

Kol Nidre 5781
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Changing Ourselves and Changing the World

I didn't have the blessing of knowing my grandparents. However, there were several other very special family members and family friends who nurtured me in different ways.

One was my late grandmother's best friend, Angie, who used a wheelchair and lived in a nursing home due to her MS. She didn't have any family of her own, which I think was part of the special connection my dad and all of us had with her.

She was a faithful Catholic, with a picture of the Pope proudly displayed in her room. Her priest was a regular and important presence for her.

She was one of the most positive people I have ever known, always with a smile on her face and a unique ability to live in the moment and see blessings.

It was from her, over 40 years ago, that I learned a perspective that still guides me today. She had a crocheted picture hanging on the wall. It included the words of what is commonly called the Serenity Prayer.

*Grant me [O God]
The serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.*

This prayer was written by a twentieth century pastor named Reinhold Niebuhr. I see it as the extension of the Talmudic teaching of Rabbi Tarfon that says, “It is not up to you to finish the work, yet you are not free to avoid it.”

As we begin our Yom Kippur together, it is overwhelming to take in all the urgent needs. This is a time for personal reflection and self-improvement, which is already a daunting task when taken seriously. And, when we look not just inward but outward, at the events in our city over the last several weeks...so much violence and openly expressed hatred...it can weigh us down. And that weight only grows heavier when we look across the country and around the globe.

But on this night of Kol Nidre, literally “All our Vows”, my prayer is that we will engage in a process of discernment, doing the soul work that allows us to find the courage and wisdom to take action, to do as much of the work as we are able to do to create positive change, to direct us onto a good and right path.

I think tonight is an opportunity to ask questions: what is the Rochester I want to see? What is the New York I dream of? What do I want to happen across the United States?

This is a time to ask those big, broad questions...if not now, when?!?

Once we have answers to these questions, we can apply the perspective of both Neibhur and Tarfon: what are the first, small, realistic and achievable steps we can take to fulfill our hopes and dreams?

I think this same process can apply on a personal level. What are our goals for our physical and mental health? For our learning and emotional growth? For our families? What about our professional pursuits? And, our charitable giving and volunteering?

Our instinct might be that Yom Kippur is a time to look back over the past year and make amends. While that is certainly a part of these days, our primary focus needs to be looking ahead. What can we do for positive change in the coming months?

Change is hard. And the process of discernment is challenging.

One of my favorite comic strips, which sadly hasn't been published in a number of years, is Calvin and Hobbes. In one strip, Calvin, the wise, profound, and wickedly funny little boy, turned around the Serenity Prayer... "Know what I pray for? The strength to change what I can, the inability to accept what I can't, and the incapacity to tell the difference."

It's a formula for frustration, certainly, but it's also realistic. There's just SO MUCH happening in our world right now, that it can take our breath away. We want the strength to change what we can and also, somehow, someday, for that to be without limits.

An example.

On March 30, a man named Daniel Prude died. He died after a confrontation a week earlier, in the middle of the night, naked, on the street.

In the last several weeks, many of us have been engaged in different ways in responding to this event.

I speak tonight to honor his memory.

And, I speak tonight to recognize the tremendous complexities in this moment, and the overwhelming possibilities for how we can respond.

I can't understand all of the elements of this situation and I can't change all of the structural issues that led to this tragic moment. But I'm not free to avoid the work just because I can't complete it.

What I do believe...what I believe in my core...is that I want people in our city...all people, everywhere, actually... to have respect and dignity and comfort and loving embrace and peace in that holy moment when life comes to an end.

I don't want skin color or bank account or other aspects of identity to interfere with the fundamental trajectory: healthy birth, quality education, secure housing and health care, fruitful employment...and dignified end of life. If not tonight of all nights, I want to see a world where there is equality. And human dignity for all.

And I pray on this Yom Kippur that I will be blessed with the strength to pursue this vision, the wisdom to know how I can be effective, and the reassurance to know that I—and all of us—can do our share, even if we cannot complete the task.

Yom Kippur is, in a way, a vigil. We take this window of time and we use it as a time to focus...to try and see clearly what needs to change in our world, and how we need to change ourselves to make it possible.

This sacred sliver of the year is a powerful moment to understand the intersection between personal change and change in the world. It's as my teacher, Rabbi Kerry Olitzky, phrased it, "Because the world is a different place each moment I am alive, there is unlimited potential for change."

There are many concerns I have about the reaction and response to what happened to Daniel Prude. There have been moments over these last several weeks when I was heartened that we were moving closer to justice, and there have been moments when I have been dismayed and distressed at the focus and approach of those working for change.

Most importantly, though, I believe this moment in our city's history is a time to remember that there is unlimited potential for change. We do not need to accept conditions as *they* are and we do not need to resign ourselves to how *we* are. It will be a long time before there is equality and peace, but I urge us to believe that it will come. The world is different than it has ever been before. This is a time for us to discern what we can do to change the things we can.

As I reflect on the prospect of change, I am mindful of the classic teaching of Rabbi Israel Salanter. Salanter was the founder of the Modern Musar or Jewish Ethical Mindfulness Movement. He reflected, “When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. But I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my country. When I found I couldn’t change my country, I began to focus on my town. However, I discovered that I couldn’t change the town, and so as I grew older, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, but I’ve come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself, then I could have made an impact on my family. And, my family and I could have made an impact on our town. And that, in turn, could have changed the country and we could all indeed have changed the world.”

Today, we can resolve to change the world, beginning with ourselves. May God bless us with strength, wisdom, and courage as we embrace this holy and essential work.