

Rosh HaShanah Morning 5781

If I'm Not For Myself Who Will Be For Me? Put Your Mask On First

Rabbi Karen S. Citrin

I remember the first time that I flew on an airplane with my children. Our twin sons were seven months old when Micah and I flew from California to Florida to celebrate my grandmother's birthday. It was the first time that she met her great-grandchildren. Fortunately, friends had advised us to pack extra outfits for the boys. Unfortunately, no one had advised us to bring extra outfits for ourselves. That's a story for another time. Despite the challenges of cross-country flight with two infants, there is one moment of the journey that especially stands out in my mind. It was the moment just before take-off. The flight attendant spoke through the loud speaker – "In the event of loss of cabin pressure, for those of you travelling with small children, put your mask on first before you help others."

"Put your own mask on first." I had heard these words spoken on countless flights before and had not thought much about them. It seemed counter-intuitive to me as a new mother. Isn't this selfish? Of course I should help my children first, they wouldn't know what to do. I thought more about this instruction during the long flight. Somewhere over Nebraska it started to make more sense. If I couldn't breathe, I would no longer be able to help them. This one brief act of taking care of myself first could enable me to save their lives.

This story reminds me of a famous Jewish teaching from *Pirkei Avot*, the section of the Talmud which contains pithy sayings and ethical lessons. Rabbi Hillel said, "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).

This morning I would like to focus on the first part of this message – "*Im ein ani li mili*, If I am not for myself, who will be for me? We will return to part two, "If I am only for myself, what am I?" on Kol Nidrei. And, "If not now, when?" this third question with its message of urgency, will echo during Yizkor on Yom Kippur afternoon.

I will admit that I find the first question the hardest to follow. If I'm not for myself, who will be for me? Maybe it's because I am a rabbi, a profession that embodies caring for others. Maybe it's because I am a mother with children at home. Maybe it's because we are facing an extremely polarizing and stressful election. Maybe it's because we are living through a pandemic, and my instinct like many of yours, was to go into over-drive trying to get through each day, often neglecting my own basic needs. How many of you also experienced days when you forgot to, or didn't have a chance to shower?

Over the past few months, I have spoken with many of you, members of our dear Temple family. One word emerged as a common refrain – survival. Yes, you recognized our collective privilege, and how fortunate we are compared to so many who have lost so much more. Yet, you have shared your pain, your loneliness, your lost celebrations and commemorations, your lost jobs, your questions, your sheer hardship with trying to manage each day. It is hard for all of us to fully wrap our heads around this new world we are living in.

And there is the guilt. Why have others been able to take on new hobbies, bake bread, and manage to find more silver linings? Sure, looking back, there have been some positive moments. Less commute time, more time at home with family. But, the weight of it all on our bodies, minds, and souls has been tremendous. And it has taken a toll. I have not done a good job caring for myself this year, and I want to do better. Perhaps many of us are feeling more vulnerable these holidays.

Sometimes rabbis give the sermon they need to hear. “If I’m not for myself who will be for me?” Put your own mask on first. Take care of yourself first so that you can then care for others. Audre Lorde said, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” (*A Burst of Light*) According to Lorde, black, lesbian, poet, self-care is a radical act. Self-care is not selfish.

I am not here to tell you what it looks like. Self-care is a very personal endeavor. I would like to share some Jewish perspectives with you this morning. Judaism can serve as a moral and ethical compass when it comes to how we care for ourselves. The first is this season, right now. The New Year offers us a change in perspective, a reminder of what is most treasured in our lives.

Chris Harrison, a writer for the Audacious Hospitality initiative at the Union for Reform Judaism, and member of the Jews of Color Leadership Cohort offers, “There is not a more sobering time to remind us of the marks we’ve missed over the past year than the High Holidays. We spend these days facing our transgressions and determining how to do better, how to be better, and how to strive toward a place of godliness... *Teshuvah* (repentance/repair) is a vital aspect of the High Holidays, so it’s important to embrace these holidays from a strong foundation rooted in self-care.”

In other words, it's only through nourishment of ourselves that we find the strength to nourish others. This season guides us to turn away from that nagging voice inside, and to return to wholeness. Harrison continues, “The point of the High Holidays is to affirm that we are worthy to walk this path, that our flaws are simply areas of our life that require our focus and care. This beautiful task that Jews have taken on every New Year for centuries is ancient and rooted in tradition, and at the same time, each journey is unique and form-fitted for every individual. Regardless of your missed marks, you are special, you are God-adjacent, and you are worth every minute of this journey through these Days of Awe.”

