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Neilah Yom Kippur
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How Can We Fix Our World?

Friends all:

G'mar Hatima tova--the greeting for Yom Kippur--may we all be sealed for good!

To those who are here in person at B'nai Israel and to those who are with us "virtually"--one united community in the spirit of Yom Kippur--please know how deeply I cherish this opportunity of speaking with you as a prelude to Neilah, the concluding service of this sacred day and the emotional crescendo of the High Holy Day season. I am especially grateful to my dear colleague, Rabbi Michael Safra, for this invitation and for the friendship that we have shared now for almost two decades.

Neilah is a unique moment, precisely because there is a heightened urgency to our thoughts and concerns. Yom Kippur--with all its intensity--will soon be over, and another year stretches uncharted before us. How will we use that gift of time?

Like so many others, I was mesmerized by the events of recent weeks, as the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan and as over 100,000 Americans and Afghanis were airlifted to safety. In the midst of unrelenting chaos and sorrow, one story grabbed my attention:

Delta Airlines pilot Alexander Kahn flew hundreds of Afghan refugees from Germany to Dulles as part of a US government partnership with private commercial airlines. It was a poignant experience for Kahn, he told CNN, primarily because his own father was a Holocaust survivor who immigrated to the US in a similar fashion. This is what Alexander Kahn said: "My father was liberated from Buchenwald by Patton's Third Army and came to the U.S. not much differently than the people coming now. He had the clothes on his back, no family, no English skills and had to start life over again. Luckily, he was able to do so in this land of opportunity-- eventually becoming a doctor and serving in the American Army...

Kahn said that he met his crew the night before the flight from Ramstein Air Force Base to Dulles and with their own funds, the crew purchased supplies like diapers, wipes, candy, and coloring books for the children, because they knew that the evacuees had almost nothing with them. And Kahn told the CNN reporter: "I was able to put myself in their position and realize that this is going to be a frightening experience for

them...but it also has the potential to become an excellent experience. These evacuees are coming to America, and we are a generous country with generous people."

What is empathy? It is exactly how Alexander Kahn defined it: putting ourselves in the position of others--and then reaching out through tangible acts of caring.

Often we feel overwhelmed, even helpless, by the many problems surrounding us: a highly polarized political culture which threatened democracy itself here in our Nation's Capital, the devastating effects of climate change and the scourge of a pandemic, now well into its second year, which has upended life for all of us, even for our 2-year old grandson, Benji, who together with all the other kids stood at the entrance to the DCJCC for the first day of Nursery School--with a mask tied tightly on his face. But, despite the swirl of our world, wherever we are, whatever our personal circumstances may be, each of us has the capacity for empathy, compassion.

Lest you think that empathy or compassion is a 21st century concept, let me assure you that it is at the core of many Jewish values. The Midrash puts it aptly: Just as God is called "The Compassionate One, so are we mandated to be compassionate...to visit

the sick, to comfort the bereaved, to give to those who are in need--in a thousand and more ways to create a better, kinder, world for all God's children. Our bubbes and zaydes spoke about having "rachmones" for others--empathy, compassion. Jews were often called: Rachmanim b'nei rachmanim---compassionate ones, who are the children of compassionate ones. Could there be a greater honorific than that? What does our discordant world really need? Surely it is more empathy, more compassion.

I was touched by an article in the Post on Monday which described a performance on the Mall of "Come From Away" marking the 20th anniversary commemoration of 9/11. It is the story of the residents of Gander, Newfoundland. When American airspace shut down in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, 38 jets were directed to land in Gander, where thousands of these stranded passengers--who came to be known as "the plane people" --received an extraordinary outpouring of generosity and hospitality from the "locals". That kindness extended for days until "the plane people" could return home.

At Neilah, we pray metaphorically: "Let the curses of the old year end, let the blessings of the new year begin." How do we create blessings? Each of us can be an agent for blessing, as we bring a surge

of compassion and empathy to our family, to our community, to our country, and to our Jewish people. It is a responsibility that should be our privilege to embrace.