

A few years ago my wife Anne and our kids started to get upset when I didn't answer them when they spoke to me. I had a suspicion that I was beginning to lose my hearing, so I went to the audiologist. She put me in a room, placed the sound-cancelling headphones over my ears, and told me to indicate whenever I heard a tone in my ear. She tried various pitches and then checked my sensitivity to volume. As the sound became quieter I strained to pick up the tone. Eventually, I told her that I did not hear anything coming through the headphones, but I did hear something through the glass in the room where she was recording.

After the exam the audiologist told me that she had good news and bad news about the exam.

“Let's start with the good news,” I said.

“Well,” she replied, “You have the hearing of an eight-year old.”

Elated, but puzzled, I asked, “So what's the bad news.”

“You're going to have to tell your wife.”

True story!

I have been criticized – at home and at work – for not always being as attentive as I could be. It's something I struggle with, need to be reminded about and apologize for if I've done it to you. As my audiologist reminded me, my real problem isn't that I cannot hear. It's that I'm not always listening.

Today, I would like to suggest, this is not just an issue for me, but a societal challenge. There is just so much “noise”, that it's hard to filter out what matters. We enslave ourselves to a constant barrage of input that leaves us no respite from work and no freedom from the incessant contact of others. There is no escape, as texts and tweets, emails and messages demand our immediate attention. It is possible to shut it off, but how many of us ever do? Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, our technology allows us (heck, it practically demands of us!) to always be doing something or with someone else. You might say we live in an age of societal attention deficit disorder.

My personal challenge is a mirror of so many. Living each moment trying to do everything, to listen to “it all”, we lose the ability focus on the things that really ought demand our attention. Like the audiologist who challenged me, the prophet Jeremiah warns us how distraction leads to a loss of moral focus. “They have eyes, but they do not see; ears, but they hear nothing.”¹

On Rosh Hashanah I tried to make the case that the day of the world's birth is really not about universal themes, but starts with each individual, calling us to repair ourselves. Today, I would like to suggest that Yom Kippur, generally seen as a day for self-reflection and personal improvement, is really *not* about looking in, but looking out. All the self-denial – refraining from food and drink, bathing and cohabitation – is misunderstood if we think it is about us. Rather, Yom Kippur is about re-aligning and re-focusing so that we more clearly see what's going on around us.

The need for us to pay attention to the needs of others is a theme writ large throughout our sacred literature. In the *haftarah* we read earlier the prophet Isaiah rails against the hypocrisy of those who come to pray and fast, but do nothing to build a more equitable society:

Even on your fast day you think only of desire,
 While oppressing all who work for you ...
 Is this the fast I desire?
 A day to afflict body and soul?
 Bowing your head like a reed, covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes?
 Do you call this a fast – a day worthy of the favor of Adonai?
 Is not this the fast I desire –
 To break the bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke
 To let the oppressed go free and release all those enslaved?
 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
 And to take homeless poor into your home?²

The Yom Kippur confessional underscores Isaiah's point. Yom Kippur, we teach, is about our connection with God. Yet the formal admission of wrongdoing we recited earlier (על חטא שחטאנו לפניך *al chet shechantu lifanecha*) says nothing about living a so-called religious life. We do not speak of failing

¹ Jeremiah 5:21

² Isaiah 58:3-7

to pray enough or observe Shabbat. Rather, we point out our moral transgressions – abusing power, lying and deceiving, acting out of self-interest, taking too much of the earth's resources for ourselves (“consumption of food and drink”) through greed and exploitation. If you want to live a truly faithful life, the prayers suggest, create a just and equitable society.

In case we did not get the point, the Torah portion this afternoon (the final teaching we are supposed to take with us as we move back to our lives) says that we can be holy. How? By acting in ways that create more righteousness in the world. Share what you have with those in need. Do not deceive. Do not take what rightly belongs to others. Pay workers a fair wage and on time.

The message, then, is clear. Yom Kippur's ultimate goal is not the repair of the soul (תיקון הנפש *tikkun ha'nefesh*), but fixing the world (תיקון עולם *tikkun olam*). In Jewish thought, therefore, inner contemplation is not a retreat from the world. It is, instead, the means by which we find the focus to see what is broken.

Rabbi Alan Lew, who wrote much about Jewish meditation, explained it in this way:

The more we focus on ourselves, the more we realize that we are not merely ourselves. Sitting in a room with others, consciously breathing the same air, hearing the same sounds, feeling our thoughts and our emotions moving in the same rhythmic patterns, we come to experience that we ourselves are not fixed objects, neither discrete nor separate, but part of a web of being larger than ourselves.³

The goal of Jewish self-awareness, then, is an awareness of others. It is allowing our ears to hear, our eyes to see and our hearts to feel the pain of those around us. Awareness is not just an appreciation of the wonder of the world, it is also a realistic recognition of its ugliness and pain, cruelty and injustice.