I appreciate Harrison’s message especially this year. Our High Holy Days embrace two Godly attributes, judgement and mercy, *din* and *rachamim*. During these challenging times, we could all use a little more *rachamim* – mercy and compassion, especially for ourselves. We are worth it.

Rosh HaShanah celebrates the birthday of the world. With each day of Creation, God declared in Genesis, “It was good.” On the sixth day human beings were created “*tov me’od*,” very good. Not great, not perfect, but very good. Or as one professor of mine in rabbinical school taught, “good enough.” Especially now, I believe we can all use a little

more self-forgiveness. We are all doing our best to get through the long days. Good needs to be good enough.

While this holiday season paints a broad picture of the year and our lives, Judaism also offers a daily perspective and practice of self-care. Our daily prayers affirm the values of *shmirat ha'guf* and *shmirat ha'nefesh* – “the guarding of body and soul.”

The rabbis saw each day as a new beginning, an opportunity to find blessing. Each day when we wake, we say a blessing for our body – *asher yatzar* and a blessing for our soul – *Elohai neshama*. The blessing for our physical being recognizes that things don't always work properly or feel whole. Yet, each day is an opportunity to relive the Creation of the world and our own creation. We recite in our morning blessings, “Blessed are You, *Adonai* our God, who made me in your image.”

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, "Why are we forbidden to make images of God? It is not because God is beyond all images, so that no image could possibly depict God.... God *has* an image, and that is you. You may not *make* the image of God because you *are* the image of God. The only medium in which you can make God's image is the medium of your entire life, and that is precisely what we are commanded to do. Everything you do, everything you say, each moment and the way you use it are all part of the way you build God's image. To take anything less than a full, living human being - like canvas or a piece of marble - and call it the image of God would be to diminish God, to lessen God's image.” (as quoted by Rabbi Arthur Green) Heschel aptly captures the sanctity of our lives. If God's image is me and you, then our lives are vessels we must care for.

It is the season to first look inward before looking outward. These past six months I have felt like I could barely catch my breath. It took Micah's sister receiving a breast cancer diagnosis last spring to remind me that I had not had a mammogram in two years. I was too busy. It had slipped my mind. I need to put my own mask on in order to move forward into the New Year. And I want to invite you to join me. Let us pause and slow down for a moment today, on this first day of the New Year - a gift for ourselves.

I invite you to center yourself in a comfortable place (maybe even lying down since you are at home). If you would like, you can close your eyes. Try to breathe. Try to feel the image of God in your heart, in your soul, in your muscles and limbs. Try to relax and let go of what you would like to leave behind from this past year. Think about your goodness. The many ways that you are good, and good enough. Think about what feels broken. Imagine the ways that you can start to repair yourself and our world. 5781 is here. A time to renew and rejuvenate. Ancient memories call us to better times ahead. Taste the apple dipped in honey. A drop of sweetness in a lost year. If I am not for myself, who will be for me? Love yourself then love your neighbor. Focus on what is good. Resolve to do better. Resolve to be for yourself. Resolve to take time for yourself. Resolve to care for yourself. Resolve to love yourself. And breathe. When you are ready, I invite you to open your eyes and return.

I would like to share a recent poem by Jewish writer Alicia Jo Rabins, entitled, “On Breathing:”

*I'm OK during the day, but at night I get scared,
Which makes it hard to breathe, which is a symptom
Of the pandemic, which is what scares me.
Well played, anxiety, my old friend. You've always
Warned me something like this might happen.
You're a gift from my ancestors who survived plagues,
And worse. They wove you into my DNA to warn me,
So that I too might survive. Now that it's happening,
Anxiety, I don't need you any more. I need
The ones who gave you to me. Hear me, ancestors
Who lived through danger times: I'm ready for you now.
All these years I've carried your worries In my bones.
Now I need your love, your thousand-year view.
Tell me it's going to be OK. Remind me you made it
Through, and we will too. Teach me to breathe.*

I wish I could tell you that it's going to be okay, but rabbis don't have that kind of super-power. I draw strength from the thousands of years of resilience that the Jewish people have held onto. Our wanderings in the desert. The weekly pause of Shabbat. The chain of wisdom and stories, tears and laughter, hopes and prayers that we continue to pass on and on.

Here is our reality; our world has lost its cabin pressure. Let's try not to panic. Put on your mask and breathe. Then help someone else. *Shanah Tovah.*