

Kol Nidrei 5781

If I'm Only For Myself What Am I? Help Someone Else With Their Mask

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Our world has lost its cabin pressure. Let's try not to panic. Put on your mask and breathe. Then help someone else.

That is where we left off on Rosh HaShanah morning. Ten days ago we explored part one of Rabbi Hillel's famous saying, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now when?" *Im ein ani li mili, uchshe'ani l'atzmi ma'ani, v'im lo achshav eimatai?*" (*Pirkei Avot 1:14*)

Let us now turn to part two: If I am only for myself, what am I? Some would argue that this question is the essence of Judaism. Countless biblical *mitzvot*, commandments, speak to this principle: "Remember the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (*Exodus 22:20*) "Do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds." (*Leviticus 19:16*) "Love your neighbor as yourself." (*Leviticus 19:18*) Put your mask on first in order to help someone else live.

Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz commenting on this second part of Hillel's teaching in his *Pirkei Avot A Social Justice Commentary* writes, "Hillel is directing each of us to ask: Will I realize my moral responsibility and spiritual potential? To learn to be me, I must also look outside of myself, which requires humility."

I begin with two true stories about an important commodity these days - toilet paper. The first is about an extended family member who lives alone and whose health is compromised with a chronic condition. We'll call her Anne. At the beginning of the pandemic, Anne told her close friend of about 3 decades that she was going to a grocery store during senior hours. The friend asked her to pick up some toilet paper. Anne said she would not because her friend and her husband were healthy as well as younger and should not ask her to do their shopping. The friend stopped talking to her. Anne tried calling her friend but would not leave a message. My closer relative tried to convince Anne to take the high road and forgive her friend, to no avail. They have not spoken since.

Compare to a story told by Rabbi Ed Feinstein. A woman was standing in line at a grocery store and was holding back tears explaining to the clerk that all the toilet paper had been taken from the shelves by hoarders and she had come out only to get some toilet paper. The man behind her in line had a big package of toilet paper. He immediately ripped it open and gave half the rolls to the woman. The clerk looked at both of them and said, "Both of you go on through. I am not charging you for it. Anyway, I don't know how to ring up half a package of toilet paper."

These past months have tried and tested all of us. And the end is not in sight. How will we someday share our stories of these times? How will we tell the next generation what it was like to live through Covid? Will we talk about running out of toilet paper and soap, wearing masks, giving elbow bumps instead of handshakes, sitting 6 feet apart at school, not being able to hug loved ones, not being able to be with loved ones? And will we also tell all who will listen about how we witnessed more kindness and more compassion than before? How those times were a

wake-up call to a better humanity? How the world changed for the better and how we are still living that silver lining today?

The pandemic has uncovered what was already there – economic disparity, racial inequality and injustice, and a deep level of human disconnection. We were already disturbingly distanced before it became a mandate. Dr. Vivek Murthy, former surgeon general, and Dr. Alice Chen writing together share: “this pandemic could [and already has] triggered...a social recession – a fraying of social bonds that further unravel the longer we go without human interaction.” (*The Atlantic*, March 2020) I am especially worried about those who live alone, those who are less tech savvy, and the generation that has come to be called “screenagers.”

In Dr. Murthy’s new book, *Together*, released just a month ago, he describes loneliness as the “feeling that you’re lacking the social connections you need. It can feel like being stranded, abandoned or cut off from the people with whom you belong...” Dr. Murthy’s message especially speaks to us on this eve of a 24-hour fast when he continues, “Quite simply, human relationship is as essential to our well-being as food and water.” In other words, human connection is essential, as vaccines and ventilators are for our human recovery.

Kol Nidrei calls us tonight to reflect on what is essential in our lives. One source of human connection is Temple Beth David. I know that some might question whether synagogue community is essential. What I believe is essential is how our temple community helps guide us to respond to this fundamental life question, “If I am only for myself, what am I?” Yes, we are physically distanced. But we are connected, and in some ways, maybe even closer.

Over the past months many of us have welcomed Shabbat together from the intimacy of our living rooms. Our *minyan* has grown, especially these High Holy Days when extended family are joining from other states and time zones. Immediate Past President Paul Greenberg often spoke about the importance of *kesher* – human connection. Early in the pandemic, our congregation stepped up to organize and take care of one another. As Temple President Pat Aronson said in her High Holiday message, Board members called fellow temple members to check in and say we are here for you. Caring Connections volunteers continued to write condolence and congratulatory notes, even when they could not visit in person. And we initiated a new means of staying connected, a survey for congregants to help fellow congregants.