³ *Be Still and Get Going: A Jewish Meditation Practice for Real Life* (2005), p. 174

Such awareness is established at the very outset of our people's story, at the moment when Abraham began his journey. One of the central questions our rabbis ask about Abraham was why he was chosen. Was it an act of pure grace or was there something in him that led God to say, “This is the man to model what I want for the world”?

According to one rabbinic parable Abraham was like a traveller who, looking at the world, saw it like a palace all lit up (a בירה דולקת *birah doleket*). Seeing it he said, “Surely such a place has someone to look after it.” According to this interpretation Abraham was chosen because when he looked at the world (God's “palace”) he saw it ablaze with splendor and glory. From this he deduced that there must be a single, unifying force. In other words, Abraham was chosen because of his theological insight.

But there is a second interpretation – not that the palace was ablaze and filled with light, but that it was aflame. According to this view, Abraham's question was, instead, “Is there no one to put out the flames? In a world of such chaos – where evil threatens to consume everything – how *could* there be God?” And to this God responded, “I am here, but I need *you* to put out the flames.”⁴ This view of the text rests, then, in the understanding that Abraham was chosen not because of his theology, but his insistence on ethics. He became father of our people not because of his faith, but because of his radical assertion that against all reason that says there can be no God, only *with* a sense of God who calls us to ethical behavior can we be inspired to be engaged in the repair and redemption of the world.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote, “There is an eternal cry in the world: God is beseeching us. Some are startled; others remain deaf. We are all looked for. An air of expectancy hovers over life. Something is asked of us, of all of us.”⁵ Heschel's challenge is that of my audiologist and Jeremiah – to take heed and to listen better. The world is burning and God calls out, “I need *you*.” I ... need ... you.

⁴ *Midrash Rabbah* 39:1

⁵ *Man is Not Alone*, p. 245

In a strange paradox, the Torah teaches that we have an obligation to those who are poor and yet also says that there will always be poor amongst us.⁶ Why then, we might well ask, should we help others if the issue of inequity will never be resolved? First, because it makes a difference to those we can help; second, because giving to others changes *us* and finally, because it is the only means by which we bring about greater justice and righteousness.

It is easy to be overwhelmed by all that is wrong in the world; and so to “look but not see, to hear but not listen” is an understandable excuse for doing nothing. But on this day, with our eyes focused on the world not as it is, but as it could be - as our traditions demand it *ought* to be – we cannot hide.

Can you not see the world on fire? Is there not one flame you can help quench? You want to really know what it is to be a Jew? It is to put on the crown our father Abraham wore [wear firefighter’s helmet] and put out the flames.

In our nation, is there nothing where you can bring some healing?

Two thousand years ago Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi went to Rome. There he saw marble pillars wrapped with sheets to prevent them from freezing in the cold or cracking in the heat. And he also saw a poor person lying there, with nothing but a reed mat underneath him and on top of him.⁷ How little has changed. How is it that in a city with condos that sell for \$100 million there are some without even a reed mat for a bed? How can you and I – not the government – but *us*, strengthen the support systems to help those in need become more self-sufficient?

If homelessness is really a problem of mental illness – what can you do to better tend to those who suffer such psychic pain?

Do the screams of the tens of thousands cut down by gun violence in this country not reach your ears? Is the right to bear arms truly more sacrosanct than the need to find reasonable ways to limit those who can own them?

⁶ Deuteronomy 15

⁷ Pesikta d’Rav Kahana 9:1 (on Psalm 36:7)

Are we deaf to the racist overtones in our politics? Are we blind to racial inequities that lead to the incarceration of so many young African-American and Hispanic men? How can we accuse those in other lands of abuses of human rights when we have not solved the bigotry in our own?

There are fires ablaze in our nation. Are there none you can help put out?

And what of the flames beyond our borders? Have we not learned from the false hope from isolationism that America, like it or not, is part of the world? Are there no great concerns that tug at your heart? None?

Wherever you stood on the Iran deal, the Islamic Republic remains a threat to Israel and supporter of Hezbollah and Hamas, fanning embers of hate across the region. Ask yourself – what can I do to ensure strong, bipartisan support in this country for a secure Israel?

Has the brutality of Islamic fundamentalism lost its ability to move us? Are we inured to the beheading of intellectuals and rape of those of other faiths? How can we be silent when religion is used not as a force for good, but hate?

