing is not to be afraid. Like the ancient Jews of Sharon, we can overcome the dangers of the moment by inspecting, fortifying, connecting, engaging, committing, nurturing, renewing Jewish identity with regularity and constancy – *pa'amayim ba-shavua*, twice each week. Let us accept the challenge, that we and our posterity may be inscribed and sealed for good in the book of life. Amen.