

## “Rise Up, You Sleepers”

Yom Kippur 5780

Imagine for a moment that you are in a room filled with hundreds of people at a pinnacle moment in time. Each person is there to listen to a dynamic speaker, someone with an important message. Everyone is sitting at the edge of their seat, ready to be inspired and motivated to do important work. Now, imagine that the hundreds of people are all rabbis. Six months ago, that was exactly where I found myself, as I sat in on a session at the Central Conference of American Rabbis’ annual convention. Speaking to that group can be, well, intimidating. Every person in that room is well-versed in public speaking, in (hopefully) offering inspiring remarks, and mostly comfortable in front of a large group of people. But on the second night of the convention, we had the privilege and honor of *listening* to the brilliant, eloquent, and passionate Bryan Stevenson share his story.

Mr. Stevenson is, “the founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a human rights organization in Montgomery, Alabama. Mr. Stevenson is a widely acclaimed public interest lawyer who has dedicated his career to helping the poor, the incarcerated, and the condemned.”<sup>1</sup> You may also recognize his name because he wrote the book, Just Mercy based on his experience in Alabama helping wrongly convicted felons facing the death penalty fight for freedom. This book will be released as a major motion picture in the coming months, starring Jamie Foxx and Michael B. Jordan.

But, what was *most* intriguing about Mr. Stevenson’s address wasn’t his intensely compelling story, the incredible lessons and action items he gifted us, or the emotions he stirred within each person listening. It was his unending energy and ability to keep going throughout his entire speech. As he spoke, he never even stopped to take a breath. Even more than that, it wasn’t just the passion he had when speaking about this issue, something that is near and dear to his heart, but the fact that for years he has fought this battle, tirelessly, without stopping, not even to take a breath.

I, however, am so very tired. The burden of each day weighs heavily on my shoulders, pushing me down and making me feel useless. It’s not just the everyday grind, but the onslaught of news we receive at the touch of a button, the alerts that flood our phones, the constant connection to the broader world. And, much of the news we read or hear feels overwhelming and onerous. Does this sound familiar to any of you? Do you also feel the oppressive weight of the world?

I, like many of you, suffer from outrage fatigue. Perhaps this is a new term for you. I only heard it recently in a favorite podcast. For inquiring minds, “outrage fatigue” is defined as a state experienced by those who try to take on too many social, political,

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<sup>1</sup> From “about EJI” on [www.eji.org](http://www.eji.org).

legal, or economic campaigns at once. Someone with outrage fatigue experiences exhaustion, cynicism, apathy, and hopelessness.<sup>2</sup>

It's not a great feeling. Unfortunately, many of us have felt the extreme emotions associated with outrage fatigue for a while. I imagine that for some, you have felt this way for years, decades, maybe even most of your life. The truth is, there are so very many issues that have plagued us for an incredible amount of time that it's a wonder this new term wasn't introduced until recently. And the harder truth is, that many of us have the luxury to walk away from these issues when we feel too tired, too overwhelmed. Unlike Bryan Stevenson, or the plethora of leaders who work tirelessly to bring justice to the world, we have had a certain privilege afforded to us, one that allows us to take a minute and restore our energy, reinvigorate our efforts.

But as Jews, we have felt trickles of this exhaustion for nearly our entire existence. Of course, there are moments in our history that we felt it far more intensely, but it is something that remains on the back burner of our brain, always.

That exhaustion feels almost doubled when we consider that Judaism encourages and commands that we contribute to Tikkun Olam, in repairing the world. We have an obligation to actively participate in making our world a better place, which only draws us further into the multitude of issues that incumber our every day lives.

How do we find the energy, then, to keep going and keep working to affect change, just as Bryan Stevenson does? How do we continue to push forward, knowing that we are fighting an uphill battle for so many different concerns, or even just one key problem?

Overcoming outrage fatigue feels impossible at times. Really, overcoming the feeling of hopelessness around any issue feels impossible. But as these matters continue to plague our society, it is incumbent upon us to find that strength and continue moving forward. I know, there are far too many issues to choose from, too much heaviness weighing us down. And yet, as Jews, as human beings, we often find ourselves returning over and over to these issues to find a new way to progress forward, to help out the world in some small, significant manner.

Why do we keep returning to these problems? In part, we return out of an obligation to help the stranger, because we remember that we were once strangers in the land of Egypt, in Babylon, in the small villages of Eastern Europe, in Charlottesville, and so many other places around the world. And, we know that when we think back on our history, there have always been righteous gentiles that sought to help us, to assist our ancestors and family members in finding safety and security. We remember those who helped us, and in return, we help others.