And what of those fleeing the persecutors?

“Love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt.”⁸ Are we absolved by pointing an accusing finger at the Gulf States? Do we wash ourselves of all responsibility saying, “Europe is already ‘lost’”; “Let the Arabs deal with their own”? The huddled masses can go there? We Jews, by dint of tradition and history, know what it means to have a world indifferent, to have borders closed, to be feared as an economic burden. Are we so hard-hearted that our fear of refugees is greater than our sense of injustice done to them?

As the world warms and fires (literally) burn – what do we do to control our excessive desire for more and more? In what ways – large and small – can we, who use so many of the earth's resources, use less? “Take care”, the Torah warns, “let you eat and are satisfied, build fine houses and settle down” and think all you have is simply yours, and you say the “strength of my hand

⁸ Deuteronomy 10:19

produced this wealth for me.”⁹ All we have is on loan. How can we protect this world for our children and our grandchildren?

O children of Israel, do you not see the brokenness amongst your own kin?

So many of our young people are unmoved by the institutions of Jewish life. What must you and I do to offer a compelling, vital case for being Jewish to the next generation? How do you and I support sacred communities – not just this synagogue, but synagogues throughout the world – that inspire men and women to their best, empowering them to be agents of good and offering them a haven to their own broken souls?

Are you aware that there in the past 20 years the number of Jewish poor in greater New York has doubled, with 1 in 5 Jewish households now classified as poor? Yes, many are Orthodox, seniors and Russian-speaking immigrants (so?), but there are many others struggling - even in our own synagogue. Do you not hear the words of Torah, “If there be poor among you ... do not harden your heart nor close your hand”?¹⁰

And what of the needs of those in the State of Israel? Herzl's call that “If we will it, it is not a dream” animated Jews to return and build. What is the dream you have for Israel? What will you do to make it real?

In the fight about the Iran-deal the past number of months, have we lost sight of the other needs of Israelis and problems in the Land of Promise?

The story of the immigration and absorption of Ethiopian Jews in Israel epitomizes the best of Israeli society. Yet so many Ethiopian Israelis feel that racism and discrimination holds them back and shunts them aside. How can you and I reach out in some way to help our fellow Jews?

When Israel's Minister of Religious Affairs says every single person here – worshipping in a Reform synagogue – cannot be called Jews and also argues that our vibrant, modern expression of Jewish life is (and I quote) a “disaster for the nation of Israel”, can you stand aside indifferently? When women are spit on and assaulted for the audacity to read the Torah in a site

⁹ Deuteronomy 8:10 ff.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 15:7

sacred not to just some Jews, but to us all, should we be silent? When our money is good enough, but our very essence is attacked, should we not cry out?

Political considerations may keep Israel and Palestinians from making peace, but is there not something you can do to bring people from both communities together? What hardness of the heart and smallness of vision closes us from the possibility of peace? There are so many groups in Israel seeking to bridge the divide between Palestinians and Israelis. How dare we say, “They don’t want peace” when we do nothing to make it more possible?

How do we fight extremists – not by trying to prove to the world it is we who are the victims and not the Palestinians, but by strengthening the hands of moderates on both sides of the conflict?

This past year it became clear that opposition to the State of Israel is the mask of 21st century anti-Semitism. Does the murder of Jews simply buying food in a kosher market simply because they are Jews not galvanize you to see that hatred of the Jews has not disappeared? There are so many groups combatting anti-Semitism and exposing media bias against Israel. Is there not one worthy of your support?

Finally – to those of you saying, “Rabbi – you mentioned so many needs, but not this one or that one” - you are right. So, help fix it. Don’t get caught up by what I failed to speak about. Get out there and be a firefighter.

The world is, indeed, a burning palace. And the Master of the House says, “I am here, but I need *you* to put out the flames.”

The Hasidic master once asked his students, “What is the most important moment in all of Jewish history?” And the students answered readily –

“The moment God gave us Torah on Mt. Sinai!”

“The day the Holy Temple was erected!”

“When great Maimonides sat down to write the Code of Jewish Law!”

“No,” responded the Rebbe, “The greatest moment in Jewish history is now. This moment. All of these moments are great. But they mean nothing if they have no place in *this* moment. This moment, right now, is the greatest moment in Jewish history.”

Let us not be deformed by the paucity of our hope. Let us not see the pain and brokenness of our world and be lulled by apathy or indifference or the sin of “tomorrow I’ll do it, not now.” Open your eyes to see. Let your ear hear. Repair yourself and repair the world ... and make this moment – our moment – a time to be worthy heirs of the children of Abraham, who saw the “burning palace” and said, “What can I do to save it?”