

Bet Mishpachah  
Drasha for Yom Kippur Morning, 5781  
Al Munzer

There is a story from the Talmud that I have not been able to get out of my head. It is a passage in the tractate *Sanhedrin*, where the Rabbis deal with questions surrounding the arrival of the *Mashiach*, the Messiah. We are told of a mystical encounter between Rabbi Joshua and none other than Elijah, the Prophet: “Where,” Rabbi Joshua asked, “shall I find the Messiah?” “At the gate to the city,” Elijah replied. “How shall I recognize him?” “He sits among the lepers.” “Among the lepers?” cried Rabbi Joshua. “What is he doing there?” He changes their bandages,” Elijah answered, “He changes them one by one.”

The whole idea of gates and lepers and outcasts and even, frankly, the literal belief in a Messiah seems so quaint and archaic. So why do I keep thinking about it? Is it perhaps because we are in the grips of a pandemic? Is it a fear that I like millions of others might be stricken and cast out? And why the urge to talk about it on Yom Kippur when we are all trying desperately to distance ourselves from all the fears and anxieties that have occupied us for months on end, day in and day out?

Some of you who have heard me speak before on the High Holy Days can guess who I turn to when I am in a quandary about how to proceed and how to make sense of a thought that keeps churning in my head. Yes, I seek the advice from my good friend, the one whom many of you have come to call “the Rebbe of Dupont Circle.” But when I looked for him on the Circle where he usually holds court, all the benches were deserted. Even the pigeons were gone. So, I walked on, aimlessly, forlorn, down an eerily quiet Connecticut Avenue, along 17<sup>th</sup> Street, then Lafayette Park, and finally the White House. And, lo and behold, that is where I found him, dressed in his usual black caftan, with his grey beard and sidelocks, bending down, almost on his knees, his felt hat pushed back, holding his glasses with his left hand, carefully reading the all the signs on the fence, one by one, murmuring the words as if in a prayer, “I can’t breathe; Equality and Justice for All; No Justice, No Peace; Say her name Breonna Taylor; Racism is a Sin; Emmett Till; Treyvon Martin; Stronger Together; Racism is a disrespect for God’s Creativity; George Floyd; Police-Free schools; No to Hate; End Racism. I can’t breathe.” Passersby shook their heads and smiled. And a young African American man in a blue satin cap and gown proudly had his picture taken. And a group of young kids, kids of all colors and origins, just stared, mesmerized by the view of this strange man clearly from another planet. And suddenly, before he even had a chance to greet me with the usual, *Shalom Aleichem*, I understood why I had been so focused on the story from the Talmud. It wasn’t about lepers, it wasn’t about disease, it wasn’t about the pandemic. It was all about people who had been cast out. My friend stood up, shaking his head, tears in his eyes, clearly moved by the words and images on the fence, then turned around and embraced me. “You found me,” he said, “these days, this is where we all belong.” I then told him of my dilemma, of being stuck on this passage from the Talmud, about where to find the *Mashiach* and having to deliver a *drasha* on Yom Kippur at Bet Mishpachah and feeling completely lost and helpless. “Lost and helpless,” he said, “Isn’t that what we all feel these days? Isn’t that why there is a Yom Kippur, a day to acknowledge our frailty, and a day to find our moorings, and a day, to look to a world free of all the sins, and all the shortcomings we communally confess on Yom Kippur, a world free

of war, a world free of hunger, and world free of prejudice and hate. It's a hope some would call delusional, an age so far off it might indeed be called Messianic, the age of the *Mashiach*." And then he added, "On Yom Kippur we confess, we beat our chests, we commit to turning, to changing our ways, that is *Teshuva*; and oh, how desperately do we pray on Yom Kippur to set us right with our Maker, that is *Tefila*; but the third pillar of Yom Kippur, *Tzedaka*, sadly all too often gets short shrift. *Teshuva* comes from the head, *Tefila* comes from the heart, but *Tzedaka* requires action, an outstretched hand. That, my young friend, is what the rabbis in your story endeavored to teach us, the personal *Mashiach*, the personal redemption we all seek is found among those who have been cast aside, those whose sores have been left unattended and whose bandages are in desperate need of being changed, victims of a pandemic worse than Covid 19, victims of a pandemic of systemic bigotry, hate and racism. Just like it is a sacrilege to offer prayers for those who have been afflicted by the virus in the absence of action, so too it is a sacrilege not to follow the prayers, the vows we make on Yom Kippur with action." And then my friend paused, nodded and added, "I am just a figment of your imagination, a convenient device, and this is as much as I can do, now it is up to you and all your friends at Bet Mishpachah, living breathing human beings, to act, to reach out, to touch, to change those bandages, one by one." And with that, my friend simply vanished.

When scholars translated the Hebrew Bible, the word *Mashiach* was transliterated to Messiah, and assumed a whole host of specifics in Christianity, but its root *Mem, Shin, Chet*, spells *Mashach*, Anointed. Whether we believe in an ultimate redemption by a *Mashiach* or not, we all have the potential to be anointed, anointed to the task conferred on us by the Almighty, to reach out to our neighbor, to acknowledge and do all we can to relieve their pain, their hunger, their loneliness.

The ability to reach out is implanted in us at an incredibly young age, and all too often is lost as we get older. My mother told me about a girl, just 4 or 5, who while standing in line at a bakery, was taken aback and momentarily froze and frowned when she saw a person of very short stature, someone we might have called a dwarf, with a very deformed hand. But then, the girl smiled, grabbed the man's deformed hand, and said in Dutch, "*Goede morgen Meneertje*," "Good morning little Sir." That little girl was my sister Eva. I never knew my sister Eva because she was killed in Auschwitz, but I have never forgotten the important lesson Eva conveyed through my mother, to grab the hand of those who are different.

Eva was the victim of unbridled hate. Eva speaks to us today and implores that we reach out and tend to the wounds of those who have been outcasts and help assure that no one in the future will ever be called "the other," and that the laughter of children like her never again be silenced. May we thus be inscribed and sealed *LeShana Tova uMetuka*, for a good year and a sweet year.

Amen

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