We keep returning to these problems because as Martin Niemöller once stated, "...Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out- because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came

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<sup>2</sup> Ley, David J. Ph.D., "Coping with Outrage Fatigue," *Psychology Today* (Psychologytoday.com)

for me and there was no one left to speak for me.”<sup>3</sup> We know that we have to speak out for others because we all have to speak up for one another; we are all part of humanity.

It often feels too difficult to even approach many of these issues, especially when we know there won't be an end to these problems in our lifetimes. When we feel that sense of hopelessness, the results of outrage fatigue, I turn to the story of Honi the circle maker, a man known for the ability to make the rain fall:

One day Honi was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked, "How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit?" The man replied: "Seventy years." Honi then further asked him: "Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?" The man replied: "I found [already grown] carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted those for me so I too plant these for my children."<sup>4</sup>

We have to do the work now, even if we don't see visible changes. Laying the foundation does actually impact future generations. Just as we have an obligation to the world **now**, we have to consider those yet to be born, those who will inherit this earth.

So, when we think about the work that needs to be done, the help we need to give to those without a voice, those who need shelter and food, the animals and planet that need protection and aid, how can we overcome our outrage fatigue? How can we muster the strength to keep moving forward and fight the good fight? What can we possibly do to reenergize ourselves when it feels like no matter what we do, we're not making a difference?

To start, I once again turn to the inspirational words of Bryan Stevenson. One of the first messages he gave us in his address is that at this point in our history, "We [need to] wrap our arms around another person and affirm their humanity." If we can get proximate with another person, we can have a tremendous impact on them, and maybe more importantly, ourselves. We need to break down the walls and barriers that have prevented us from knowing each other, especially those with whom we disagree. As Father Greg Boyle said during an interview with Alan Alda on his podcast, *Clear + Vivid*, "We can't demonize people we know well. Humans can't sustain the distance once they're in the same vicinity."<sup>5</sup>

Mr. Stevenson also suggests that we have to be willing to do uncomfortable and inconvenient things. It is hard to get involved in some of these issues. They are messy, they are challenging, they are exhausting. But finding an issue that you are passionate about, and finding others who share that passion, will help to keep the momentum going and keep everyone involved energized. When you know that you have partners in this work, you know you will have someone to lean on for support. If you are interested in

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<sup>3</sup> Gerlach, Wolfgang. *And the Witnesses were Silent: The Confessing Church and the Jews*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2000, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Babylonian Talmud, tractate Ta'anit, page 23a.

<sup>5</sup> Interview from "Clear + Vivid: Compassion, Kinship, and Real Ways to Help Others," podcast, September 24, 2018.

diving headfirst into this important work, we are forming a team of passionate, compassionate, and energized people at CBI to participate in the social justice efforts of the Reform Jewish community. In partnership with our fellow Austin synagogues, the Religious Action Center in Texas, and many other incredible organizations from the local and state levels, we will do this work together, as one unified group. Please join us in continuing the work of Tikkun Olam, of creating a world of peace.

And just as we challenge ourselves to get involved, I know all too well how overwhelming it can feel to select one or even two key issues to pour your heart and soul into. I know how quickly the work involved in many of these problems can swallow you whole. And, I know how difficult it can be to pick just *one* of the myriads of issues displayed before us at any given moment. If nothing else, my hope for all of us is that we find peace of mind, even if we can prioritize *only* one cause. As much as we'd like to, we can't fix everything. In fact, if we try to take on too much, we often end up affecting very little change. This sometimes means saying "No" to worthy, important, and urgent matters. This isn't a measure of your compassion or dedication to the different causes; rather, this is an opportunity to determine where you *can* be most effective.

And finally, Mr. Stevenson implores us all to stay hopeful. He defines hopelessness as "the enemy of justice." There is so much work to be done. I know, it's overwhelming. It's exhausting. But whether we are tired, or angry, or feeling done, the work remains. As Mr. Stevenson taught us on that evening in March, "[Let us] use our brokenness to appreciate what it means to be human. Our brokenness shows us the way to mercy and compassion."

During a time that feels impossibly hard, when the weight of the world sits on our shoulders, and it is indeed on OUR shoulders, let us rise up from our slumber. Let us stand up tall, ready to take on this work. Let us join together with our brothers and sisters, our fellow Jews and members of other faith communities, let us unite as one humanity, one people to repair this broken world. Let us use our privilege to speak for others, to give voice to the voiceless.

We are not alone. We are not lone and lonely warriors. Together, we can make an impact on generations to come. We can plant trees now that will bear the fruit of justice for future generations. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us about completing this important work, "Then justice shall abide in the wilderness and righteousness will dwell in the fruitful field. For the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quiet and tranquility."<sup>6</sup> There is much to be done, but we can do it, together. May we all be partners in building a world of righteousness, love, wholeness, and peace. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 32:16-17