According to coordinator Renee Goldberg, “People needed help with simple life tasks that became difficult to do either because of lack of mobility, conditions that placed them at risk going into public places, or some whose family could not support them due to limitations from Covid. Some who never really needed to rely on others found that they just couldn’t do for themselves safely, including getting groceries, picking up prescriptions, helping to get to a Dr’s appointment, or connecting to temple via zoom or livestream. Those that volunteered to help all stepped up when asked the first time and often took that congregant in need under their wing to help even with additional tasks.”

It may not come as a surprise that many more people volunteered to help, than those who asked for help. It can be hard to ask for help. If you are out there and in need of anything, please, please ask. This is why you are part of Temple Beth David.

This Kol Nidrei Temple Beth David stands on holy ground. As Pat shared, our temple community will celebrate its sixtieth anniversary this year. Founding temple members, Cynthia and Harvey Atkins reflect back on their move to Westwood in 1959. One of their first priorities was to join a synagogue. The early members of what was then called the Dedham-Westwood Jewish Community Group sought to strengthen their bonds and provide Jewish education for their children. How meaningful it is that sixty years later several leaders have stepped forward to create a special fund to honor the legacy of our founders and sustain Temple Beth David through current times and the years to come. The new Cynthia and J. Harvey Atkins Founders Fund will help make sure your synagogue community continues to thrive and grow.

A longtime temple member, Board member, and chair of our Inclusion Committee, Connie Rizoli, recently shared these thoughts with me: “This year has made me sad - sad but not depressed. Having said that, the Rosh HaShanah service opened the flood gates. This service resonated in a unique way. Was it hearing us recite “Who by fire, and who by plague”? Was it realizing that the ancient prayers of Rosh Hashanah still speak to us today? Is it because I was struck with the fact that these words, this tradition, has strengthened and sustained us as a people through pogroms, death camps, ghettos? Was it the words of the rabbis that echoed the ache, the anguish, the worry that we all carry these days? Was it because I felt in my gut that our community is strong - so strong that physical distance doesn't break our spirit? Is it because we are blessed with clergy who walk with us, share in our faith and give us all strength to keep going? I think it was all of the above.”

Yes, Connie it is all of the above. While many doors remain closed, the Kol Nidrei heavenly gates are wide open – the gates of prayer, gates of tears, gates of compassion, gates of loving kindness, gates of justice, gates of healing. We are stronger as individuals because we are part of something bigger than ourselves, a tradition, faith, and temple family that sustains us. When we do our part to build this temple community, we answer the question, “I am not only for myself.” I am for the past. I am for the present. I am for the future.

Educator and author Dr. Parker J. Palmer said, “To only connect with your own ego is to be in a very lonely place... Whether you put it theologically or biologically, we are created for community. Without community, we struggle. It’s as if we didn’t have oxygen to breathe.” (*Together*, Murthy)

Put your mask on then help someone else to breathe. Care for yourself, care for your family and community, care for your neighbor and the stranger among you. The late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg spoke about how being Jewish helped her empathize with others. “The Jewish religion is an ethical religion,” she said. Judaism helps us answer this essential question, “If I’m only for myself, what am I?” by teaching that we are responsible to change and to repair the world.

We are responsible to say: “Never again.” Never again will a black person say he can’t breathe. Never again will a pandemic unfairly target poor and underserved communities. Never again will I eat and not share my food with someone who is hungry.

These days it is hard to see a person’s face. At the very end of the Torah we are taught that Moses knew God *panim el panim*, face to face. (*Deuteronomy 34:10*) The philosopher

Emmanuel Levinas eloquently wrote about how to see the face of another, to look into the eyes of someone else, is the most basic mode of human existence. When I look out to you praying with masks on in our temple parking lot, I see your faces. When I look through the camera here in our sanctuary, I see your faces. When I think about our synagogue community, I see the faces of all who have come before us, all who are with us now, and all who will yet come. We can help others with their masks by looking into one another's eyes and making a connection.

Wearing masks is helping to save lives. Measuring the distances between us is helping to save lives. One day we will share these harsh details of what it was like to live through Covid times.

One day when we look back, I hope we will also share the ways that we measured closeness: How we found new ways to mourn, welcome babies, celebrate youth being called to Torah as b'nai mitzvah, bless marriages, and embrace new members. How we passed on our traditions to children, while providing an extra dose of love as they struggled with remote learning. How we had seders and heard Kol Nidrei. How we sang in our homes. How we called and sent cards. How we had picnics. How we drove by and waved. How we made signs and demonstrated. How we gave food and toiletries and money. How we shared toilet paper. How we smiled under our masks. How we opened our hearts. How we slowed down and realized what is essential in our lives. How we helped repair the world.

I was forced to be apart which is why I hold you close. I am a better person because I helped others. This is why being together matters. *If not now, when?*